

Eurasian Perspectives

IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVES

Edited by
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Authority as Accomplishment: Intergenerational Dynamics in Talas, Northern Kyrgyzstan¹

Judith Beyer

“One has to respect the elders” – this is one of the most fundamental principles of intergenerational interaction in the province of Talas in Northern Kyrgyzstan². A village historian once explained this utterance to me which orders the relations between the old and the young in the following way:

One of the laws (*myizam*)³ since ancient times concerns the relation between elders and young people. The oldest one is an *aksakal*, and the youth should listen to him. The oldest one rules, governs, and advises young people, teaches all kinds of handicraft such as smithing and how to train a bird and a dog; how to play an instrument, how to recite Manas, how to tell the genealogy. A young man learns everything from the elders. And elders teach everything. Young people listen to him and serve him: if he wants to ride, the younger one prepares a horse for him, if he asks to call somebody from a field, then the young man calls, if he asks the young man to slaughter a sheep, the latter slaughters, if he asks to sweep the road, the young sweeps it; an *aksakal* commands and the young man implements everything. And an elder is obliged to teach everything (20051103).

In this statement the historian does not talk about actual persons or real situations. Instead, he lists a number of activities an unspecified young man has to perform for an unspecified *aksakal*. We also learn

that while having to implement what the old man says, the young man benefits in that he receives training and experience. And although commanding, the *aksakal* is also presented as being obliged to transfer his knowledge to the young man. In this idealized model, old and young thus both enjoy privileges and have obligations towards one another which bind their asymmetrical yet reciprocal relation. The differences in age and status which the historian describes become embodied through the performance of specific interactional practices. While young people are compelled to be at the elders' disposal, elders are likewise expected to behave in ways deemed appropriate. This kind of interaction is conceptualized locally in terms of respect (*syi; urmat*). To put this in methodologically clear language, I suggest that being treated respectfully establishes an individual's claims to authority and that authority should be understood as the result of such co-emergent interactional practices. We can talk of elders having achieved authority when these co-emergent practices are not challenged in direct interactions.

This article describes the processes through which the authority of Kyrgyz elders is acknowledged and the rights and privileges elders enjoy. It is argued that working towards becoming an elder requires more than just being of a certain age. As they come of age, elders gradually learn to comply with and perform 'eldderness' in the expected ways. Thus, socialization does not end once an individual has reached adolescence; actors are only socialized differently as they grow up. Borrowing a semantic construction from conversational analysis, elders are required to “do ‘being elders’” (cf. Sacks 1984). Elders need to work at “being elders” and the acknowledgment of their authority should not be seen as an unproblematic automatism, but an accomplishment. This interactional perspective casts a new light on the hierarchical relationship between the young and old, because “being elder” cannot be taken for granted. Instead, an individual has to constantly work towards being recognized as an elder. The authority of an elder is evaluated and becomes visible by how successful he is in having his eldderness acknowledged by others. This presupposes that elders are actively seeking opportunities to claim their authority. One way of doing this would be to perform high moral integrity. However, the young eventually challenge the old when claiming respect and authority for themselves. As they draw upon the same resources as their parents in order to be recognized as “head” (*bash*)⁴, children find themselves competing with their parents.

In the given frame the article characterizes the types of interaction through which authority is situationally constituted. It first enumerates some of the fundamental rights elders enjoy in contemporary Talas, and then describes the obligations that come with these rights. Finally, it discusses a dispute case between a father and his son about access rights to land in order to show how the authority of elders can be challenged. In all three sections it draws upon field data gathered in two rural mountain villages in Talas, Northern Kyrgyzstan, between 2005 and 2008.

