Ordering ideals: accomplishing well-being in a Kyrgyz cooperative of elders

Judith Beyer

Department of Law and Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle-Saale, Germany

In May 2005, after a tumultuous parliamentary election campaign had led to factionalism among the village population, village elders in northern Kyrgyzstan formed the cooperative Yiman Nuru (Light of Faith). The institution, which is headed by the local imam, was set up with the explicit aim to restore harmony and unity among all villagers. This article deals with how people in rural Kyrgyzstan try to achieve a state of well-being for themselves. Specifically, it analyses a chart the elders created upon forming the cooperative, in which they order their social and economic practices, their moral duties and responsibilities vis-à-vis other villagers, as well as their relationship with state actors, along the lines of three moral concepts: harmony, unity, and moral conduct. This chart provides a unique opportunity to probe into people’s reflexivity and their own ways of reasoning about the meaning of well-being.

Keywords: well-being; state; conflict; social security; emotions; elders; Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

Thin has argued that the anthropology of well-being has been ‘weak and inexplicit’ (2009, 27) and that ‘anthropologists have failed to develop any systematic interest in the subjective, experiential aspects of well-being’ (2008, 135). This has to do in part with the fact that well-being is an analytical category and often does not translate well into the language of our informants. There is also the issue of how to analyse personal feelings, given that we cannot look into the heads and hearts of the people with whom we work (Bailey 1983, 26). However, in addition to the subjective component of well-being, it can also be considered an interpersonal category, ‘since all individuals live within particular worlds of others, and all societies live in a common world at large’ (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009, 5). Likewise, Adelson (2010, 109) has argued that to ‘understand the cultural meanings of well-being is to understand a society’s social, cultural, and political values: values which are, in turn, reflected in the language and practices of well-being’. In his recent monograph, Michael Jackson has combined the individual and the social aspects of well-being by arguing that ‘life transpires in the subjective in-between, in a space that remains indeterminate despite our attempts to fix our position within it’ (2011, xiii, emphasis added). He understands human well-being as ‘a field of struggle’ because it is always perceived as elusive, transitory, and unevenly distributed (ix). It encompasses the past (Where do we come from?), the present (What are we?), and the future (Where are we going?), and thereby transcends not only the subjective and the social but also time and space.

Anthropological literature on well-being might still be sporadic, but the discipline has a longstanding interest in issues of social security. While debates explicitly focused on the concept of ‘social security’ originated in the 1970s and 1980s in the context of ‘development’,
contemporary anthropological work focusing on social security in post-socialist countries has emphasized people’s creative ways of filling the gap left by the ‘withdrawing’ socialist state (Caldwell 2007; Kay 2007, 2012; Read and Thelen 2007). While the Soviet state provided *sots pomoshch* (social assistance) in the form of pensions, funds for the disabled, and child allowances, authors emphasize that people at the local level continued to exercise their own forms of social support that were more encompassing, including help and care offered by friends and kin. If we understand social security in an inclusive way as ‘a set of resources and strategies – material, social, emotional, symbolic – that people mobilize in order to guarantee their everyday personal well-being and stability’ (Caldwell 2007, 69), then as an analytical concept it comes close to how my Kyrgyz informants perceived it, but contrasts with the provision of social assistance exclusively by state institutions. During the Soviet era, social security was often confined to monetized support schemes, many of which have not been continued because the independent post-socialist states are often unable (or unwilling) to fund and maintain a comprehensive welfare system (see Caldwell 2007 for the case of Russia).1

When anthropologists talk about social security, they explicitly include ‘emotional security’ (Benda-Beckmann et al. 1988; Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, 2000) or ‘compassionate social security’ (Caldwell 2007) as an integral part of the concept, emphasizing the importance of private relationships and networks in which individuals are embedded. As anthropologists, we encounter people’s emotions in the context of social situations, where they are not bracketed off from the flow of other kinds of interactions. In this article, I approach well-being as the idealized outcome of successful social security provisions, particularly those of emotional care-taking. It is in this encompassing sense that the local Kyrgyz concept of *zhardam* (help) needs to be understood. Care is an integral aspect of social security. Kay (2007, 53; 2012) has argued that ‘care’ is also a highly gendered concept, as it is mostly females who offer it. Caring by and for men in the post-socialist rural context has thus far been under-studied (Kay 2007; Kay, Shubin and Thelen 2012; Milbourne 2012). My focus is on male elders in rural Kyrgyzstan and how they, in a situation of political, social, economic, and emotional distress, aim to achieve well-being by coming up with a creative initiative for taking care of each other and their fellow villagers. I analyse their novel approach to providing social security and achieving their own and others’ well-being by establishing a cooperative of elders called Yiman Nuru (Light of Faith).

