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From mice-eaten passports to fingerprint scanning: fluctuating state presence and 'entangled documents' along the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on engagement with identity documents among the rural Uzbek population in the borderlands of Kyrgyzstan. By exploring the materiality of the documents and people's concern with these material artefacts of bureaucracy, this article illustrates how the state has been moving in, out and through the lives of the people living on the margins of the state. People's engagement with documents illuminates the temporal dynamics of the state's spatialization practices and highlights the fluctuating presence of the state. In addition, this article exposes the discrepancies between the classificatory bureaucratic order and the changing realities of everyday life. Gaps between these two domains are filled with what I refer to as entangled documents. People's attempts to disentangle documents reveal how people on the margins of the state manage encounters with state bureaucracy and provide insight into the internal dynamics of a local bureaucracy.

KEYWORDS

Entangled documents; bureaucracy; state spatialization; Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

The state, appearing as an overarching political institution, seems to be ubiquitous in the lives of people by framing and setting preconditions for their lived worlds. The abstract idea of the state becomes concrete as the state materializes in the lives of people through various objects, practices, performances and enactments, both symbolic and material (Nyers 2006). A whole range of things come to represent the state: flags, coats of arms, military uniforms, border fences and buildings housing state institutions are only some of the elements that represent the state in its material form. Besides the vivid, the apparent and the spectacular (Adams 2010), the state often materializes and substantiates itself in people's everyday lives through simple materialization of bureaucratic mechanisms and their tools, namely documents (Hull 2012a). Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012, 124) argues that 'documents are among the most tangible phenomena that induce state-like effects'. Not only are documents the pivotal elements of the material culture of the state bureaucracies, but they also reveal how the state penetrates the quotidian

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lives of people. It is precisely through documents that the state enters the private and the mundane lives of people – through the simple acts of identifying and categorizing individuals, surveilling them with the help of various registers, and controlling their actions through permits and authorizations. While passports are the most prestigious documents signifying belonging to a state, people usually encounter the state through other types of quotidian documents (Das and Poole 2004): birth certificates, marriage certificates, driver licences, identity cards, taxpayer cards. These ordinary documents 'bear the double sign of the state's distance and its penetration into the life of the everyday' (15).

The significance of documents and their materiality are well established in the anthropological literature, where much of the work underlines their distinctive and integral role in producing and structuring state governance (Riles 2006; Cabot 2012; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012b; Lowenkron and Ferreira 2014). Following that work, this article advances the scrutinization of such documents as an important tool in exploring state spatialization processes. A focus on the concrete material expressions of the state allows us not only to locate the state in the particular and disclose 'the constructed and fragile nature of the state effect of ordering and encompassment' (Rasanayagam, Beyer, and Reeves 2014, 10), but also to trace the temporal dynamics of state spatialization. Ferguson and Gupta (2002) have highlighted verticality and encompassment as the key features of the state spatialization process. This article highlights *fluctuating presence* as an additional image of the state that highlights the dynamics of its temporality.

Being a constitutive feature of the state bureaucracy, documents also open the bureaucratic realm for closer scrutinization. Anthropological work on bureaucracy has studied bureaucratic practices, capacities, self-representations, knowledge and bureaucratic encounters (Herzfeld 1993; Nuijten 2004; Feldman 2008; Stoler 2010; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Hoag 2014). Colin Hoag (2011) has pointed out that much of the anthropological scholarship on bureaucracy is embedded in normative discourse that is dominated by notions of what bureaucracy should be with regard to its objectivity, rationality, efficiency and functionality. Hoag proposes that one way to approach bureaucracy, avoiding the analyses predetermined by idealized notions, is not only 'to write about the gap' but 'to find ways to write from it', exposing aspects that 'complicate the legal realism of bureaucratic discretion' (85). Guided by Hoag's suggestion, this article explores document predicaments and illuminates the widening gaps between the classificatory order of the state bureaucracy and people's lived realities.

This article draws on ethnographic data collected during ten months of fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan in 2013–2014. The work was conducted in three villages along the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border in Jalal-Abad Province. The three field sites varied in size, ethnic composition, proximity to the border, economic activities, and exposure to the ethnic violence that took place in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Material presented in this article stems from conversations, observations and everyday engagements with the local Uzbek population in these villages throughout the duration of the fieldwork. Data were also collected through informal conversations and formal interviews with state representatives, local bureaucrats and representatives of local and international non-governmental organizations operating in the area. My personal background, as a Western-trained scholar from the Baltics, allowed me to freely engage with both the local Uzbek population and representatives of the Kyrgyz state, as I was largely perceived as impartial to internal domestic power dynamics. Yet, the shared Soviet past provided a common ground for

interactions with the interlocutors. The main language of the fieldwork was Russian, in addition to some basic Uzbek and Kyrgyz.

The first part of the article introduces ethnographic material on engagement with identity documents in the rural Uzbek community living along this border and explores how such engagements have changed over time and how they are marked with various degrees of state presence, consequently illuminating the fluctuating presence of the state in the lives of these borderland people. Using documents as a heuristic tool I wish to highlight how the state has been moving in, out and through the lives of the ambiguous citizens produced by changing state regimes. In the second part, I propose the concept of *entangled documents* as a tool useful in exploring the gaps between the state bureaucratic order and the lived realities that have been changing along with the fluctuating presence of the state. The last part of the article not only shows that entangled documents expose such gaps and reveal the space between these two domains, but also gives insight into the internal dynamics of local-level bureaucracy and illustrates how people on the margins are managing their encounters with the state.

