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Judith Beyer^a

^a Legal Pluralism Project Group, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

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Settling descent: place making and genealogy in Talas, Kyrgyzstan

Judith Beyer*

Legal Pluralism Project Group, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

This article explores how the inhabitants of two villages in northern Kyrgyzstan relate to one another and to their environment in terms of both place and genealogy. By performing relatedness, people make claims upon a physical landscape, while their relationships are simultaneously shaped by perceptions of the particular place they live in. The term ‘settling descent’ evokes this dialectic, in which people ‘settle’ descent in a literal sense in rituals, statues, objects and the stories they tell about the past and the present. The often-repeated academic opposition of ‘identity through kinship’ vs. ‘identity through locality’ is resolved by showing how both are aspects of the same historical process. The paper draws on oral histories of key informants, ethnographic case studies and classical as well as recent literature on kinship, place, post-socialism and the anthropology of Central Asia.

Keywords: descent; genealogy; place; social change; oral history; Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

In the recent literature on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, descent has come to be regarded first and foremost as a resource through which government officials construct the nation and politicians recruit their voters. Within this observable trend, two different developments can be distinguished: while some scholars have emphasized descent and explore ‘tribalism’ (Esenova 1998), ‘clan politics’ (Collins 2002, 2006), ‘elite clans’ (Kadyrov 2009) or ‘the power of “blood”’ (Schatz 2004), others deny the importance of descent and see territoriality as the decisive factor of these societies, and thus pursued topics such as ‘the power of localism’ (Radnitz 2005) and ‘the rise of regional identities’ (Jones Luong 2002). It is striking that throughout the debate either one or the other phenomenon is identified as the key to unlock the complexities of the contemporary Central Asian political landscape. Gullette (2010) has criticized these instrumentalist approaches by arguing that it is misleading to understand descent and territoriality as the driving forces in political or economical games of the politicians. Despite political elites’ description of this phenomenon as ‘*traibalizm*’ (Russ.), Gullette suggests that this ‘is an allegation of corruption; it is not primarily an identification of kinship’ (2010, p. 3). In other words, politics is not necessarily based on, nor confined to, a framework of kinship ties. Gullette argues that genealogy, in contrast, is ‘a way to examine relatedness through how it is established and maintained’ (*ibid.*). In his view, it is the people’s genealogical imagination, which centres on knowing one’s patrilineal ancestors (*jeti ata*: lit. seven fathers) and the historical recitations of one’s genealogy (*sanjyra*) that ‘complements the governments’ nation-building project’ (2007, p. 384). I pick up from there. While observable practices of identification include such aspects as outlined by Gullette, lineage membership also plays a material and practical role in everyday life, away from the politicians’ stages and beyond a merely discursive

*Email: beyer@eth.mpg.de

level. This is visible, for example, in the way people alter and relate to the landscape, as the following example shows.

Returning to my field-site in summer 2008 after almost two years of absence, the most visible change to the landscape was a bronze monument erected on the main street to the provincial town of Talas in the northwestern-most province of Kyrgyzstan. Guarding the entrance to the valley in which the two villages where I carried out long-term fieldwork are located, there is now a statue of Bürgö Baatyr. Vested in full armour, the hero is sitting on his horse with two tigers at his feet, baring their teeth. The installation is more than six metres high, including the brick base. A sign made of granite is affixed to the base, displaying a spear with an attached flag, covered with small ornaments, as well as the numbers XVIII–XIX engraved onto the lower left of the plate: the centuries during which Bürgö Baatyr lived. This hero is the ancestor of my two main informants: Kudaibergen Ata, the head of the local court of elders, and Baiyz Apa, in whose household I lived during my fieldwork. Listening to their stories and participating in their lives, I have come inescapably to associate the villages Aral and Engels, as social and physical places, with them. It was also due to their financial contribution that the statue of Bürgö Baatyr was erected in spring 2008, manifesting their efforts to imprint the self-image of their descent line (*uruu*¹) onto the landscape.

‘Settling descent’, the title of this article, expresses a dialectical process in which people make claims upon a physical landscape by performing relatedness while their relationships are simultaneously shaped by perceptions of place. While both genealogy and landscape appear to be self-contained and eternal, they are in fact not only deeply entangled but also constantly recreated anew over the course of time. Following Ingold (2000, pp. 191 ff.), I regard landscape as a lived phenomenon which is not ‘out there’ but which people are a ‘part of’ and which ‘is perpetually under construction’ (*ibid*, p. 199):

[T]he landscape tells – or rather *is* – a story ... It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation. To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past. (Ingold 2000, p. 189)