I address well-being from an ethnomethodological angle (Garfinkel 1984 [1964]; 2002; Schegloff and Sacks 1974 [1973]) and by means of a case study that illustrates the search for well-being after a bitterly divisive period of electioneering for parliamentary elections had shaken their personal lives as well as their social organization. In doing so, I use ‘well-being’ as an inclusive category that encompasses people’s hopes and aspirations as they become relevant in a given moment in time. I pay attention to how emic concepts and local practices of well-being are articulated in a situation where people are redefining their relations to one another by spelling out the conditions for an idealized moral order. I refer to people’s efforts to achieve well-being as ‘ordering’ attempts, and understand these as activities aimed at (re)gaining a sense of normativity, predictability, and certainty in one’s life. Ordering is directed against the perceived unruliness and irregularity of people’s everyday realities. It occurs in direct interaction with others, and also when an Other is only imagined. It encompasses verbal as well as non-verbal communication, and embodied practices as well as discourses, and it takes place whenever members of society assemble to engage in social actions (Maynard and Clayman 2003, 195). It is through the practice of ordering that people seek to achieve well-being. Because ordering is an ongoing process, this article advances an understanding of well-being as being constantly in the making and taking place in the realm between inner and outer realities.
The founding of Yiman Nuru

Yiman Nuru was founded in spring 2005 in Engels, a mountain village in Talas Province in the north-western part of Kyrgyzstan. There, 1600 metres above sea level, people live off their land and raise animals. Only two years after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the villagers started privatizing the communally owned property. Because they were among the first in all of Kyrgyzstan to proceed with privatization, they were subject to a now reformed land codex which only provided them with 21 *sotik* per person. This was the second-smallest land allotment in the whole country. During my fieldwork in 2005 and 2006, people frequently remembered how they ended up having to slaughter and eat their animals, or sell them, to survive the first years of independence. Many moved to the capital, Bishkek, or even abroad in search of work. For most villagers, however, outmigration was not an option. Instead, they continued to privatize all goods and property to raise the cash that was increasingly needed as a result of the economic ‘shock therapy’ that was imposed on the country.

Since its independence, Kyrgyzstan has proven itself to be the most politicized country in Central Asia. Participation in political events is high, and not only because taking part in elections or referenda was a requirement during Soviet times and thus something that comes ‘naturally’ for most older citizens. Since independence, people have pinned their hopes for a better future – a growing economy and a stable state – on democratic change, often promoted by international organizations and foreign experts, but also sought through revolutionary upheaval in the years 2005 and 2010. However, the reality of politics has engendered a great deal of instability in the country, which has endured three changes of president, six constitutional referenda, and the dissolution and reforming of several government coalitions, since independence in 1991 (see Beyer 2013). The last decade in particular has brought the people of Kyrgyzstan more economic, political, and social problems than ever before.

This precarious situation fuelled the parliamentary election campaign in 2005, during which the main two candidates for Talas Province approached villagers in person or through their support teams. The fraudulent elections that followed the soliciting of votes constituted the last straw in a series of events leading to the public outburst of discontent that culminated in the ‘March Revolution’ (Beyer 2005). In the months prior to the parliamentary elections, aides to the candidates running for posts had started to distribute ‘aid’ (*zhardam*) such as seedlings, sacks of flour, and other subsistence products to all economically and socially vulnerable households who were willing to support their candidate. The candidates’ activities were aimed at filling the gap the withdrawing socialist state had left behind. By offering a measure of the social security that had formerly been provided by the *kolhoz* (collective farm) administration or directly by state officials, this ‘aid’ was welcomed with open arms by the villagers, many of whom were struggling to get by on a daily basis. However, fierce competition over villagers’ votes began once the candidates started distributing money directly to those families that promised to vote for them. A year later, when I asked the village *imam* why they had created Yiman Nuru, he recalled the situation at that time:

During the elections, people were divided into Saruu and Kushchu. ... For instance, our street voted for Talant *baike* to be deputy in parliament. And Ormok Street voted for Urmatov. Kara Kushchu voted for both. And people from this street didn’t enter the houses of people from that street. There was fighting among the youth, and the elders did not talk to each other anymore.