From mouse food to plastic bags and fingerprint scanning

Ferguson and Gupta (2002) argue that verticality and encompassment are the two key principles in state spatialization practices: these two metaphors work together to embody the spatial and scalar image of the state that is produced through mundane bureaucratic procedures. Building on their work, I propose an additional imagery of the state that illuminates the temporal and dynamic aspect of the state spatialization process, namely the fluctuating character of the state. My argument here is also indebted to the work of Madeleine Reeves, who has explored the process of state spatialization in rural Central Asia through dynamics of border work, illustrating how the state can sporadically intensify its presence through particular events and moments in time (Reeves 2014). She has also pointed to temporality as an important aspect in the bordering process (Reeves 2016).

While the state might appear as an all-encompassing and constant entity framing the lives of its subjects, the presence of the state is always fluctuating. This has particularly been the case for the rural communities of Kyrgyzstan, where throughout recent decades people have experienced profound and extensive changes in the 'states' of being. Following Ferguson's and Gupta's inquiry into the ways bureaucratic practices relate to state spatialization, I argue that people's engagement with documents is a particularly useful vantage point for tracing the fluctuating presence of the state. 'Documents' in this case is understood as a generative term for paperwork people engage with in relation to the state. My interlocutors would often use the generic term *dokumenti* (documents) to refer to any kind of paperwork requested or produced by the state.[1] Peirano (2002, 5) has succinctly described such documents as 'those legal papers that harass, torment, or facilitate the life of the individual in modern society'. For the rural Uzbek community living along the border of Kyrgyzstan these were ID cards, passports, residence registrations, marriage certificates, birth certificates and other legal documents such as official statements and agreement letters. People's engagement with these documents illustrates how the state has been moving in and out of the space inhabited by minority ethnic Uzbeks.

Ermek's visit

One of the most compelling examples of the changes in people's attitudes and engagement with documents was the case of a lost and found passport I encountered during my fieldwork in a small Uzbek village right at the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. On one occasion my host family was visited by their Uzbek neighbour, Ermek. He was seeking advice and help from my host family's father, Maksatbek, regarding some problems with his documentation. Maksatbek was contacted from time to time by villagers with similar requests for help. This was due to his connections with the local administrative system, as well as his command of written Kyrgyz, which many local Uzbeks did not have. He was also considered impartial to the recent ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, due to his mixed ethnic parentage.

Ermek explained that he was trying to get a passport for his daughter but was having problems with documentation, as his daughter had a foreign birth certificate and his wife did not have a valid passport. Although Ermek's family lived in a village on the Kyrgyz side of the border, his daughter was born in Uzbekistan. Before the closure and militarization of the border beginning in the mid-2000s, it was common for Uzbek women in the village to give birth in Uzbekistan – among other reasons, that is where the closest hospital was. Due to their daughter's foreign birth certificate, both parents needed to confirm that they agreed to her applying for Kyrgyz citizenship. Ermek himself had a valid passport, but his wife had only an old Soviet passport issued in Uzbekistan, which was not valid identification for signing the documents. Because of this, Ermek's daughter's application had not been accepted. Ermek explained that he was told at the local passport office that he needed to provide either a valid passport for the mother or a notarized agreement (*soglasheniye*) in which the mother agreed to her daughter's obtaining Kyrgyz citizenship. However, the notary refused to sign the agreement, as the mother did not have a valid passport. Ermek had decided to try to write such an agreement without the help of a notary and was now asking Maksatbek for help in writing it.

However, Maksatbek and Ermek disagreed about how such a document should be written. Maksatbek said that instead of an agreement (*soglasheniye*), it should be a statement (*zayavleniye*). Ermek insisted that he was told by the local authorities that it should be an agreement (*soglasheniye*). While Ermek was concerned about providing the exact document he was asked for, Maksatbek was more concerned about the logic behind the type of document required. According to him, an agreement is made between two parties, but this document concerned only the mother, so it was more logical to write a statement, not an agreement. After several minutes of discussion Maksatbek started to laugh and exclaimed: 'Look, we have plenty of such people whose passports are eaten by mice!' Also laughing, Ermek reached into the inner pocket of his dark-brown leather jacket and pulled out a passport. I recognized it by its dark red colour: it was one of the old Soviet passports. As he handed it to me I noticed that one corner was missing. Not a small part, but a big chunk of it was not there. It seemed to have been torn away. As I flipped through the pages, which were stuck together, Ermek explained that his wife's passport had gone missing for a long time. He was unsure of how long, but it was long enough that he and his wife had assumed that they no longer had it. But then they had recently found it at home. Only, a mouse had eaten some of it.

I asked whether they had tried to exchange the Soviet passport before it went missing. He explained that his wife had no need for a Kyrgyz passport. His wife was from

Uzbekistan, and though when they married she moved to live on the Kyrgyz side of the border, she still continued to work in school in a nearby village across the border. Another reason they did not change the passport was that it involved many complicated bureaucratic procedures in Uzbekistan. Now, while Ermek was explaining the difficulties with passport changes, Maksatbek became agitated. He said that Ermek did not know anything. He called him stupid and accused him of being ignorant of the law.