Respecting the Elders

As heads of their households, elders take decisions in regard to their property, land, and animals and they can to a great deal control the lives of their household members (cf. Abu-Lughod 1986: 80, Shahrani 1986). Their elevated status becomes visible for example in their right to name their grandchildren in the male line and, if they want to, raise them as their own children, who will call them “Father” (*ata*) and “Mother” (*apa*) and address their biological parents with “Uncle” (*baike*) and “Aunt” (*ezhe*).⁵ Such requests by elders can hardly be refused and in fact I have not come across examples where parents would have denied these particular rights of their elders.⁶ Within the household, the head (*bash*) will be treated in what are considered respectful ways, for example by being offered the honourable place opposite the door (*tör*). When meat is being served, the household head receives the head of the animal, a practice which was already noted in early ethnographies (see Grodekov 1889 p. 9). Other parts of the animal may be eaten by young household members only, for example the ears – “this way the young learn to listen to the elders”, as an *aksakal* explained to me. Respect, in these cases, is the basis of the care the elders enjoy from their children and relatives.

The oldest *aksakals* of a descent group (*uruu*) are approached by their members, who come to ask for help and moral support, for blessings (*bata*) and mediation in dispute settlement (cf. Beyer 2006). Many current elders have held official positions during kolkhoz times: those who are currently members of the neotraditional court of elders (*aksakaldar sotu*), for example, have been kolkhoz directors, agronomists, journalists, or teachers. They are educated and possess a lot of technical knowledge related to land, irrigation, and animals – areas which are as central to much Kyrgyz life today, as they were

during Soviet times, and around which disputes frequently arise. These elders are used to speaking in public and dealing with officials and politicians.

In their role as household heads or heads of descent groups, elders have gradually learnt to take over traditional roles and perform specific tasks of a *bash*. To summarize, they have expert knowledge, which they acquired during Soviet times and which remains crucial nowadays as the contemporary Kyrgyz education system is degrading. Some male elders have also taken on entirely new responsibilities by becoming judges of one of the neotraditional *aksakal* courts, which were set up in each village throughout the country (cf. Beyer 2007). In addition to that, elders are respected as veterans of the Second World War or the Afghanistan War. The fact that most of them perform Islam on a regular basis once they get older – made visible by praying (*namaz okuu*) and keeping the fast (*orozo*) – further demands the display of respectful behaviour from the younger generations. Whereas it would certainly be possible to delineate these different sources of knowledge into pre-Soviet (being *bash*), Soviet (being experts or veterans) and post-Soviet (being judges or being religious), these sources do not lead to a compartmentalization of the individual's personal histories. Being a technical expert, the head of a descent group and a pious Muslim are not contradictory or even separable characteristics of a contemporary elder in Talas. The authority which elders achieve in interactions thus cuts across the usual dichotomy of viewing the traditional against the modern, the leader against his followers and the past against the present. “Doing ‘being elder’” is rather a practice of bricolage. I argue that elders continue to be respected nowadays because they have managed to accumulate different knowledge throughout the last decades and succeeded in presenting themselves as worthy of respect. This makes “being elder” look attractive in the eyes of the young who themselves strive towards it.

Obligations of Elders

The proverb “A beard is needed at a feast”⁷ which I often heard as an answer when trying to find out why especially *aksakals* were invited to festivities, but also to sad events such as funerals, conveys well that the respect people accord to elders is only one side of the coin. On the one hand, elders enjoy privileges in everyday life and during

festive events such as birth celebrations, marriages, funerals, and national holidays. But on the other hand, they also have to fulfil the expectations of other villagers by publicly approving and legitimizing these events (cf. Fortes 1969, p. 239, Holleman 1986). Thus, the elders' agency is directed by the expectations of others. A former Soviet judge, now an *aksakal*, explained to me that *aksakals* have to be generous, quiet, restrained, humble, and compromising. He also emphasized that *aksakals* are regarded as being responsible for the youth's behaviour and for those who have misbehaved in their community (20051021). Askar Ata⁸, an *aksakal* court member from my field site, said they were required not to lie (20060514). Their work for people should be "for free", since it was "*aksakal's* work", as an elder from another village on the other side of Talas province put it (20050608). "The judges of the *aksakal* court should not judge fairly because they are judges, but because they are *aksakals*", remarked Töröbek Ata, another member of the *aksakal* court (20060420). This short list gives an indication of how male elders should ideally behave in order to be considered good *aksakals*. Female elders, on the other hand, are exempt from these expectations as long as they have a husband. In general, women in Talas are characterized in opposite ways as compared to *aksakals*: gossipy, loud, and emotional. This is also what they say about themselves, laughingly. While these attributions are surely stereotypical, they are not judgmental. Women can display behaviour which would be inappropriate for *aksakals*, such as screaming and shouting in public. However, a shift in behaviour is required of them when they become widows and the head of their households, that is, responsible for the well-being and the standing of all household members. I never heard a widow scream and seldom did they gossip themselves although they were certainly listening to what other women had to tell. A key informant of mine, an eighty-two year-old woman, is such a female *bash*. She enjoys enormous respect not only within her household, but in the whole village. She is able to keep the household members together as "one", takes a central part in the life-cycle rituals of her extended family, her descent group, and her neighbourhood, and has a reputation for being one of the most religious elders in the village. She is even called *moldo* by the *aksakals* – a title usually given only to pious males. She resembles respected *aksakals* even more in the sense that she is home most of the time, attending to the sheer never-ending stream of relatives, neighbours, and other guests who come