In order to interpret this statement, a few words need to be said about the spatial setup of Engels and people’s conceptions of descent. The village was formed in the 1920s when the people were forced to settle down in their winter encampments on a permanent basis and forced to give up transhumance. Engels is located in a small valley where three streams come together, and is surrounded by mountains. People who belonged to the same *uruu* (lineage) settled in the same
quarter – one quarter for each group. Still today, members of the Kara Kushchu uruu live in Üch Emchek, people from the Sarymsa uruu live in Örnök, and members of the Sokurbörü uruu live in Özgorûsh (Figure 1).

My informants trace their personal descent first from their respective uruus and then from their chong uruu (major descent line), Kaimazar, to which all villagers belong. Saruu and Kushchu, which are clan identifications, usually do not play any role in public discourse, village histories or villagers’ daily interactions (see Beyer 2011). The political events of 2005 were thus a major exception because the candidates and their aides tried to bribe villagers in Engels along the lines of what they considered their ‘clan identity’. The imam continued explaining what happened in the village as a result of this:

Aksakals [lit. whitebeards] fought [he laughs]. One deputy was from the Saruu clan. We [he and the aksakals from Özgorûsh] voted for him because his work was good and successful and he was helping people. But we are Kushchu and so the quarrel started with the question, ‘Why do you vote for Saruu?’ Others [aksakals from the other quarters] told us, ‘If you vote for Saruu, then move to Saruu [meaning leave the village]. And different conflicts occurred. There were even fights. It was harsh. People were also given money. . . . People’s culture [madaniat – literally ‘civilization’, linked to the Russian word kul’turnost] was spoiled. Yiman Nuru was created to unite all these people again. I thought, ‘How can we unite the aksakals?’ I am an imam. So to unite the aksakals, we formed Yiman Nuru. Now if we have to elect a deputy for parliament, Yiman Nuru will vote together. We will say, ‘OK, we like this deputy’, we will raise our hands and vote. We agreed on this. We decided to act in harmony [yntymak].

When I asked him if they were thus including all members as part of the cooperative, irrespective of their uruu identity, he confirmed that they were. While the conflict had revolved around disputes over villagers’ ancestor-based voting behaviour, the actual problem was that outsiders had succeeded in destroying people’s morality and that villagers had allowed their unity (birimdik) to disintegrate, forgetting about their moral conduct (tarbiia) and shared moral norms. How exactly
the official inauguration ceremony of the cooperative, which was held several months later, during Ramadan in November 2005. The ceremony took place in Manas Ordo, the site of a mausoleum where the ‘father of all Kyrgyz’, Manas Ata, is alleged to be buried. The area around the burial place has been turned into a historical outdoor museum, and many festive state-organized events take place there.\(^5\) Having heard about the elders’ cooperative, the provincial governor and his team initiated the ceremony to promote similar initiatives in other regions of the province where the March Revolution of 2005 had likewise led to factionalism and the disruption of what was perceived and presented as the previously harmonious coexistence among citizens. In addition to the governor and a large group of politicians and state officials, elderly men and women from all four regions of the province were invited to attend the festive programme, which included not only speeches by the aksakals, the village imam, and the governor himself, but also artistic performances, musical contributions, and a sermon delivered by the head imam of the province, in which he exhorted the elders to cooperate with the governor: ‘Aksakals! Help the governor. Summon everybody to unity. If the governor does something wrong, tell him and direct him in the right way. Attend each meeting of his and help him. I help him too. I told him that we always exhort people to live in unity [birimdik].’ A national television station and several local and national newspapers reported on the event in the following days (Figure 2).

Tüloöberdi Aksakal,\(^6\) one of the oldest aksakals of the village and the imam’s immediate neighbour, stepped onto the stage and spoke to the audience about why Yiman Nuru was created:

There is a good proverb in Kyrgyz which states, ‘Pride kills a man; fear kills a hare.’\(^7\) The March Revolution awakened our pride [namys]. That’s why we, 82 aksakals, got together and decided to create Yiman Nuru. The main goal of the organization is to summon people to be good and to guide people to the straight path [tüz zhol] … Our goal is to give good advice to our young generation. We should not take our knowledge with us to the grave. If before we felt uncomfortable, now we are no longer ashamed [uialbai chelek] to give advice to our youth. Now we have started talking about it without having these feelings. Since the creation of the organization, we are no longer ashamed. We need to have pride, we need to keep our pride and we need to guide those who are on the wrong path to the right path.\(^8\) We need to help them, and Talas [Province] will flourish. Talas is good, and we are more united than other places. May God give us unity [birimdik]! It’s good now. I don’t want to boast, but I summon people to unity.