> He does not know the laws and regulations. He does not follow anything and is afraid. So they [Uzbeks] keep sitting with their heads down. There are plenty of them here in the village. City Uzbeks are not like this, they know the law, and they fight and get what they want. But the village Uzbeks, they are all illiterate, and so they continue to live like this.

Although Ermek tried to argue with Maksatbek, on seeing Maksatbek's anger he gave up and just tried to get the help he had come for. And eventually, Maksatbek agreed to write a draft of the document.

The next day I met Ermek at the village administration office where he was waiting for the administration secretary accept the documents for his daughter's passport application. In the evening Maksatbek and I met Ermek again and learned that he was unsuccessful because the people in the administration had gone to a seminar. Maksatbek asked how much Ermek had to pay for his daughter's passport. Ermek told him that he had to pay an extra 1000 som and that this was the way to do it (*Tak nado. Bez etogo nevozmozhno*).[2] He also noted that next time he would go to the administration with a friend who would help him submit all the necessary papers. Maksatbek later elaborated that the friend Ermek referred to was an intermediary (*posrednik*) to whom the money would be passed. A couple of days later Ermek called me to say that he had managed to submit all the papers and that the passport would be ready in a month.

Overarching presence of the state

The case of the old, mouse-eaten Soviet passport illustrates how people's attitudes and engagement with the documents have changed over time, reflecting the fluctuating presence of the state.

In the Soviet period, the life of rural communities in the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) was structured in and around the collective agricultural farms of the state (*kolkhoz, sovkhoz*). Thus, the Soviet state with a highly regulative socialist regime had a strong presence in the lives of the people. The categorization of the population and the 'passportization' of this community also occurred during Soviet rule. The internal Soviet passports[3] were introduced in Kyrgyzstan in 1932 and thereafter gradually distributed to the population (AKI Press 2018) marking the beginning of the documentation of this community. When I asked about their Soviet passports, people would often refer to the fact that passports were distributed to them by the state itself, suggesting that this was not an issue of individual concern. They would recall that passports were handed out at the local school or working place, indicating that the passportization occurred on the initiative of a state institution rather than the individual citizen. For this community, the Soviet period was also marked by a highly active cross-border life that was barely regulated or surveilled but rather encouraged and supported (Megoran 2012; Reeves 2014; Troscenko 2016). Thus, while it was an important document, the passport was not a prerequisite in the daily

lives of these borderland inhabitants. John Torpey (2000) notes that in the Soviet Union the passport was an essential part of everyday life, particularly because a passport and a residence registration (*propiska*) were linked to employment, housing, and access to goods and resources. However, once a person was registered and settled in a collective farm in a rural area, as was the case for the borderland inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan, these documents were much less important, despite being 'the backbone of a system of controls' (Torpey 2000, 131). The paternalistic and authoritative Soviet state handled people's documents, and in the settled life of the *kolkhoz,* in this rural borderland context, people did not have to concern themselves about them very much.

Withdrawal of the state

The strong and overarching presence of the Soviet state abruptly ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The period of transition from Soviet rule was accompanied by economic chaos and the dissolution of state systems (Pelkmans 2017). Under the transition period's 'shock therapy', which included liberalization of the market, privatization of collectively owned land, houses and state-owned companies, and significant cuts in state services, 'Kyrgyzstan's state system crumbled and fragmented' (28). Particularly in the rural communities, these changes were painfully visible: workplaces disappeared with the collapse of the formerly state-owned companies and collective farms, and the state withdrew its services and welfare provision to a large degree. The retreat of the state was also clearly visible in the immediate landscape through decaying infrastructure, such as deteriorating roads and dilapidated buildings. In many rural places the state became almost nonexistent in daily life, and these changes were accompanied by a general 'sense of abandonment by a state' (Reeves 2017, 714). During this transition period, the absence of the state was also reflected in people's lack of concern with documents.

With the collapse of the Soviet state, Soviet citizens and citizenship officially ceased to exist. The new countries, the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, introduced regulations according to which people could exchange their old Soviet passports for new ones.[4] However, not everybody managed to acquire a new passport. Many did not fulfil the legislative requirements for Kyrgyz citizenship, such as having a residence registration in the Kyrgyz SSR. In particular, many of the people living in the borderlands found themselves unable to provide all the required paperwork, as they had documents issued by several Soviet republics. Others were simply not interested in dealing with bureaucratic processes; living in an environment from which the state was absent and where residents' everyday issues were settled through informal networks, they saw no need for formal papers. Also, throughout the 1990s and into the mid-2000s people living along the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border could continue to engage in cross-border mobility without any formal documents due to the lack of border control (Reeves 2014; Megoran 2017). Thus, the documents were not of particular concern for the rural borderland inhabitants.

Ermek's case echoes the same attitudes: his family's cross-border life during this period did not require any documents, and therefore it was considered unnecessary to settle identity documents for his wife. The mouse-eaten passport bore the visible signs of this state absence: the most prestigious document pertaining to the individual's formal attachment to the state was lost to rodents.