To exemplify this argument, I introduce a particular ritual, for the occasion of which the village community of Aral separated into their respective descent lines, and during which my two main informants reflected on and reasoned about their *uruu*. In doing so, they invoked the landscape where the different *uruus* had lived in former times and referred to the various organizational forms of settlement and administration of which villagers had been part since the arrival of the Russians at the turn of the twentieth century. Exploring these different settlement sections and administrative units, I argue that *uruu*-membership becomes relevant not only in ceremonial contexts, as Evans-Pritchard has argued for Nuer lineages (1963, p. 203) and as Gullette has suggested for the Kyrgyz (2010, pp. 5, 86), but that it has consistently played a role in conceptions of the landscape – during Russian and Soviet ‘reforms’ of sedentarization and collectivization as well as the recent process of privatization which the two villages underwent. By paying attention to how people settle descent and how they order their lives by means of – rather than in resistance to – modes of governance which have been introduced in a top-down manner, this article aims at exploring emic conceptions of history which are inextricably tied to a genealogical topography (Mondragón 2009, p. 116; see also Fox [1997, pp. 91–102], Dubuisson and Genina, this volume) and landscape. Moreover, attending to genealogy and place in people’s accounts as interdependent categories can also help to question the often ‘flat’ accounts of space as mere backdrop for action and thus lead to a more nuanced account of identity formation in Central Asia.

Praying for rain

In May 2006, I took part in a ritual called *tülöö*. The whole day, cars from the capital Bishkek kept arriving: sons and daughters-in-law were coming home for the event. The villagers had been busy throughout the previous two weeks with the planting of their potato seedlings and wheat seeds. Now rain was needed for growth. Early in the morning of 14 May, people were moving with horse carriages down to the river, which ran by only a few hundred metres away from my house. I watched how the first fires were lit and the smoke of samovars began rising up through the air. I saw more people spreading out along the riverbank further down in the direction of the main valley as well. Observing who walked from their houses down to the river revealed that people of my neighbourhood stayed together as a group in preparation for the ritual. They were from the same descent line: the Bürgö *uruu*. I proceeded down to the river shortly afterwards to join 'our' group, which had occupied a spot on the riverbank.

Women of my neighbourhood had spread out tablecloths onto the grass and I observed how newly arriving daughters-in-law added more foodstuffs to the bread and cookies already laid out. Such food is called *tasmal* and each household usually brings it to any kind of festivity. I also saw women help clean the intestines of freshly slaughtered livestock which younger men were busy cutting into chunks. Kudaibergen Ata, the head of the local court of elders and a neighbour of mine, arrived and joined my adoptive grandmother, Baiyz Apa, in giving commands to the women to bring cups, get the samovars going and tear the large pieces of bread into smaller ones. Baiyz Apa started telling me about the event in which I was about to take part:

People conduct this *tülöö* each year in order to ask Allah to give much rain so that there is enough for the land. We do it once a year in May. We also ask for unity (*yntymak*) and peace (*tynychtyk*) for the people. Every year different households slaughter [livestock]. This year seven will be slaughtered. It is a holiday for the village. There are other *tülöö* there [pointing further down the river where I had seen the fires before]. Another father of yours is there [meaning Kojoke Ata, another elder]. We separate into *uruu* today. Kojoke Ata is *Aksak Börü*, we are *Bürgö*. We [Bürgö] are different and they are different. [pause] We used to conduct it together each year. But this year we're doing it separately. I think this father of yours [Kudaibergen Ata] can also tell you why we are doing it separately this year.

Kudaibergen Ata, who had listened to what Baiyz Apa was telling me, joined the conversation. Like her, he was mostly referring to the major descent line Kaimazar when he spoke of 'we':²

We did not do it together every year. It was like this from the beginning and it is still like this. We have always been doing this. But we need to unite generally and conduct it together. It would be nice to have it together. There is nothing bad about uniting. Over there [pointing down the river again] two *uruu* are separate: Kodol and Aksak Börü. So we pray in three places today [pause]. It was like this before [pause]. But we all pray for the same thing. We ask good things from God for people – unity (*yntymak*). This request is the same. It is *salt* (customary law) coming from Islam. It is obligatory for believers in Muslim countries to ask God once a year, when the year renews itself. It is a good thing.

Baiyz Apa had presented the event as one of coming together, as a 'holiday of the village' and as occasioned by the necessary call for rain. She emphasized that in previous years the ritual had been stronger because all the *uruus* had celebrated together. However, she was thereby undercutting the declared purpose of the *tülöö* as such, which was to reassert the *uruu*-principle for which a splitting-up into groups is required. Kudaibergen Ata invoked two different 'befores' in his comment: one 'before' when people had separated into *uruu* 'from the beginning', and another 'before' when 'we used to have a common *tülöö*' which is portrayed by him as ideal, since it enhanced 'unity'. He found himself torn between either upholding the *uruu*-principle in its idealized version, namely as a group existing only in relation to other groups (see Evans-Pritchard [1963, p. 147]), or joining Baiyz Apa in her emphasis of *yntymak*. His solution

was to combine both, even at the cost of some incongruity: he first clearly stated the importance of the *uruu*-principle by emphasizing that they had ‘always’ done it like this. He then acknowledged that in principle, celebrating together ‘would be nice’, but did not allow himself to admit to me that they might not have conducted the *tülöö* along the same *uruu*-lines last year. Referring to the growing number of *uruu* members as well as describing the ritual as ‘salt coming from Islam’ might have been rationalizing statements uttered in regard to the dilemma he was facing, namely how to reconcile seemingly contradictory interpretations of the event which only surfaced because I was asking.³