Implicit in the opening part of the aksakal’s speech is the widely shared knowledge that the March Revolution in 2005 was a revolution of ‘the people’, even though most villagers had not directly participated in the uprising, which took place in the capital, Bishkek. Some village youth, however, had travelled there, and in the months after the revolution they continued to boast on the village streets about how they had entered the building of the president’s administration, helping to take back from ‘the state’ (mamleket) what they perceived belonged to ‘the people’ (el). While the revolution had thus been viewed as a positive event, the election campaign that preceded the uprising had not. Tüloöberdi Aksakal addressed two types of emotion that were regarded as being central to both events: namys (pride) and uiat (shame anxiety). He stressed that namys had been set free during the revolution, not only in the demonstrators but also in the elders who had remained at home. This liberating effect was something the elders came to actively draw upon when forming the cooperative in the aftermath of the conflict. At the same time, they managed to overcome another emotion, namely uiat. Among Kyrgyz, namys is understood as a set of positive qualities. It is often translated as ‘honour’ in the literature on Central Asia (e.g. Kanagatova et al. 2011, 15; Reeves 2011), but ‘pride’ or ‘dignity’ comes closer to how my informants utilized the concept: real men have pride, whereas cowards are like hares who are afraid of even the smallest things. But namys needs to be kept in check and under control. If it ‘escapes’ bodily, individual, and social control, it may turn into something negative and destructive. People who have such uncontrolled namys are arrogant, boastful beyond reason,
Figure 2. Tülüöberdi Ata and another aksakal from Engels. In the newspaper in which this photo appeared, the editors added the following imaginary dialogue by way of a caption: ‘May our children have yntymak and yiman.’ ‘Exactly, instead of shooting each other and fighting.’
and asocial. A real man of dignity is someone who is able to balance his pride without appearing too arrogant. Uiat, on the other hand, enforces conformist behaviour as it creates anxiety about not being able to comply with the expectations of others (see Beyer forthcoming). The *aksakal’s* speech demonstrated how the elders managed to overcome their shame anxiety, which had formerly kept them from speaking out in public, and how they came to embrace *namys* as part of Yiman Nuru’s mission. They thereby empowered themselves and set their goal of keeping the uncontrollable youth ‘in check’ by educating them about how not to stray from the right path (see Beyer 2010). Through their activities as part of Yiman Nuru, the *aksakals* claim respect and dignity for themselves from their (younger) fellow villagers, hoping that their initiative will be recognized and rewarded. As their authority has been challenged by the conflict situation the village community experienced, the creation of Yiman Nuru also needs to be understood as an effort to restate their role as arbiters of morality. But restoring moral and emotional social security was not the only goal the organization had set itself. The *aksakal* continued his speech:

> We got three hectares of land from our mayor and planted potatoes there. We need to raise money because among 82 elderly people, one might become ill. We need to send those ill elders to health resorts [*kurort*] so that they can get treatment. We talk a lot about poverty. We are thinking of helping our poor people.

With this statement, Tülööberdi Aksakal turned away from the emotions that had led the *aksakals* to join forces in educating the village youth on moral behaviour to the financial and health care–centred concerns of Yiman Nuru. The members of the cooperative also started to take their well-being into their own hands by working potato fields, selling the harvest, raising money for the poor, and sending the sick to health resorts. (Figure 3) In doing so, their actions were consistent with the practices of rural elders in other post-socialist states as documented by anthropologists: their striving for self-sufficiency and independence as well as their yearning to contribute in meaningful ways to the well-being of the village community were remarkable.

---

Figure 3. *Aksakals* of Yiman Nuru plant potatoes in the commonly owned field.
When the ‘caring’ Soviet state ceased to provide the social security that people in Kyrgyzstan had become accustomed to, they were still better off than many people in other post-socialist countries, particularly those who lived in villages where the kolkhoz had been the only context in which true village solidarity could develop (see Heady and Gambold Miller 2006 for examples). In my field site, people could immediately rely on their long-established kin networks or other social support mechanisms such as shared labour among neighbours (ashar) or the long-term reciprocal connections among school classmates (zhek zhaat). Compared to these rather established measures of social security, however, Yiman Nuru is a novel and hybrid form, as it combines diverse aspects of social security, ranging from financial to social to emotional support, that had previously been taken care of by different state institutions. Although only the male household heads are counted as members of the cooperative (these are the 82 elderly people Tülööberdi Aksakal was referring to in his speech), it is through these elderly men that all the other members of their respective households can benefit from the zhardam offered by Yiman Nuru.9 By means of this arrangement, Yiman Nuru encompasses all villagers, irrespective of age, gender, social standing, or lineage affiliation. There is not a single household in the village that did not send its household head to become a member.