Resurgence of the state

After the first decades of independence, the Kyrgyz state reasserted itself in these rural territories. With the increased state presence, in the form of a militarized border zone and the professionalization of state structures, a new concern and need for documents appeared. While the lost and forgotten mouse-eaten passport was not required for a long time, now passports were valuable commodities. Since people were forced to engage in difficult bureaucratic procedures and pay large amounts of money for their passports, these were now meticulously cared for. The particular ways people take care of their documents today is a case in point.

During my fieldwork, I would frequently travel in shared taxis between cities along the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border. These taxis were often used by people travelling to the few open border-crossing points. On one such trip, I shared a taxi with three Uzbek women travelling together on a border-crossing trip. Just before the taxi reached the border crossing, the women pulled neatly wrapped documents out of their handbags. They each unrolled the transparent plastic bags and took out two documents: a green Uzbek passport and a blue Kyrgyz marriage certificate. Those were the necessary documents for crossing the border.[5] After looking through and double-checking their documents, the women carefully folded them back together, neatly wrapped them in the plastic bags for extra protection and placed them safely back in their handbags.

These carefully handled and plastic-protected documents stood in sharp contrast to Ermek's wife's mouse-eaten passport. The value and importance given to the documents had significantly changed with the state's territorialization and resurgence. This was displayed through the particular attention paid to these material objects. Now they were prerequisites for sustaining cross-border sociality and essential tools for enhancing people's mobility. As illustrated by Ermek's quest for his daughter's documents, they were also essential for education and work. Moreover, as the state was digitalizing its surveillance systems a new type of population control was being established. Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary elections in 2015 were the first elections where all voters needed biometric registration, marking a profound change in the state's legibility and control over the population. According to the state services, over 2.7 million people (from a total population of 6 million) had registered for new biometric ID cards that would allow them to vote in the elections. Newspapers reported:

> Voters were given ballot papers only after they underwent an electronic fingerprint check. As electoral officials processed the voter's biometric data using the fingerprint scanners, an image of the voter appeared on the monitor. Additionally, the device's screen flashed red when it detected any irregularities (Lee 2015).

One's identity and legality were now materializing not only in physical paper documents but also in the fingertips that were meticulously screened to detect one's right to participate in the political life of the state. The state was gaining control over the population by asserting itself in the lives of the citizens in new and profound ways.

Entanglements

Within a short period, the rural borderland inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan experienced various modes of state presence: the Soviet regime's overarching presence, the collapse and

withdrawal of the state during the turmoil of the 1990s, and the resurgence and territorialization of the independent Kyrgyz nation-state from the 2000s onwards. In this landscape of fluctuating state presence, people's attitudes and engagements with the pivotal artefacts of the state – documents – were changing, displaying the temporality and the dynamics of state presence throughout several decades. However, not only did people's engagement with documents change, but also the documents themselves were caught up and entangled in the changing everyday realities the bureaucratic state order was attempting to capture. Following Gupta's (2013, 437) argument on messy bureaucracies, which have to fill in 'the gap between the classificatory order of bureaucracy and the world that such an order refers to', I suggest the concept of *entangled documents* as illuminative of such processes of gap filling and as revealing of the gaps themselves. Entangled documents illustrate how bureaucratic papers become intertwined in changing bureaucratic practices and the dynamics of social, political and economic realities, which are a difficult match to the neatly categorized bureaucratic order. They also expose how bureaucracies themselves can become entangled in the web of messy realities, changing state regulations and baffled by unclear jurisdictions among the various state agencies.

In the scholarly literature the notion of entanglement has been used to describe connections, networks, dependence, entrapment and complex systems in general (Thomas 1991; Hodder 2011; Ingold 2010). My usage of the term resonates more with Ian Hodder's (2011) application of it. Calling for a more integrated perspective in archaeological theory, Hodder is using the concept of human–thing entanglement to describe entrapment and the mode of being caught up. Similarly, my usage of the term *entangled* points to intertwinedness and messiness, indicating a state of entrapment caused by a relation of interdependency.

Entangled documents

Entanglement with various personal documents was not uncommon in the rural border areas of Kyrgyzstan. In interviews, representatives of state authorities acknowledged that the problems with documents in the border areas were widespread and well known. Problems included expired passports, lack of identification papers, lack of marriage and birth certificates, and problems with residence registration and passports among women who had married across the border from Uzbekistan.

A local lawyer assisting people with document problems explained this situation as a side effect of the bureaucratic system that was inherited from the Soviet period. An important bureaucratic legacy from this time was the system of residence registration (*propiska*). The interconnection of various documents and their attachment to the *propiska* system often proved problematic. For example, some people were unable to receive Kyrgyz citizenship after the dissolution of the Soviet Union due to their *propiska* in the Uzbek SSR. Others who had moved across the border from Uzbekistan were unable to deregister themselves from Uzbekistan due to complicated bureaucratic practices in that country. Consequently, they could not obtain legal residence in Kyrgyzstan. But the problems with the *propiska* system were not limited to the border areas. My friend's brother, who was living in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, deregistered from Kyrgyzstan due to prolonged employment in Russia. After returning to Bishkek he had to renew his expired ID card, but he could

not do this without a *propiska*. However, when he attempted to get the *propiska*, he could not do so because he did not have a valid ID card. He was stuck in a bureaucratic quagmire, where he needed the one document to get the other, and vice versa.