That the *tülöö* was conducted separately by each *uruu* this year triggered the two elders into telling me more about the general delineations along descent lines in the village:

KA: We are Bürgö, these [pointing downstream] are Kodol. Kodol are the same as we are [in size]. But they only slaughtered three animals, we slaughtered seven. Aksak Börü are many. Today they are celebrating together with Chürpö. There are only a few Chürpö. So these two *uruu* united today. In the lower part [of the village] there are more people. In the whole village, there are two *chong uruu*: Jetigen and Kaimazar. Jetigen are divided into 13 smaller *uruu*. And all those *uruu* in the other part of the village derive from Jetigen. From the ‘kontora’ [Russ. former *kolkhoz* buildings, the village centre] onwards they are Jetigen and here and there live Kaimazar [pointing towards the mountains behind us in the direction of Engels]. People from Engels are all Kaimazar. There are only two *chong uruu* here: Jetigen and Kaimazar. And from these two *uruu* people branch out.

BA: They multiply.

Here, Kudaibergen Ata relativized his earlier claim that Kaimazar had split up into *uruu* this year, celebrating the *tülöö* separately. Aksak Börü and Chürpö, as it turned out, were celebrating together. When I later joined that group which had set up their camp up river from Bürgö *uruu*, they told me that since there were only a few households of Chürpö in Aral, it would have been too boring for their elders to sit alone. So they shared their food and held the event together.

In his comment, Kudaibergen Ata further explained the basic division along descent lines currently prevalent in Aral. According to him, the village is divided in two parts: the four *uruu* of Bürgö, Kodol, Chürpö and Aksak Börü all descend from a major descent line whose common ancestor is called Kaimazar. They occupy the ‘upper’ part of Aral, that is, the western part, up to the street leading to the ‘kontora’ – the old name for the building of the *kolkhoz* administration where today the mayor has his office. The ‘lower’ part of the village, the eastern part, belongs to the 13 *uruu* of the major descent line named after Jetigen. Kudaibergen Ata also revealed that all people from Engels village are Kaimazar, which means that people from the ‘upper’ part of Aral share a common descent with them. That Aral is split into two parts is also visible in the fact that there are two schools, two pharmacies and two mosques in the village – one for each ‘side’. We can thus see that the delineation along *uruu* is reflected in the way the village is geographically arranged.

While I was listening to the two elders’ elaborations about the contemporary two major descent lines in Aral – Jetigen and Kaimazar – I became confused. I had recently read a book about the genealogy of Aral written by the village historian (Isakov 2001) who lives on the other side of the village. He described the principle of an *uruu* in the following way:

Every *uruu* in Aral helps their members in conducting all kinds of festivities: when there are celebrations, when there are funerals, when there are other events. Best of all, for this kind of help no one will ask for money. Everything is conducted according to equality and everything is done in a way so that every member of the *uruu* will have an equal share. This is according to *salt* and goes back centuries . . . The meaning of *uruu* has never been lost. Collectivity, friendship, *yntymak* and help have been important throughout socialist, Muslim and Buddhist times as well as during the era of Chingiz Khan. (Isakov 2001, p. 16)

Nobody in Aral would object to this (idealized) characterization of the *uruu*. He goes on, however, to note that the other major descent line in Aral next to Jetigen *uruu* is called

Kushchu. The name Kaimazar does not feature in his book. That his interpretation diverged from the one the two elders had just told me about came as no surprise to the two elders whom I informed about what I felt was a mismatch. They were aware of the contingency of their own and others' interpretations:

KA: Since Bektur [the author's name] himself belongs to Jetigen, of course he has to praise Jetigen.

BA: There are many Kushchu too.

KA: In Talas province there are only two: Kushchu and Saruu. There is no Jetigen. Kushchu and Saruu, only these two. Saruu live on that side [pointing away to the main valley] and Kushchu on this side [sweeping his arm around in an inclusive movement]. But he [Bektur Agai] does not even belong to Kushchu. Jetigen come from Iran and Iraq.

BA: Yes. It seems they are descendants of the prophet.

KA: Yes, descendants of the prophet. That's why all of them talk like prophets [both laughing].

From this communication we can see that while there seems to be agreement on the importance of the *uruu* principle as such, the elders accepted that others have their own interpretations of how this general principle looks in practice. Thus, Kudaibergeren Ata revealed his personal understanding of the descent principle and did not reproduce a generally agreed-upon discourse. While he explained to me that on a provincial level, Kushchu and Saruu form the appropriate opposition, Bektur Agai had aligned Jetigen with Kushchu. He thereby not only invoked Kushchu as another commonly shared ancestor of all Kaimazar, but also elevated his own *uruu*, Jetigen, into direct opposition with Kushchu, thereby dropping Saruu as a relevant major descent line for the area. While I had a hard time understanding this move, the two elders seemed not to be confused at all. They had even more examples about how people differed in their accounts on this issue and suggested consulting a book on Bürgö Baatyr written by another villager for clarification.