to see her, talk to her, and seek her advice. But along with her privileges come obligations, as female heads are supposed to act in ways that are usually expected from *aksakals*.⁹

In the following example she maintained the high moral ground at considerable material cost for her household. In spring 2006, after the potatoes had just been bedded out onto her land, a thief dared to dig out a large portion of them in order to plant them on his own land. He was found out, and with everyone in the village gossiping about him in very negative ways, he came to her house together with the sacks of potatoes he had managed to dig out. She refused to see him and had her youngest son deliver a message to him: "My mother said you should take these potatoes – she will not eat from what a thief has touched". The man was forced to take the sacks and leave. This example serves to show that by converting the potatoes into a non-returnable poisoned gift, she denied the thief's attempt to reconcile. She never lost another word about this incident. Her daughter-in-law (*kelin*), however, went on lamenting for some time, because she was already anticipating the problems lying ahead of her.¹⁰ As this example shows, "doing 'being elder'" can get the actor entangled in a web of expectations (cf. Wrong 1994). The old woman acted according to her status as *bash*, displaying high moral integrity by sacrificing her and her family's only income, the potato harvest. The thief was humiliated not only because everyone in the village knew about his failed deed, but also because he had dared to steal the potatoes from one of the village's most respected individuals, who even went on to deprive him of the possibility to make up for his nefarious deed. As far as I could tell from the gossip going on afterwards, her reputation was strengthened throughout the village, since everyone acknowledged her virtuous behaviour. However, as an elder, she also did not have to worry about the practicalities following from her moral deed: her daughter-in-law had to find ways and money to cover the missing income in autumn when the festive season started.

As elders also hope to be remembered after their death as ancestors, they work at performing their authority in ways that prove them worthy of ancestorhood in the eyes of their relatives and fellow villagers (cf. Van der Geest 1998). Raising children, giving them an education, arranging their marriages, building houses for them, taking care of their grandchildren, and keeping a good reputation in the village are all practices through which an elder can show that he has

led a successful and morally committed life and should therefore be remembered by others.

Challenging the Elders

So far, I have illustrated that the relation between the young and the old is ordered through a formalized mode of communication: while the young need to pay respect to their elders, these elders need to strive towards complying with an idealized image of being humble and wise. This social contract, however, can be challenged in several ways. Most frequently this occurs by means of indirect conversation: gossiping, vilifying, and reciting proverbs which portray elders in exactly the opposite way from the positive image of benevolence and wisdom. All these tactics give the younger generation the opportunity to reconcile hidden resentment with outward respect.¹¹ Another way to express disagreement with the commands of elders is to silently disapprove and simply do something else. Although there is little an old person can do in the face of disrespect, it turns out that young people themselves work to sustain the general principle of having to respect one's elders. Children, who are socialized into respecting their elders, habitually submit to their parents' wishes and demands. They do so, knowing that one day they will be in a position that allows them to command respect from others as well. The public demand that one has to respect one's elders acknowledges the future of the young: "Those who do not respect the old will not be respected when they are old themselves",¹² was an utterance I heard from young and old informants alike. Every male individual thus works throughout his life towards being recognized as a "head". Through the pursuit of these goals, the young perpetuate this domination by the elders (cf. Weber 1978: 212). In turn, they also learn to dominate their younger siblings who have to respectfully address them in a formal way, using the second person plural as well as titles usually reserved for the parents' generation (*baike* for older brothers and *ezhe* for older sisters). While coming of age, they also learn to shoulder the growing responsibilities, for example when having to take care of their younger siblings. This is how they also learn which behaviour commands respect from others.