This resonates with other cases in post-Soviet space, where the Soviet system of *propiska* was inherited by the new bureaucracies. Karolina Szmagalska-Follis (2008) describes how in Ukraine's bureaucratic system various documents are intertwined with the *propiska*. She describes how prisoners in Ukraine are dispossessed of their identity documents, which are not returned to them after they have served their term. To obtain new identity documents, they need a *propiska*. But they cannot get a *propiska* without identity documents. For these former inmates, a bureaucratic dead-end locked them in a circle of social and legal exclusion that was difficult to disrupt without proper knowledge or means of tricking the system.

Another entangled document legacy related to the Soviet period is linked to the integrated cross-border life that was promoted by the Soviet authorities in this region. Many borderland inhabitants had attachments to both bordering countries and therefore possessed documents issued by both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (from the Soviet period and from the 1990s). This often created problems when dealing with the bureaucracies of the independent states, as illustrated by Ermek's case. In other cases, as mentioned above, people did not have any documents at all, as they had no need for them in rural areas where the state used to be absent. A new problem that has become more apparent in recent years is the lack of marriage certificates. With the religious revival in the country, religious wedding ceremonies have gained new prominence. Many marriages conducted by religious instructors are not registered with the state, and therefore many people lack marriage certificates. This in turn creates problems with birth certificates, since a marriage certificate is requested by the local rural authorities for the issuing of a child's birth certificate. Because various documents are intertwined within the bureaucratic state system, the lack of one document can mean complications with other documents.

The documents also become intertwined in new and unexpected ways as the political realities of the border landscape change. Documents produced for one bureaucratic purpose or one type of population control are now being used by the state for other purposes. One example is the marriage certificates carried by the women in my shared taxi. These documents had moved beyond just representing the established legal partnership between two persons and their families. In a changing context where the two neighbouring states were diverging politically, the formerly close relationship between them was replaced by strong nationalistic policies, which revealed themselves in strict border-crossing regulations (among other ways). With the militarization of the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border, marriage certificates had become important travel documents.

All these examples are cases of entangled documents that arise in relation to changing political, social and economic realities. The entangled documents of this rural border community are connected to the Soviet state's bureaucratic practices and its legacies; Soviet policies of regional integration; the subsequent absence of the state, producing a lack of concern for documents; the new territorialization of the state; and the state's loss of control over some spheres of social life, such as marriage. While some anthropological writings have explored gaps within the institutional practices of bureaucracy, like the work of Anna Tuckett (2015), this article rather focuses on how these entangled documents illustrate the gaps that exist between the current bureaucratic order and

people's lived realities. Moreover, they illuminate the genealogy of these gaps, as these documents themselves are the material traces of the changing political, social and economic landscapes people inhabit.

Muddled bureaucracies

Disentangling these entangled documents was not a straightforward process. People who were attempting to deal with their document predicaments, like Ermek, noted how difficult it was (almost impossible) to resolve problems in meetings with bureaucrats. The local bureaucrats also shared their frustrations, complaining about the challenges they faced when dealing with such documents. Lack of knowledge, misperceptions, disagreements, conflicting practices of state agencies and the increasing demands on the local bureaucrats from the central government were recurring topics in my conversations with and about the state agencies regarding their bureaucratic practices. The local bureaucrats struggled to manage the entangled documents.

Along with the professionalization of the central state and the proliferation of the state apparatus in recent years, local bureaucrats have had to deal with the central state to a larger degree than before. New regulations and legislative acts, which have to be implemented locally, have placed new demands on the local bureaucrats, which they were struggling to meet. Continuous changes in the legislative acts and local bureaucrats' lack of comprehension of the legislation were important aspects fostering discordancy.[6] The secretary of the local administration noted that understanding the legislation was a challenge for bureaucrats in these rural areas due to language problems. First, few of the local bureaucrats were able to understand the juridical terminology. Second, the language of the legislative texts was an issue in itself. Kyrgyz state has two official languages, Kyrgyz and Russian, but knowledge of both languages varies in the population. Particularly in the southern part of the country, people are less fluent in Russian. The secretary described how the fact that the legislation documents were usually sent in Russian[7] affected and complicated the work of the administration:

> I read it to the rest of the staff, but either way only 80% of it is understandable. They could have at least sent it in the Kyrgyz language. They send these long decrees in juridical language with all the juridical terms. It is very difficult to understand. … We are trying ourselves to understand the law and the different situations people are in. And that is how we are fighting our way through it.

The same difficulties were echoed in other people's accounts of the work of bureaucracy. A representative of an NGO working on document related issues noted:

> Many of these people [people working in the local administrations] do not understand the legal terminology used in the legislative documents, so they do not understand the law. Sometimes the laws and regulations are sent to them in Russian, but they do not speak Russian. On other occasions they receive such a bad copy of the new legislation that it is simply unreadable. These people earn the equivalent of 10–20 dollars a month, so the motivation is also not at the top. Sometimes they even have to buy their own stationery equipment, because there is no state money. How can they give advice?