I argue that we should treat objects such as statues, names, written genealogies and books about *uruu* ancestors as valid and relevant interpretations of the general *uruu* principle, which Isakov defined in the beginning of his book. That these objects are clearly influenced by early Russian scholarship and Soviet representational practices and today used by Kyrgyz politicians in their nation-building efforts should not lead us into treating them simply as instances of 'invented tradition'. Such influence from 'outside' is obvious since the codification of genealogies, for example, stands in opposition to the traditional practice called *sanjyra* where particular elders, the so-called *sanjyrachy*, recite genealogies. Moreover, such codified genealogies are visualized in the form of kinship diagrams and referred to by the Kyrgyz-rendered Russian word 'genealogiia'. Invoking the existence of written documents is often employed whenever people perceive that their personal accounts need further 'backing'. Often, however, a text is not consulted but only gets invoked in conversations. These are instances of what I call customization: a reflexive cultural technique that people have known and applied for a long time, leaving scholars and policy makers confounded when trying to grasp what may have seemed to be chaotic modes of Central Asian livelihood. Customization allows people to sustain the importance of the *uruu* with creative new (that is, originally non-customary) means. In doing so, politicians as well as the general population sustain *salt* as a repertoire to which they can resort when trying to explain how life should be ordered. These different practices and objects are valid, even as they are recognized as partial, such as the books of the well-respected village historian. While everybody acknowledged his intellectual scholarship, the two elders were far from accepting his version of the genealogical topography of Aral for themselves. The two elders were in the end very clear about the fact that Kaimazar had been in the area first. When I asked 'and where did Kaimazar come from?' after they had attributed Isakov's *uruu* origin to 'Iran and Iraq', both laughed:

KA: Kaimazar come from here. They have always been here.

BA: Yes [nodding].

KA: They have always [stresses the word] been here. In Budenyi there is a white monument. It is a big monument of Kaimazar. We came here and owned Zulpukhor Ata [a stone mausoleum, located at the graveyard of Aral, outside the village]. And later Jetigen joined us. When they asked for a permission to stay, we let them stay and said 'Alright, you may stay'.

Through the production of such 'first comer' rhetoric, which builds on phrases of domination, references to material objects in the landscape as well as emphases of the strength of one's own *uruu*, the two elders merged their descent ideology with an ideology about a particular place. Following Mondragón (2009, p. 123), I understand this alignment of descent and place as part of a person's or a group's 'geographical identity'.⁴

It was through attending to the two elders' lives that I understood how such a geographical identity was formed. In telling me about their childhood in the mountains, policies of sedentarization and subsequent collectivization, about working in 'Kolkhoz time' and about today's ongoing privatization, they also outlined the various periods of 'reformation', starting from the 1930s, when the Russians began to lay down their laws upon people's land. While from an outside perspective, older forms of settlement and administration were 'stacked' within one another, villagers each time customized these 'reforms' and related to them anew, eventually claiming them as part of their geographical identity. And while these 'reforms' were imposed on them as part of a colonial technology, intended to encompass a landscape the Russians perceived of as 'savage', 'empty' and in need of civilization, villagers constantly incorporated these new forms of settlement and organization as part of their own way of living. They altered the imperial landscape (see Mitchell [1994]), which made it possible to perceive of it as 'theirs'.

The gradual end of transhumance

Baiyz Apa grew up about 40 kilometres away from Aral in the main valley. In the winter months she lived in an encampment (*kyshtak*) and in the summer months she lived on the pasture (*jailoo*) where her grandfathers, her father and her uncles herded animals:

I was born in the mountains where people used to set up their yurts. In the wintertime, we used to live in the valley and in the summer we used to move [to the pasture]. If one got used to it, it was a nice and interesting life. We used to make good food, though: in the wintertime *kymyz-köjö* in the summer we had *airan*, and *kurut* [all dairy products]. Food was good that time. Every day we had *besb-barmak* [hand-made noodles with meat]! ... We used to keep in touch with the neighbouring yurts. If, for instance, our house was here [showing], the brother of my father was here [pointing]. He had three children. We used to call him grandfather (*chong-ata*). There were only a few people in the mountains. And the place of my maternal grandfather was a bit further – three kilometres away from us. There were another three, four yurts. They used to call it a village (*ayil*) that time. We lived in the yurt for six months. And then we packed our things when it started to snow. In the lower part we also had relatives. We kept in touch with those people. The *jailoo* is good! Every day it's like a holiday there.

From Baiyz Apa's nostalgic comment about growing up in the mountains, we can see that her paternal relatives herded their animals together in one place, with her maternal relatives living close by. Recalling her childhood in the mountains not only brought back memories about who had settled together, but also references to the home-produced food and especially the abundance of meat. The good life on the pasture is seen by her as inextricably related to the good food people had.

Kudaibergen Ata, who was born in 1939, remembered stories from his parents about how the first Russians arrived in the area and he retold the words of his father to me as though he himself had experienced those years:

We had joined Russia before 1917 when [Tsar] Nikolai was thrown from his throne. And in 1930 they turned the winter encampments into 'artels' (work unit). We had five encampments here [in

contemporary Aral village]: Kara Choku, Taldy Bulak, Terek, Aral and Birinchi Bolushtuk. You can write them down. And each *uruu* composed an 'artel'. You can say 'artel' was something like a farmer's association (*dyikan charba*) today. Later we were united into *birikme*. Ours was called Aral. This was in 1936. We had five *birikmes*: Jangy Turmush, Taldy Bulak, Terek, Aral and Pionir.