However, young people will have to challenge their parents when (as sometimes happens) the latter continue to treat them like children. The following case shows how a nearly 50 year-old "son" had to

rebel against his father who did not recognize the son as *bash*. The father, as the head of the household, had made use of his customary right to keep the land of all of his family members after they received their plots in the privatization schemes of 1993. Arstan Baike had set up his own household with the help of his parents after he got married. He has six children. His oldest son recently got married, brought a wife home, and they were expecting a child. Officially, Arstan Baike owned only 40 *sotik* of land (20 for himself and 20 for his wife) since none of his children were properly registered when the land had been privatized.¹³ Even these 40 *sotik*, though, were still under the factual control of his elder father. Thus, Arstan Baike wanted to claim and exercise his right towards the 40 *sotik* of land his father had hitherto not handed over to him. He argued that he had many mouths to feed now and too little land. His father, however, systematically ignored the demands of his son to be recognized as *bash*, even though the latter was about to become a grandfather soon. In spring 2006, his father again sowed wheat on Arstan Baike's land plot, which the son had already cleared from stones, making it ready for a tractor to harrow. He had wanted to plant potatoes. When Arstan Baike saw how his father had crossed his plans again, he first confronted him personally, but failed to change the old man's mind. Finally, he approached the head of the court of elders, Myrzakul Ata, who is also a relative of the family.¹⁴ With me in tow, Myrzakul Ata met the son and his mother on the respective land plot outside of Aral. The father had not come. "He does not understand", his wife simply said. Whereas Arstan Baike and his father had been fighting inside the house, as Arstan Baike later told me, there was no way that the father would bring this family dispute into the open. He could not allow his son to disrespect him in front of others, even if the "others" were only kinsmen such as Myrzakul Ata.¹⁵

The land dispute between mother and son was a lesson in how respecting one's elders (here, one's mother) can constrain an individual's actions. While the mother screamed at and cursed her son, accusing him of disrespecting his father and of being ungrateful for all that he had done for him, Arstan Baike tried to stay calm, not raising his voice, and arguing in a conciliatory way. He tried to get his mother to acknowledge that he, too, was a head and had to take responsibility for his family just as his father had done. But his mother would not listen. Instead, she compared his six children to the eleven children she had given birth to and kept on repeating that without his

father, the son would own nothing, for the parents had paid for his marriage and built him and his wife a house:

May you fall down deep into the ground together with your daughter-in-law! 'My son brought a daughter-in-law' he says. Everyone brings a daughter-in-law! Or do you think you are the only one, who has a daughter-in-law? Do you think you did a great job by arranging the marriage of your son? I have 10, 15 daughters-in-law! We built houses for you all! Die instead of debating over the land with your father! (Mother, 20060417)

Myrzakul Ata had turned his head away, smoked a cigarette, and waited for things to calm down. He then took the woman's hand saying: "Come here, you have given birth to him", ignoring the next curse the old woman uttered towards her son. He continued telling her:

You know you should have left the land to him and not plant anything. There is no need for conflict here.¹⁶ The government gave the land to all of us. Everything is based on laws, you understand that, right? (20060417)

She did not answer. "I am trying to feed my family", said Arstan Baike instead: "Each person has to fight for his own life".¹⁷ His mother cursed him again. This went on for thirty more minutes, leaving me standing by uncomfortably. Finally, the son gave in. "But from next year onwards", he said, "I will plant on my land". The only answer Myrzakul Ata had for him was to remind him that whatever he intended to do, he should not forget that "we are one people" and that such disputes should be kept "inside".¹⁸ To me, he said, "I am glad I did not make this public. People would have said that we fought", referring to the fact that he was from the same descent group (*uruu*) as the disputing family. When I tried to talk with Arstan Baike a couple of days later on the street, he denied further problems saying "everything is quiet now".