The local bureaucrats also pointed to inconsistencies in the laws and conflicts among the various state agencies as contributing to the confusion of entangled documents. A

representative of local authorities illustrated this with the complicated *propiska* system already mentioned. She described how hospitals required *propiska* upon women's hospitalization during childbirth.

> But if we give it [confirmation of residence registration] to women who have Uzbek passports, then we get the police at our door. They show us documents where it is written that we cannot give such confirmation to them, and they call it a criminal case. The laws are also changing all the time – they are unstable, and there are many inconsistencies.

Discordant bureaucratic practices reveal tensions and confusions within the state apparatus, both between different state agencies and between bureaucrats themselves. Discrepancies in the work of state agencies were also mentioned by NGO representatives working on statelessness issues.

> There are in general many disagreements between government agencies. For example, the simplified procedure of getting residence permits [introduced by the central authorities to ease the situation for stateless individuals] was not really working, as it was not acknowledged by local authorities.

Another explained that

> People often do not know who to approach within the government. Or if they approach them, they get shuffled around in and between government agencies. The authorities themselves are not well informed about their responsibilities. And this is a general problem in Kyrgyzstan.

The lack of skills and knowledge, combined with little support yet greater demands from the central government, was putting new strain on the local bureaucrats. The local administration had to deal with a constant flow of new regulations from the central state, which they struggled to comprehend and adapt to their settings. As Colin Hoag (2011, 82) has pointed out, 'idealized rules are never specific enough to fit a local context, bureaucrats' work is to interpret them (under a range of constraints)'. The bureaucratic processes around the entangled documents highlight how the local bureaucrats are struggling to bridge the gap between the bureaucratic state order and world realities as they themselves are enmeshed in the changing legislation, contradictory regulations and conflicting areas of jurisdiction of various state agencies. Not only were the documents entangled in a web of bureaucratic interdependency and changing realities, but the bureaucracy itself was caught up in the state production of legal documents they were unable to understand and follow.

Disentangling the entangled

While challenges, such as the ones discussed above, within the state bureaucratic apparatus contributed to discordant bureaucratic practices at the local level, people's encounters with the bureaucracy were also marked by other discrepancies. For people trying to solve their document problems, encounters with the bureaucracy (and the state) were marked by arbitrariness, contingency, unpredictability and waiting. Although the particular role of an individual bureaucrat in these encounters was acknowledged, the encounters became metonyms for the troublesome experience of engaging with the state. For these people, successful disentangling of document predicaments depended on possession of particular knowledge, personal networks and the ability to engage in informal payments.

Knowledge and connections

Indeterminacy, and the unpredictable, arbitrary and inscrutable character of bureaucracy, fosters a sense of opacity, which, as noted by Hoag (2011, 82), 'empowers bureaucracies and bureaucrats – they become gatekeepers, with control over the flow of information and resources'. In his classic work on bureaucracy, Max Weber (1978) argued for the importance of knowledge and its position within the realm of bureaucracy. Knowledge as a tool of empowerment, control and domination plays a particular role in relation to bureaucracy, as one needs access to particular bureaucratic knowledge to be able to comply with it. My interlocutors often lacked this knowledge: they were unsure what the various bureaucratic documents meant and what the appropriate procedure was to attain them. The arbitrariness of the bureaucratic system was reflected in inconsistent and random information dissemination regarding how to settle one's document issues. Many people experienced leaving the offices without having attained clarity on how to settle their document problems, as they were often referred to other offices or asked to provide other documents they were unable to get a hold of. Many were not accustomed to dealing with bureaucracy and struggled with navigating the documenting practices of the state. But it was not only the formal knowledge of procedures that was of crucial importance in successfully navigating the bureaucracy. Gupta (2012), in his study of bureaucracy in India, notes how his informants were well aware of other types of knowledge as important prerequisites in managing the bureaucracy, namely, who to talk to in the administration, whom to approach, and what should be offered for certain services. Gupta suggests that people's cultural information on how the bureaucracy works and their socio-political connections are essential tools in successful dealings with the bureaucracy. This was also the case in Kyrgyzstan.

In Ermek's case, the lack of knowledge about the formal documents and his lack of awareness of the culture of bureaucracy had forced him to seek advice outside the administrative offices of the state. The need to write an 'agreement' that Ermek had little knowledge about made him turn to his neighbour for help. The discussions about the aim, purpose and character of such documents demonstrated Ermek's lack of familiarity with the documenting practices and templates of bureaucratic communication. Ermek struggled with both the format of the necessary document and the language employed by the bureaucracy. Gupta (2012, 36) likewise has pointed out that 'writing is a prime modality of engaging the state', which is always a disadvantage for the poor and the marginal, who often lack knowledge of the formalities of a particular bureaucratic language. For the people of the rural Kyrgyz borderlands, who were not accustomed to engaging with the state through formal correspondence, the requirements regarding a certain mode of formal communication through specific types of written documents created difficulties. Not only the bureaucratic language but also engaging with the state in one of the state languages, Russian or Kyrgyz, was a problem. Many Uzbeks living in the Kyrgyz borderlands did not have a written command of the Kyrgyz language[8] and had little knowledge of Russian. While they understood spoken Kyrgyz, they were often not fluent enough in its written form to provide the well-written documents required by authorities. The increased presence of the state brought a need not only for documents but also for skills in new forms of engagement and communication with the state.