Even other Kyrgyz would find it difficult to fully comprehend Kudaibergen Ata's account of how institutional forms and settlement names were constantly changing. As an added complication, he explained the arrival of the Russians in terms of a voluntary alliance. His way of talking about the landscape of Aral and Engels after the Russians came is a perfect example of how descent and new forms of settlement and administration have become entangled and exist alongside one another today.

Since 'Manas time', the five original winter encampments (*kyshtak*) which Kudaibergen Ata had referred to were spread out along the sidearm of the Talas River over an area of about 20 kilometres. They carried the names of distinctive features of the landscape.⁵ Aral, for example, means 'island' and refers to a territory surrounded by two arms of the Talas River. This was the place where the four *uruus* were celebrating their *tülöö* in May 2006. It was in these encampments that the different *uruus* lived in the winter months and to which they returned after a summer spent in the pastures up in the mountains.⁶ The very western encampment must have been called differently in 'Manas time', but people only recall the name Birinchi Bolushtuk (literally, 'first district') that hints towards the fact that Russians had named it during 'Nikolai time'. Elders recalled that while the first Russians had already come to their valley in 1904, the first foreign families began settling there only in 1912, bringing apples, potatoes, chickens and vodka with them. The renaming of the encampments into 'artel' in 1930 seemed to have had little direct effect on the population at this early stage.

The most significant change occurred in 1936 when the 'artel' were transformed into *birikmes* to which villagers sometimes also referred as 'small *kolkhoz*'. At that time, the first houses were built for the Kyrgyz. In 1937 a large household survey was carried out. This survey not only identified all individuals in all households according to age, sex and their degree of literacy (almost everyone is marked as 'illiterate' in the survey), but it also noted the number of animals belonging to each household, as well as the crops they planted and the amount of land they owned. A year after this survey was carried out, people had to sign their livestock over to the *birikme*.⁷ Later, in 1955, the inhabitants of Jangy Turmush, Birinchi Mai and Oktiabr' had to leave their houses and were forced to move westwards towards the territory of Aral and Pionir, where *kolkhoz* Kommunizm was established. The population of this *kolkhoz* was thus recruited from people who had been living in five encampments-turned-work units.

The making of *kolkhoz* Kommunizm

When the *kolkhoz* came into being, transhumance was officially forbidden by officials who were at this time no longer Russian, but Kyrgyz who had received training in Kazakhstan or Russia. When I asked Baiyz Apa whether she remembered the practicalities of establishing *kolkhoz* Kommunizm, she told me the following:

There was a district committee. They organized a meeting and then just united us, saying 'Now you are united.' That time there were five *birikmes* and they became *kolkhoz* Kommunizm [pause]. People are like stones in the river. They did not say anything. They agreed to everything. So they united us and mixed us together. Amongst ourselves, however, we did not get used to each other easily. We kept saying 'our village' – 'your village'. And then they united us under Kommunizm. So many heads (*bash*) came to Kommunizm. I worked in their times, too. They used to give us awards during the holidays, but they also used to force us to go to work.

Other villagers told me that the population had asked the architect from Talas, who had been responsible for designing the *kolkhoz*, that they be allowed to stay together in the same way

as they had lived in the previous encampments-turned-work-units. Their wish was granted, so the story goes, and this is why until today the set-up of the village structure of Aral reflects the five encampments and therefore also the different *uruu* divisions: the ‘lower’ part of the village belongs to the major descent line Jetigen, whereas the ‘upper’ part belongs to Kaimazar (together with Engels). Within the two parts of the village, the various neighbourhoods were also identified as belonging predominantly to one *uruu*, although this pattern had been transformed in recent years due to people moving and new houses being built. Two years after the *kolkhoz* had been established, *kolkhoz* Engels was ‘added’ to *kolkhoz* Kommunizm.⁸ And again villagers had to get used to their new neighbours. Baiyz Apa described how ‘they’ felt when ‘Engels people’ joined them in 1957:

Everything changed again. When Engels people were added to us, their land was less [than ours]. Our Kommunizm had more land. We had started to build barns and storage houses as well. And these three [Örnök, Kuugandy and Özgörüş] had only stones and mountains [laughing]. But then good leaders came ... When we had a good head, our plan was implemented well. And if we had a bad leader, then work would stop. Order (*tartip*) was very strong that time, but that order was not harmful. We were living together really fine in the end.

When *kolkhoz* Engels joined *kolkhoz* Kommunizm, the villagers of contemporary Aral had already come to identify with ‘their’ *kolkhoz* in a way that made them perceive even their own *uruu*-members from the neighbouring village as intruders who did not contribute anything to the community. Baiyz Apa attributed the final coming-together of the two villages to the ‘reign’ of certain new ‘heads’: the *kolkhoz* directors. The commoners were told for whom to work and what to do. They did not receive a payment, but were taken care of and protected instead. While Baiyz Apa had likened people to ‘stones in a river’ before, when she remembered that nobody had protested when the collectivization process started, she went on to present this kind of leadership in a positive light. The *kolkhoz* blossomed and possessed about 45,000 animals in its best years which villagers regarded as ‘average’ on a national level.