I argue that the founding of Yiman Nuru is an outcome of the villagers’ reflexive thinking about the conditions they live in and their efforts to achieve well-being via novel means. Heritage (Heritage 1996 [1984], 109–110) has argued that it is through reflexivity that all human actors conceive of their world as one that they themselves constantly produce. I agree with Karim, who suggested that anthropologists should regard their informants as ‘observant people capable of their own reflexivity’ (Karim 1993, 82).10 All people generate their own ways of reasoning by acting towards things on the basis of what these things mean for them, that is, through interpretations of their actions. Paying attention to people’s reflexivity is a necessary insight in understanding how people engage in ordering their lives. The following section describes one such particular attempt, namely the explicit ordering of a set of key moral concepts, known to all Kyrgyz people, that come up frequently in their everyday conversations as well as in formal speeches, specifically in those situations where people need to be reminded of the fact that living together peacefully and accomplishing well-being is possible only by striving for the realization of these concepts. The parliamentary election conflict that had shaken the very foundation of villagers’ personal and interpersonal lives was such a situation.

The chart: ordering ideals

Upon forming the cooperative, the elders sat down together and drew up a chart that listed three moral concepts as central to their understanding of well-being: harmony (yntymak), unity (bir-imdik), and moral conduct (tarbiia) (Figure 4).

Underneath each concept they listed a number of specific tasks that Yiman Nuru was supposed to carry out. This chart, then, contained the elders’ dream of a social order, of an ideal village society where the three abstract moral concepts were concretized and translated into tasks and practices that the elders agreed upon. They imagined a social order where conflict would be contained because potentially uncontrolled emotions such as namys would no longer be a matter of internal or external aggression, as had been the case during the previous political conflict, and shame anxiety (uiat) would no longer inhibit the aksakals from speaking out.

The chart consists of three columns. The first entries in each of the three domains are disciplining actions and sanctions rather than positive characterizations of these concepts. This makes
Figure 4. The Yiman Nuru chart: ‘Harmony, Unity, and Moral Conduct.’
sense only if one takes into account the specific conflict situation out of which the cooperative emerged. The three concepts – yntymak, birimdik, and tarbiia – have acquired particular meanings tied to the circumstances in which they were invoked. In other situations, their meanings and people’s understanding of what well-being is would be different.

In the first column, Yntymak, are the following six entries: (membership) fee 500 som; helping the elderly; helping ill people; helping farms and peasantry; keeping in close contact with ‘the boys outside’ (young village men now living in the capital and abroad); and visiting and seeing places and people. The middle column, Birimdik, consists of these entries: keeping order in the village; resolving cases of misdemeanour so that they do not reach the court and the prosecutor; reconciling feuding spouses; working together with the provincial governor, the regional governor, courts, the prosecutor, and the militia; being together in times of misfortune; preventing profligacy; and maintaining relationships between in-laws in our village. The final column, Tarbiia, likewise has several entries: no divisions (that is, no splitting of the village community into factions); monitoring the work of teachers; monitoring the way children are educated; keeping the village clean; designating ‘the most beautiful house’ (ülgüliüü ii); controlling the problem of alcoholism; and sponsoring sporting events.

Orderings, such as the one the elders set up with their chart, are attempts at control or management (Kendall and Wickham 2001). They can be of any magnitude, and every individual is engaged in ordering activities, from the simple ordering of the domestic material objects around them to ordering their movement through space. All organization, by definition, is an attempt to order, and while ‘human beings recognize that the world is actually multiple . . . and that any one system of classification is only a pretence at overly orderly encompassment . . . people continue ordering, knowing of the logical impossibility of so doing once and for all’ (Rapport and Overing 2008, 50–51).

While this particular kind of ordering took place ‘on paper’ at first, the elders began to manifest it through concrete actions, practices, and performances. The village imam gave several examples when I asked him how the elders intended to realize what they had written down in their chart:

If somebody from our village brings a Kelin [daughter-in-law], two or three aksakals will be in that house when she arrives in order to keep order and control in that house. Otherwise, young people will just drink vodka and make a mess. Before, when a Kelin came, only elderly women and girls used to get together in one room and advise her: ‘You came to a good place. Your mother-in-law is like this; your father-in-law is like that. Your husband is like that. Be good.’ And now when she comes, not even knowing where the teacups and the teapot are in her new home, they say, ‘Drink 100 grams [of vodka].’ Is it good or is the previous way good? Also, regarding the consumption of alcohol in general, we decided that if somebody drinks persistently, 10 to 15 aksakals will go and sit in his house and say, ‘We will leave you alone once you have stopped drinking. Otherwise we will come to you every day.’ That way we try to make him sick of us [baiagy zhdatabyz da]. We will tell this drunk person, ‘What, you’ve gotten rich? If so, here we are, 10 aksakals. We will spend the night at your place. You cannot find money to take care of your parents? Then how are you finding money for vodka? If you really have so much money, then take care of us too!’ Then they will be ashamed. And they will try to quit. We need to reduce the number of people drinking.