This case shows that while household elders are expected to be benevolent, and not exploitative, in reality, things can look different. The father asserted his status as *bash* simply by not being present. This behaviour was also considered appropriate by Myrzakul Ata.

He himself reminded the son that family disputes should be kept "inside". While father and son could not openly resent each other, Arstan Baike's mother, however, did not seem to have lost face by showing up, demonstrating her discontent with what her son had done by screaming at him and even cursing him. While married women get away with such behaviour, for an old man to act this way would have been intolerable. This was the reason why Arstan Baike's father had not come. Approaching Myrzakul Ata was a desperate move of Arstan Baike, which, in the end, was not successful. Myrzakul Ata, likewise, would have had little influence over his absent fellow kinsman, who is older than him. Whereas state law prescribes formal equality between the father and son by categorizing both as landowners, their relation remained hierarchical with the father as *bash* deciding over his son's property (cf. Benda-Beckmann et al. 2009: 4-5). In fact, Myrzakul Ata mentioned to Arstan Baike that he himself keeps the land plots of his own two sons as long as they live under his roof.¹⁹ When I returned to Aral in 2008, Arstan Baike's son had left his household and moved to Talas with his wife and their child. Arstan Baike was cultivating his own land plot, as he had wanted to.

As this case has shown, paying respect to one's parents is a performative act with crucial material consequences. I suggest that Arstan Baike could not have approached Myrzakul Ata at an earlier stage in the dispute, which had been going on ever since he had left his fathers' house. He needed to become a grandfather to display enough compelling criteria in order to successfully establish his status as a *bash*. Thus, a male *bash* does not only need to be acknowledged by his household members or peers, but also by his own parents. In Talas, however, the situation has become complicated because acknowledging one's descendants as *bash* directly diminishes an actors' access to the most valuable material resource – land. We know from many other ethnographic cases that tensions between young and old are likely to arise over this issue (Fortes 1969, Parkin 1994). While Arstan Baike tried to reason in alignment with the provisions of the land reform, namely ownership on an individual basis,²⁰ his mother prioritised the principle of having to respect one's parents which also implies not to challenge the fact that land has always belonged to the *bash*.

However, at my field site such open conflict only seldom breaks out. In most of the cases I encountered during my fieldwork, children

did show patience and tried to please their parents until the latter considered the younger generation worthy of being *bash*. Even when adult “children” like Arstan Baike successfully claimed their land from their parents (regardless that state law already gave them this right years before) they initially only gained economic independence from them. This autonomy, however, will allow them to eventually prove themselves worthy of respect.

Conclusion

In this article it has been suggested that the decisive element of the inevitably hierarchical relation between young and old is the acknowledgement of the elders’ authority. This is demonstrated through respectful behaviour on the side of the young generation, and the willingness on the side of the elders to present themselves as wise and knowledgeable, that is, beyond individual ambition. Kyrgyz are socialized into treating their elders with respect, and in turn they learn to act accordingly as they grow old. I have described granting and being granted respect as an interactional, life-long process everyone in Talas is engaged in and the suggestion is that being treated respectfully establishes an elder’s claims to authority. This led me to argue that authority should be understood as an accomplishment and not as a simple result of having come of age or holding a certain position. There is therefore no fixed point in life when an actor has secured authority. Just as the young need to work towards having their authority recognized by others, the elders need to engage in “doing ‘being elders’”. This constrains their seeming autonomy. Since authority is relational and derives from how people interact with others (see Blumer 1969: 7), it should be seen as basic to human interactional behaviour rather than a capacity in itself (see Peabody 1968). The ideal relationship between the old and the young as it is transmitted through socialization depends on the mutual acknowledgment of each other’s positions in everyday life.

We have seen that respect can be granted as a result of conversational work in performances and that authority is situationally achieved when an actor’s normative and empirical claims are not challenged in direct interaction. These mutually constitutive performances not only lead to the acknowledgment of the elders’ authority, but also perpetuate and consolidate the hierarchical relation between young and old, which manifests itself for example in forms of address or access rights to resources such as land. The young

generation is socialized knowing that coming of age will lead to having authority, but only as long as one respects the elders today. While this social contract is challenged in specific interactions, as the land dispute between son and father showed, the principle as such is never questioned. This often leads actors – old and young alike – not to pursue their own interests to the utmost.