In many ways, socialist concepts of administration seemed to accord to pre-colonial modes of governance: Villagers ‘began belonging’, by working in the ‘*artel*’, the *birikme* and the *kolkhoz* under the leadership of a ‘head’. In their accounts, they portrayed the way this new elite ordered their subjects as similar to the *bii* or the *manap* in former times. They thereby customized entire new modes of governance, making them ‘ours’.

By continuously ‘pushing’ people of different encampment-turned-work-units into one location from the 1940s onwards, the Russians not only ‘stacked’ different residential units within one another, but also people of different *uruus*. But in this process, different geographical identities continued to co-exist, albeit less noticeable to outside observers. To put it differently: during Soviet times too, people identified not exclusively as ‘*homo sovieticus*’ (see Zinoviev [1986]), but as having been born in a particular encampment, as descendants of certain major and minor *uruu*, as inhabitants of a village, and as workers of a working unit. When at the end of ‘*Kolkhoz* time’ Aral and Engels had become ‘almost like one’, as Kudaibergen Ata said, this did not mean that villagers’ geographical identity came to be defined exclusively by the *kolkhoz*. This was evident in the way privatization was carried out 40 years later: that is, along the previous, *uruu*-oriented organizational forms of residence.

The unmaking of *kolkhoz* Kommunizm

In 1993, when the members of Kommunizm agreed to privatize the *kolkhoz*, Kudaibergen Ata headed the commission that was responsible for dividing and allocating the common belongings, properties and animals. Before becoming the main agronomist in *kolkhoz* Kommunizm, he had received his technical education in the Kyrgyz capital, at that time called Frunze, where he was

also first introduced to the Russian language. He had been an eager student, and finished his studies with a thesis on the diversity of plants in Talas. He was then first assigned as a land specialist to a *kolkhoz* in southern Kyrgyzstan, temporarily leaving his family in Aral behind. After long stays in different places, being transferred from *kolkhoz* to *kolkhoz*, he finally moved back to Aral at the end of the 1980s where he worked until the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁹ Here is how he recalled the privatization process of *kolkhoz* Kommunizm:

Only two years after Kyrgyzstan had become an independent nation-state, we decided to split the *kolkhoz* between the two villages [Aral and Engels]. Do you know the bridge separating Engels and Aral? Everything, which is on the other side of the bridge belongs to Engels. When it was called *kolkhoz* Engels, Engels used to be part of us. All of the people from Engels are Kaimazar. While Engels formed a new, separate *kolkhoz* and called itself Üch Emchek, we [Aral] were one of the very first villages in the whole country to undergo complete privatization.

The first step of privatization, thus, occurred along the former *kolkhoz* lines – between *kolkhoz* Engels and *kolkhoz* Kommunizm. After having been shown a *kolkhoz* in the eastern part of the country which had been privatized already, the two villages started separating from one another, forming new organizational units: Engels turned into ‘Üch Emchek’ and formed a new, but smaller *kolkhoz*.¹⁰ The other half of Kommunizm was named ‘Aral’ and continued with the privatization process by itself:

We privatized by dividing everything we had. We thought this is better than renting. ‘Mine’ (*meniki*) is better than ‘ours’ (*bizdiki*). We divided all public buildings, machinery and animals. *Kolkhoz* Engels got their share of property and technical equipment. The military station [where soldiers live to guard the boarder with Kazakhstan] and other large buildings were divided between Jetigen and Aral.¹¹ Then the commission divided the other property according to the number of people living in each *birikme*. Aral got four tractors, five cars and two combines.

Thus, the next step of privatization was to distribute the large pieces of commonly owned buildings – the military station, the saw mill, the mill, and storage houses – ‘between Jetigen and Aral’ (that is, Kaimazar), or, in fact, along the two major descent lines. Other property such as machinery was divided ‘according to the number of people living in each *birikme*’. Thus, smaller property was allocated to the former encampment-turned-work-units. In a next step, the collective’s livestock was privatized:

KA: Everyone got five sheep from the *kolkhoz* animal stock and every 10 people received one horse. For example, Bürgö received three barns full of sheep. At that time we were 239.

BA: More than ten years have passed since then. Probably we have increased.

KA: Now we are probably around 300. When we organized a *dyikan charba* (farmer’s association), there were 239 of us.

As in the case of the distribution of property, the official allocation of animals was realized by handing over livestock to the various *uruu* in proportion to the number of their members. The sheep of Bürgö *uruu* were initially kept in the barns that had been allocated to Aral *birikme*. By 1995 all *kolkhoz* animals had been distributed that way. The final and most crucial step, however, was the privatization of land. The land was officially distributed among individuals who were given usufruct agreements for 99 years: ‘From a new-born baby to an old person we were given 20 *sotik* of farm land and 15 *sotik* of grass land,’ Kudaibergen Ata explained.¹² The allocation followed *uruu* lines again: villagers were given land plots in those areas of the former encampments where their ancestors had lived (see Klijn [1998, p. 61]).