Many Uzbeks living in the rural borderlands also lacked the socio-political network and connections that could help them navigate the bureaucratic realm of the state. Drawing on personal connections, kin relations and patronage links were important in managing social, political and economic interests in Kyrgyzstan. The importance of networks and their function as a safety net, survival strategy and means for accessing resources in the post-Soviet context has been explored and acknowledged by many scholars (Ledeneva 1998; Werner 2000; Rasanayagam 2011; Pelkmans 2017). However, as a minority in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks had lost the position within the larger society that would allow them to draw on their kinship and networks as a resource in managing the bureaucratic state apparatus. The Uzbek population in Kyrgyzstan, being the largest minority group in the country, having experienced violent ethnic conflicts and residing in the regions bordering the state of their ethnic belonging, has received some scholarly attention (Fumagalli 2007; Megoran 2007; McBrien 2011; Liu 2012; Ismailbekova 2013; Megoran 2017). Much of this literature has highlighted the politicization of ethnic identity in Kyrgyzstan, along with growing nationalism in the country. Specifically, from 2005,[9] the Kyrgyz state pursued nationalistic policies that entailed gradual ethnicization of the Kyrgyz state apparatus as administrative offices were increasingly taken over and controlled by ethnic Kyrgyz (Pelkmans 2017). In 2010, this process intensified after ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, after which Uzbeks lost both their economic position and their political representatives in the local state administration (Ismailbekova 2013). This further marginalized Uzbeks within Kyrgyz society as their networks of support within the political, economic and the bureaucratic realm of the state were shattered and their opportunities in life were directly determined and limited by their ethnicity (Hierman 2015). Uzbek interactions with the Kyrgyz state became increasingly defined through the power relations between these two ethnic groups (Hierman 2010, 2015). As many Uzbeks living in rural areas lacked the required knowledge and connections, their meetings with the bureaucracy took place on unfavourable terms – terms they sought to overcome through other means.

Informal payments

A case in point is again the story of Ermek, who, unable to find the solution for his entangled documents through encounters with bureaucrats, resolved it through informal payments. While employing one's connections and network is a common everyday practice in Kyrgyzstan, which is enmeshed in webs of reciprocity, patronage and social obligations (Ismailbekova 2014), there is still a widespread understanding that corruption is an institutionalized part of the state system. Many informants noted that corruption had permeated the whole state system: even state positions were up for sale. Such accounts resonate with Johan Engvall's (2016) work on the corruption of the Kyrgyz state. He shows that the state offices are being commercialized: the state has become an investment market, in which positions are purchased for the access to resources. People remarked that passport offices in particular were one on the most corrupt state institutions in Kyrgyzstan. Interlocutors described how particular extortion strategies were employed by officials at passport offices.

> When I went to the passport office to collect the passport, they told me time and again that it was still not ready. And that is how they do it. You go once, twice, three times, and they only

> drag it on, saying that they do not have it, come back another time. Until you offer them yourself to pay those 500 som. Because you are going to spend 50 som going there and back, over and over. So it is better to pay them.

This appeared to be a common money-making strategy used by officials, as such stories of extortive and predatory behaviour by state officials were widespread. The morality of such monetary payments to state officials varied by context. While the prevalent corruption in the Kyrgyz state system was usually referred to in negative terms, it was also evaluated according to the specifics of the situation, particularly to the official's position and salary and the size of the payment. As one informant noted in describing the corruption, state officials were so poorly provided for that they had to buy their own stationery. Similarly, Madeleine Reeves (2013) notes how in Russia in some cases informal payments to the police by migrant workers seemed socially acceptable, because state pay cheques could not provide a means of sustenance. Cynthia Werner (2000, 18) notes that in Kazakhstan

> in popular discourse, views on the morality of bribery are context-specific in that people factor in the content of the bribe, the official's personality and generosity, his or her regular salary, the estimated amount of income received from bribery, how this income compares to other official's in the same position, and whether or not the bribes are voluntarily presented.

In some cases, informal payments were even considered a functioning element of the Kyrgyz system that actually allowed one to settle things. As Reeves (2013) has pointed out, in post-Soviet contexts bribery can lubricate relations in the space where the law and bureaucracy are inscrutable and ambiguous. This applied also to the Kyrgyz context. Many people who found themselves in a predicament with documents that did not have a legal solution used informal payments to resolve it, like my friend's brother who found himself in a deadlock with his *propiska*. When I asked how he solved the situation, my friend raised her hand and rubbed two fingers against the thumb, indicating money, and said, 'How else can you solve a situation like this if the country has such stupid regulations and you simply cannot solve it according to the law?' Sometimes document predicaments were even defined in monetary terms, that is, the solution was seen as an issue of payment. A local NGO member working with statelessness issues, which essentially derived from problems with documents, said: 'Statelessness is a problem among poor people. The ones who can afford to pay can settle document problems very fast. Corruption here is so widespread that this can easily be sorted out.'