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NOTES

1. Parts of this article appear in my Ph-D dissertation entitled "According to *salt*. An ethnography of customary law in Talas, Kyrgyzstan" which I completed in 2009 at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany. Field work took place between 2005 and 2008. Altogether, I spent 15 months in two rural mountain villages in Talas. My research focus was on the roles of elders, particularly those male elders (*aksakals*) who are part of a neotraditional court which came into existence in 1993 – the court of elders (*aksakaldar sotu*). My research project is financed by the Volkswagen Foundation and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. The first phase of my research project was financially supported by the Graduate School 'Society and Culture in Motion' at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.
2. *Aksakaldardy syilash kerek* (lit. One has to respect the white beards; *aksakal* is the term people at my field site use to respectfully address male elders). While this proverb refers only to male elders, old women are equally respected. There are also other utterances which include males and females as for example "one has to respect one's parents". Throughout this article, I will use the term "elder" when speaking of all elders and the term *aksakal* when speaking of male elders only.

3. All terms are in Kyrgyz and in the singular form. The acronym "Russ" stands for the Russian language and is used whenever my informants use the Russian term instead of the Kyrgyz (or where there exists no Kyrgyz equivalent to the Russian word). The transliteration follows the standard ALA-LC Romanization tables. In addition I use the German Umlaute ö, ä and ü.
4. The *bash* is the oldest male person or the female widow heading a household. Only when both parents have died will the youngest son, who stays with his parents to take care of them, become *bash* himself. The head of a descent group (*uruu*) is also called *bash* and so are political leaders and heads of other organizational groups.
5. This is especially the case when there is only one son in the family who does not live with his parents, but – for example – lives in the capital Bishkek. If he has a child, it is likely that this child will be raised in the house of the grandparents who need a male relative to take care of them when they grow old. Likewise, grandparents can demand granddaughters from their sons if they feel they could use a helping hand in the household – or simply, because they enjoy being surrounded by their grandchildren.
6. The grandmother of a friend of mine who lives in the capital Bishkek is a huge fan of Jackie Chan movies. When one of her daughters-in-law gave birth to a son, she decided to name the child in honour of the martial arts actor who is a well-known figure in Kyrgyzstan. Whereas everyone tried to talk her out of this endeavour, she did not diverge from her decision.
7. *Sakal toido kerek*. Here, again, "beard" (*sakal*) is used as a pars pro toto for the male elder.
8. All names are anonymized.
9. In other parts of Kyrgyzstan, old women can be addressed with the term *aksakal* as well. However, this is not customary in Talas.
10. Potatoes are the main income for most villagers at my field site, whereas livestock serves mostly as capital. Potatoes are sold in autumn at the bazaar in Talas or to Kazakh traders roaming the villages with their trucks. Without this harvest, people do not have enough money to participate in life-cycle rituals that are predominantly held during these months when everyone has cash at hand.
11. Consider this proverb, for example: *Sakaly uzun kishinin aklyly kyska* (A person who has a long beard has a short mind). This fundamental ambivalence towards elders is known from other contexts as well. See van der Geest (2002: 458) for Ghana where witchcraft accusations towards elders are put forward as a hidden way of airing frustration and dislike.

12. *Karyiany syilabagan, karyganda syi korboit. Or Zhakalaba atangdy, zhakalasang, seni da balang bir künü zhakalait* (Do not beat up your father, otherwise one day your son will beat you up).
13. 1 sotik is 0,1 ha.
14. They belong to the same descent group.
15. He could not have known that I would be at the meeting since the *aksakal* had decided spontaneously to take me along.
16. *Yr chyrdyn tük keregi zhok.*
17. *Ar bir adam öz – özü üchiin küröshüshü kerek.*
18. *Biz özübüz. Özübüz özübüzdö kalsyn.*
19. He also keeps the land of another son who lives in Bishkek, but claims that should he want it, he would give it to him (20060417).
20. See Dekker (2003) for details on the land reform in Kyrgyzstan.