The land plots were administered by the household head, usually the male elder who was in possession of a document listing the number of individuals belonging to an organizational unit called a farmer’s association (*dyikan charba*). These were usually all of his sons, irrespective of whether they still lived under his roof or in their own houses, which, according to *salt*, parents have to build for them. As land was also distributed to those individuals who had been born in

Aral, but lived outside the village today, these household heads were often in charge of several hectares of land as they pooled the land plots of their sons and decided on their usage.¹³ This practice continues today and still leads to disputes within the households, particularly between fathers and sons (see Beyer [2010]).

Klijn (1998, pp. 65ff.) describes how at the end of the 1990s, several of these *dyikan charba* had pooled their manpower and cultivated their land together. However, after two years, they split up for the following reasons:

Big families, which could provide more labour than smaller families, had demanded more products. Also complaints that some families were lazy while others worked hard led to a lot of dissatisfaction. Another point of argument, besides the difference in family size, was the difference in herd size. Large herds needed more of the collectively produced fodder than did smaller herds. (Klijn 1998, p. 66)

By the time I had started fieldwork, this arrangement no longer existed. And while most household heads possess a document identifying them as the head of a farmer's association, in many cases his sons, who live in their own houses, no longer cultivate their land plots or raise their animals together with their father. The *birikme*, however, were still partly active in 2005–2006. In contrast to Klijn (1998, p. 64), who calls the *birikme* 'service associations', and describes them as being 'initiated and co-ordinated by the government', but nevertheless 'based on tribal affinity', I have shown that these units go back to the early encampments and have undergone a series of name changes throughout the course of time as well as several incorporations into larger units. While these *birikme* administered the commonly owned property and the animals of those *uruu* who belonged to the *birikme*, they initially also functioned as intermediaries between the government and the families, for example by collecting land taxes for the government (*ibid.*). Klijn mentions that they 'also helped families out with funerals', for example, by paying for the tractor which brought the corpse to the graveyard. I suggest that since the *birikme* were partly formed along *uruu* divisions, this kind of help needs to be seen as inextricably related and not only existing in addition to *uruu*-internal regulations.

As I found out from people in my neighbourhood, there had been a gradual decrease in the number of *birikme* in the last years: in the mid-1990s, four units had been active in Aral: Kashka Jol¹⁴, Aral, Jetigen and Terek. In the year 2000, Jetigen and Terek dissolved their *birikmes* whereas Kashka Jol and Aral merged into one. When I did fieldwork, there was only one *birikme* left: Aral *birikme*, located in my neighbourhood and consisting of Kaimazar *uruu* members only. Here is what the two elders had to say about 'their' work unit:

KA: Among all those *birikme*, only ours survived, only Aral. The other *birikme*, they don't have anything any more. It is better to have common property than to have private property. It is bad if we sell our property – then we will also suffer like the others suffered.

BA: When we separated after independence [in March 1993], it was a problem for them [people from Engels]. They had to come here for our mill, to the mayor's office ... so they had this problem. Everything was here. It was the centre here ... And now they've got used to it.

KA: Little by little they [the villagers] destroyed the common *kolkhoz* buildings, sold the machinery and spare parts or used them for their [private] houses. They took everything that was not nailed down [laughing].

BA: We had built barns here during Soviet time and then most barns were destroyed after independence.

While this observation is far from likening privatization to prosperity as so often occurs in the writings and discourses of Western scholars and Kyrgyz politicians, it also shows that the elders attributed the agency of this process of 'unmaking Soviet life' (see Humphrey [2002]) to the villagers themselves: they were the ones tearing down what they had built and taking back what

they thought belonged to them. And while Kudaibergen Ata mentioned that it is ‘better to have common property’, it was he who had earlier decided on ‘complete privatization’.

By partly reversing the steps that had led towards collectivization, villagers remained fully in control of their assets. As seen by the two elders, privatization was not something that happened to people in Aral, but something they deliberately decided upon as Kudaibergen Ata had made clear. While my field-site had been late to follow collectivization compared to other areas in Kyrgyzstan, it was, at least in the elders’ perception, one of the first to decollectivize. And while the initial steps were regulated and encouraged by the government and international organizations in the frame of various programmes (see Spoor [1995]), the later steps were inextricably related to internal organization such as the role of the *uruu* or intergenerational dynamics which state officials could in no way influence, especially since they were themselves subjected to them in their roles as family and *uruu* members.¹⁵

Klijn (1998, p. 88) argues similarly when she states that ‘[c]ontrary to what various reports and articles state on the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, the families in Aral were coping to the current economic crisis quite well’ [sic]. She attributes this to ‘the “organizational heritage” which ‘fitted quite well into the *kolkhoz* system’ and which provide the Kyrgyz with the possibility ‘to overcome the short-term insecurity after independence’. The elders, too, remarked that already in the early independence period they were left to their own devices and had to make their own decisions:

In all of Kyrgyzstan we got the smallest amount of land – only 20 *sotik* per person. This was the minimum. Akaev [the country’s first president] made the mistake to give land, but he did not take care of the peasants. The first years were hard. People ended up eating their animals or selling them in order to survive. Many people did not work on the land, but moved to Bishkek or left the country. Only for the last two or three years now is everyone working on the land. We are coping with it quite well now.