In addition to these measures of control, the elders of Yiman Nuru have decided to meet in their members’ houses, taking turns. Each time, the person hosting will slaughter one sheep, and the guests will provide additional food. That way, the elders have come to enjoy one another’s company on a regular basis (usually bi-weekly). They have also sent particularly weak elders (male and female) to health resorts in the mountains, paying for their treatment. Moreover, they regularly donate money to the village school and the library.

A persistent problem with abstract categories such as the three moral precepts mentioned in the chart is that of translation. Particularly in the anthropology of emotion, authors frequently
encounter and discuss the fact that emotion terms or concepts do not translate easily from one cultural context to another. For many emotion words there is no equivalent at all in another language. Herzfeld (1980) has argued for examining emotions in their ethnographic specificity and warned of the difficulty of cross-cultural comparisons without properly analysing the indigenous terminology and its associated practices within one language area.12 In addition to the problem of translation, Leavitt has pointed out another dilemma anthropologists face: ‘While anthropologists in their role as theorists have tended to produce models that assimilate emotion to either feeling or meaning, anthropologists as practicing ethnographers continue to rely on the unstated assumptions of everyday usage’ (Leavitt 1996, 516).

In the case of Yiman Nuru’s chart, however, the problem Leavitt describes does not present itself, because the elders themselves have defined what harmony, unity, and moral conduct mean to them by associating a number of tasks and practices with each concept. Instead of having to define these three abstract moral concepts from my outsider’s perspective, I noticed that by looking carefully at the individual entries under these three concepts, at least three additional topics emerged that demonstrated precisely how these precepts are intended to be realized in the eyes of the aksamals, that is, how the elders envisioned accomplishing well-being through moral regeneration.

The first topic is control. In the domain of yntymak, the very first entry – a one-time membership fee of KGS 500 – guarantees that all members of Yiman Nuru will be officially recognized, and nobody will be able to enjoy the fruits of the organization’s labour if they are not willing to contribute their share. The amount is quite high: roughly the average monthly pension the elders receive from the state. The money is used to buy collective goods such as seedlings. In the second domain, birimdiik, the first entries concretize how control should be established, namely by ‘keeping order in the village’, ‘resolving cases of those who are breaking the rules so that they do not reach the court and the prosecutor’, and ‘making peace between disputing spouses’. In the last domain, tarbiia, again the first entries are devoted to the importance of establishing control: ‘no division’, ‘monitoring the work of teachers’, and ‘monitoring the way children are educated’; so too is ‘controlling the problem of alcoholism’, further down the list. Thus, control emerges as a central practice in achieving emotional security and, therefore, well-being.

The second topic that comes out clearly in all three domains balances the emphasis on discipline and punishment established in the first column as mentioned above. It is the topic of economic support and care. In the domain of yntymak, it encompasses ‘helping the elderly’, ‘helping ill people’, and ‘helping farms and peasantry’. In the domain of birimdiik, it refers to ‘being together in times of misfortune’ and ‘preventing profligacy’. In the domain of tarbiia, it encompasses ‘keeping the village clean’ and ‘designating “the most beautiful house”’. Economic support and care go hand in hand here: one stands for an exclusive understanding of social security, the other for an inclusive one.

The third topic I see emerging from the three domains is that of happiness. The academic literature has often distinguished between happiness and well-being, claiming that happiness is related to what people enjoy or like, whereas well-being has to do with what people need or want (Coulmas 2009, 6). In the psychological literature, happiness is often referred to as ‘subjective well-being’ (Diener 2000), stressing a certain degree of autonomy that an individual needs to experience in order to achieve it (Ryff 1989). What we see here, however, is that in all three domains, the elders provided for measures aimed at increasing the well-being of the village community by means of social events that are not only about keeping people entertained but also meant to be performed in groups. These are quite diverse, ranging from ‘visiting and seeing places and people’ in the first domain, to ‘maintaining (good) relationships between in-laws in our village’ in the second domain, to ‘sponsoring sporting events’ in the last domain.
In addition to these three topics – control, economic support or care, and happiness – there are several entries in the domains that emphasize the aspect of communicating with people living outside the village and with the overall appearance of the place: ‘keeping in close contact with the boys outside’; ‘working together with the provincial governor, the regional governor, courts, the prosecutor, and the militia’; ‘keeping the village clean’; and ‘designating “the most beautiful house”’. These show in what ways the elders envision their tightly-knit village community to be connected to the outside world. With these entries they extend their social security network to powerful individuals residing outside their village, some of which help Yiman Nuru financially or logistically, while making sure that in case these people visit, the village appears ‘orderly’.