However, while informal payments were a common element in dealing with the state system, many rural Uzbeks struggling with document issues found it difficult to engage in these activities. Gupta (1995, 381) in his influential work 'Blurred Boundaries', notes that bribery is closely associated with cultural capital, as successful negotiations of particular services require 'a great deal of performative competence'. Many rural Uzbeks lacked knowledge of how to navigate the system and, in fear of repercussions, turned to intermediaries. Caroline Humphrey (2012) points out that intermediaries play a particular role in economic transactions in instances where people lack connections of their own. In exploring the role of favours in the higher education system in Mongolia and Russia she describes how intermediaries have become more common and prominent as the economy of favours has expanded. Similarly, the proliferation of state bureaucracy, with its ever-changing regulations and increasing demands for documents, along with the intensified presence of the state, had created a new need and a new market for

intermediaries in the rural borderlands of Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, with the devastating impact of the ethnic violence of 2010 on Kyrgyz–Uzbek relations, intermediaries became even more important in engagements between the ethnicized Kyrgyz state apparatus and the marginalized Uzbek population. According to my interlocutors, each village typically had two or three intermediaries. Each specialized in their own sphere or a particular type of document. Intermediaries were described as people who had a talent for making arrangements and making things happen. They had connections; they knew who to approach within the system and the prices of various services. People noted that as Uzbeks had to make larger payments in the state system than Kyrgyz, then the engagement of intermediaries had almost the same cost. In addition, it also helped them avoid troubling encounters with bureaucrats.

The new presence of the state required new engagements with the state bureaucracy. But successful navigation of these encounters was framed through personal links, connections and knowledge of the system. People in the margins of the state often lacked the particular connections and cultural bureaucratic knowledge to successfully navigate the bureaucracy, even with informal payments. Especially for rural Uzbek people, who were excluded from the state apparatus due to their ethnic background, engagements with the state were often made through a third party, an intermediary, who enabled them to disentangle the entangled documents. Aksana Ismailbekova (2014, 92) points out that engagements labelled as corruption have to be contextualized, as 'in a Kyrgyzstani context, diagnoses of corruption fail to account for the complexity of social life and the degree to which it is structured by mutual obligations, exchanges, and the demands of community membership'. Caroline Humphrey (2012) also argues that even in a monetarized and power-differentiated landscape not all economic actions can be reduced to simple exchanges. While contextualization and attentiveness to the character of informal payments are important aspects in highlighting the various natures of economic actions, they are also important in revealing the particular positioning of actors engaging in these transactions. In the case of the rural Uzbek community in Kyrgyzstan it highlights how the state has re-entered their lived worlds and also how they have been sidelined from the realm of the state.

Conclusion

Recent anthropological work on the state has focused on how the state is experienced and how it comes into being in everyday relations and practices. It has been argued that these processes of construction of the state allow us to capture the imagined state in specific elements in people's everyday lives. Likewise, much of the recent literature in political anthropology has explored the various ways the state materializes in people's lives. A focus on the material aspects of state–subject interaction enables us to locate the state in the concrete and particular, making it readable and tangible for closer scrutiny. This article has focused on some of the most tangible elements of the state bureaucracy, its documents. By exploring people's engagement with documents, I have highlighted how documents can illuminate the temporal dynamics of state spatialization practices, advancing anthropological understanding of state manifestation processes. Moreover, the article contributes to the growing scholarly literature on the state in Central Asia by filling the gap in the anthropological knowledge of the rural Uzbek population's

engagements with the Kyrgyz state. Ethnography from the rural borderlands of Kyrgyzstan shows that over several decades the state has been moving in, out and through the lives of people living in this landscape. People's concern, engagement with and management of identity documents allow us to trace this fluctuating presence of the state. Furthermore, a focus on documents gives us an insight into people's encounters with the state bureaucracy. In particular, the document predicaments that are widespread in the Uzbek community living along the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border reveal the gaps between the classificatory order of the state bureaucracy and the state's subjects' lived realities. Entangled documents highlight how these gaps have been widening with the changing realities of borderland people. Attempts to disentangle the entangled documents reveal the inner dynamics of local bureaucracies and illuminate how people are tackling encounters with the state on its margins.

Notes

1. Fieldwork for this study was conducted primarily in Russian. Transliterations in this article are from the Russian language.
2. The som is the national currency of Kyrgyzstan. In 2014, 1000 som were worth about USD 18.
3. For more details on the Soviet passport system see Hirsch (2005), Luryi and Zaslavsky (1979), and Torpey (2000).
4. For more information on Kyrgyz passports, see Landinfo (2013a) and AKI Press (2018). For more information on Uzbek passports, see Landinfo (2013b).
5. During the time of fieldwork in 2013 and 2014 the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border was closed for regular crossings, with some exceptions. One exception was for people who were citizens of one country and married to a citizen of the other country. This was the kind of border crossing my fellow taxi passengers on this particular occasion were to engage in.
6. For more on citizenship legislation in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, see Farquharson (2011).
7. Although Kyrgyz legislation states that the Kyrgyz language should be the primary language used by government agencies, the central authorities mostly use Russian (Aminov et al. 2010).
8. Uzbek and Kyrgyz both belong to the Turkic language group. In the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, where the large Uzbek minority lives, most people understand and have mutual intelligibility of both languages. For more on language issues in Kyrgyzstan, see Orusbaev, Mustajoki, and Protassova (2008) and Aminov et al. (2010).
9. In 2005 Kurmanbek Bakiyev became the president of Kyrgyzstan, and introduced more nationalistic policies.

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