The ‘withdrawing’ state sneaks back in

When the provincial administration approached Yiman Nuru with a request to organize their inauguration ceremony at the Manas Ordo historical museum, the imam and the aksakals agreed for several reasons. First, politicians are regarded as bashes (literally, ‘heads’) in Kyrgyzstan, and aksakals understand such invitations as requests to perform in their role as wise elders. On national holidays and other festivities, for example Veterans’ Day, they are often invited for food and entertainment. In addition, the elderly men receive presents and money from these well-known regional players. In contrast to the rather strict intergenerational dynamics within the household, respect is not only paid to the elders, but elders, too, have to respect younger people in their role as bash. Second, Yiman Nuru hoped that they would receive state funding from the politicians who were expressing an interest in their organization. Third, as the event was broadcast and widely reported upon, they expected additional resources from third parties. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, they also felt pressured to accept the invitation. The imam contextualized the dilemma the aksakals were facing when taking part in this event which, in the end, directly contradicted what Yiman Nuru hopes to achieve in the village community:

In order to improve the well-being of our young people, we need to improve as aksakals. This is the first thing we need to do. Aksakals shouldn’t drink vodka with young people, shouldn’t play cards with them. Instead, aksakals should buy land and work on it and act as a role model for young people. In doing so, their authority will increase. They need to speak like the aksakals of old used to speak. When they are speaking on behalf of the state, they are selling their voices by going to meetings and public events for the sake of food. In short, they are selling themselves. They are being deceived for food (tamakka aldanyp atyr da). But right now, we need to cooperate with them [representatives of the state]. But once we stand on our feet and have our own funds, we will become independent from the outside. As for now, we are dependent on them and if we make a small mistake they will put a cross in our way. For instance, if I say something bad about the president, it will be over for us: television coverage will be withdrawn, and they will not allow us to enter the mausoleum of Manas again. That is why we have to work very carefully at the moment.

For ‘the state’, initiatives such as Yiman Nuru which could be described as genuine bottom-up or grass-roots institutions have become interesting because they take over services the state no longer provides. What makes Yiman Nuru particularly attractive, however, is that it is a bottom-up grass-roots institution that is run by aksakals, who have a long history of being enmeshed in political discourses (see Beyer 2006). Politicians require ‘a plethora of empathetic images and memories’ such as a shared history to create political identification and commitment (Parkin 1996, xxii), and in Kyrgyzstan they are deploying such a ‘traditional’ mode of communication via the aksakals, who invoke images and memories of an ideal social order and a harmonious moral community. Although officially apolitical, by taking part in these events aksakals have thereby become deeply enmeshed in political action and discourses.
It seems that the ‘withdrawing state’ of the post-socialist period is trying to sneak in through the back door, harvesting the fruits of Yiman Nuru’s hard work after having failed to provide any sort of initial nourishment. In this scenario, ‘the state’ becomes an almost parasitic institution, feasting on the self-achieved well-being of its citizens whilst contributing nothing to its realization. The elders know this well. Tülüööberdi Aksakal presents the position of Yiman Nuru forcefully, knowing that at the present time this position remains an ideal: ‘We don’t need a director. We don’t need people in high positions. We don’t need the governor. We don’t need the mayor. We want respect.’

In the years 2008 and 2010, when I visited my fieldsite again, I could observe that Yiman Nuru had undergone a process of consolidation. The imam and several elders such as Tülüööberdi Ata continue to play an important role in the cooperative and have worked hard to realize yearly visits to sacred sites in Talas Province and beyond. Also, health-care support for particularly vulnerable members as well as regular social meetings among the elders have become institutionalized. The imam had to admit, though, that they were less successful when it came to what the elders consider excessive spending and untraditional behaviour during life-cycle rituals such as marriages and mortuary rituals (see Beyer forthcoming for details). An important new development was that through their network of villagers residing in the capital, Bishkek, Yiman Nuru has begun to write applications to development organizations for financial assistance. While they have successfully attracted funding for small agricultural activities, they told me that they are still in need of a major grant that would allow them to buy dairy cows to provide the elders with dairy products on a regular basis. I understand their activities also as efforts to remain as independent as possible from state services and, therefore, from the reach of individual state officials whom they view as having disturbed the peace and harmony of the village in the first place.

Conclusion

In this article I have described instances of ‘procedures by which conversationalists produce their own behavior and understand and deal with the behavior of others’ (Atkinson and Heritage 1984, 1). Rather than providing an essential key to the disclosure of the socio-political order at large myself (cf. Comaroff and Roberts 1986, 2), I investigated my informants’ actions from an ethnomethodological perspective by paying attention to how they envision and express an ideal social order and how they attempt to achieve well-being in a highly charged post-conflict situation. More specifically, I followed how they ordered certain concepts, listing corresponding social, economic, political, and caring practices, with the goal of laying out the moral conditions for their future well-being.

I argue that, like order, well-being is a never-to-be-attained state that is constantly in the making. Following ethnomethodologists, I suggest that more attention should be paid to people’s attempts to order their daily lives and the world around them. While statements such as ‘ordering is everywhere’ (Kendall and Wickham 2001, 25) might hold true, they remain meaningless unless one tries to locate these attempts in specific actions and practices of people at a given moment in their lives. It is important to recognize that the meanings that things acquire for people are always derived from specific interactions that are indeterminate and bound to particular events. Only if one defines ordering attempts temporarily and spatially can one understand, for example, why for Yiman Nuru the topic of ‘control’ appears to be central for the achievement of well-being and the reestablishment of a moral order underwritten by the elders.

Yiman Nuru started as a moral regeneration project initiated by aksakals who hoped to heal the local rifts created in the community by the divisive competitive electioneering of the parliamentary elections. Initially created as a response to political conflict that had escalated into community dispute, endangering the daily life and interaction of the inhabitants, in the long run Yiman Nuru
aimed at the personal as well as communal well-being of all villagers. In the short run, the organization’s activities have filled the gap a withdrawing state had left behind through the provision of health care, monetary support, social support, emotional support, and moral advice. What is more, the very existence of Yiman Nuru has led to a repositioning of the elders’ roles in public. With the creation of the cooperative they worked towards the rehabilitation of their village community in a moral sense, while at the same time trying to reclaim their authority in a post-conflict situation in which idealized moral norms have been violated. Over the course of time and through the public recognition of their continuous engagement as members of Yiman Nuru, the elders achieved a new sense of self-sufficiency and true empowerment vis-à-vis the state.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on local-language fieldwork which I carried out between 2005 and 2010 (23 months all together). Research was financed by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and the Volkswagen Foundation. I would like to thank the guest editor, David Montgomery, the editor, Deniz Kandiyoti, and my language editor, Brian Donahoe, for their helpful comments and suggestions. Members of the Facebook group ‘Anglische-Kyrgyzcha Talkuu Aiyly’ as well as other colleagues engaged in a thought-provoking discussion on the translation of Kyrgyz terminology.

Notes

1. Caldwell reminds us that the ‘caring’ socialist state was also more of an ideology than a reality. For example, many people received old-age pensions as a form of Soviet social security only in the late 1960s (Caldwell 2007, 65).
2. One sotik is 0.01 ha (100 m²). The assigned land plots in the main valley and in other parts of the country were larger because they are less locked in by mountains.
4. The names of all politicians are pseudonyms. Baike means older uncle and indicates that the imam had established a close relationship with this person.
5. It is located close to the provincial capital, Talas, and lies about 40 km from the elders’ village.
6. Aksakal is used here as a formal way to address a male elder.
7. Erdi namys, koendu kamysh o¨ltü¨ro¨t. The proverb does seem incongruous in the context of his speech, but very often, Kyrgyz proverbs are inherently contradictory. Pride, in this context, is meant in a positive way because it is juxtaposed with fear.
9. In two cases where female widows had no sons of their own, the two women were made direct members.
10. It should go without saying that all actors have the capacity for reflexivity, not only social scientists, for whom it denotes that a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon, and informs that research (Nightingale and Cromby 1999, 228). While I am highly aware of my privileged position as an author and do take it into account as I interpret my ethnographic data (which I not only gathered but also helped to produce in the first place), here I am focusing on the reflexive techniques of my informants.
12. Even within one language (such as Kyrgyz), a single emotion word can be translated in several different ways depending on the social context in which it is employed.

15. In my early fieldwork between 2005 and 2006, dairy products such as *airan* (fermented milk) and cream were available in every household. In 2008 and 2010, however, they had completely disappeared from the tables. When I inquired why, people stressed that they were in need of cash and therefore sold all the milk their cows gave to traders, with little to nothing remaining for themselves.

References