Thus, while the elders attributed agency and the establishment of order in Soviet times to ‘good heads’, they emphasized that after independence, when Akaev turned out to be ‘too soft’ – this being the major accusation villagers brought forward against him – they had to develop alternative strategies. While some villagers migrated away, others continued privatization in order to raise the cash that was increasingly necessary as a result of ‘shock therapy’.

Privatization was still going on when I returned to my field-site in 2008: the Aral *birikme* was holding a meeting in my landlords’ saw mill to discuss the selling of the still jointly owned storage house. As in most of the cases before, the highest bid came from a rich villager who did not live in Aral any more, but returned frequently to oversee whether his property was administered well by those whom he had appointed as his deputies. While I never managed to talk to him directly, I saw him in action during village meetings and life-cycle rituals. He was undoubtedly one of the new heads of the village and while there were also undertones of jealousy when villagers talked about him, he seemed well respected as someone who ‘takes care of people’ as they put it.

In summary, over the course of the last century, various social and spatial transformations have shaped villagers’ self-perception. The landscape of Aral and Engels, as presented by the two elders, has genealogical as well as topographical features through which villagers anchor themselves in an environment that is ‘pregnant with the past’ (Ingold 2000, p. 189). Thus, the past is conceptualized as a lived experience in the way *uruu*-membership is envisioned and performed and in the way the landscape has been altered. Thus, every part of the landscape of Aral and Engels can be envisioned as ‘a knot of stories’ (Ingold 2009, p. 41) which references different time periods, forms of organization and identity. These, however, only gain relevance when they are invoked in the performances and conversations of those who inhabit that ‘knot’.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that descent is essentially tied to the landscape. It has been ‘settled’ in a literal sense: during the *tülöö*, in the statue of Bürgö Baatyr, in books about village genealogy or in the stories of the two elders about their village. By closely attending to these material narratives, I traced the intertwining of descent and various forms of organizational orderings throughout the last century and up to the present. I have shown that people’s geographical identity has been sustained through the customization of the different Russian- or Soviet-imposed settlement patterns and modes of organization. From the two elders’ accounts of sedentarization, collectivization and privatization, we see how people managed to relate to the ever-changing modes of settlement and organization, learning to acknowledge as ‘ours’ what used to be ‘theirs’. Today, they refer to places in the landscape by using various alternative toponyms. While villagers gradually customized what Russian ‘reforms’ brought into their lives, they did not forget nor deny their *uruu*-identity, as became obvious in ‘Independence time’ when privatization was not carried out on the basis of individuals or households, but along the lines of the descent groups which had mutated into production units in the Soviet period.

In the course of the *tülöö* in May 2006, this very *uruu* membership was made visible, and identification with a particular *uruu* was reasserted. In the afternoon of that day, the food that women and men had been busy preparing all day was finally ready to eat: people ate noodles with boiled meat in groups of three out of large white aluminium bowls usually used for serving food or for preparing bread dough. After the food had been eaten, an elder (*aksakal*) gave his blessing (*bata*), which people accompanied by holding their cupped hands in front, murmuring wishes into their hands about how rain was needed that year. As soon as the blessing was over, women proceeded to clean the aluminium bowls and pile them on top of one another. I was surprised because they normally guard their personal household items attentively, making sure that their dishes do not end up in another household. I asked my landlady Jyldyz Eje, the older daughter-in-law (*kelin*) of Baiyz Apa: ‘How do you know which bowl is yours?’ ‘I don’t. They are all ours.’ Elmira Eje, the younger *kelin* of Baiyz Apa, explained further by pointing to the bowl in Jyldyz Eje’s hand: ‘See?’ and she showed me the small hole which had been punched into its rim. ‘Our bowls have this hole. So everyone knows they belong to Bürgö.’ The other *uruus* had different ways of marking ‘their’ bowls, they told me. I found out that while over the course of the last years almost all property had been privatized, new utensils had been pooled together and are today regarded as Bürgö property. This is also the case for the cauldrons in which meat or noodles are boiled for rituals. All of these dishes are kept together in one place at a neighbour’s house.

It is a familiar suggestion that food and especially eating ‘may be an important mediator between the concepts of identity through locality and identity through descent’ (Strathern 1973, p. 33). The communal preparation of traditional food in new dishes owned by descent groups during the *tülöö* rite is a powerful manifestation of villagers’ efforts to once more perform as *uruu*, as they ritually imprint their group identity onto the landscape at the place where ‘their’ previous encampment had been.

Notes

1. The term *uruu* has often been associated with ‘tribe’ in English and ‘*plemia*’ in Russian literature. Another Kyrgyz term, *uruk*, is often translated as ‘clan’ or ‘*rod*’ (Rus.) respectively. Sometimes, however, *uruk* is also translated as ‘lineage’. As the term *uruk* is not used in my field-site, I do not deal with this inconsistency here. According to my informants’ accounts and their own (written) genealogies, an *uruu* is made up of a group of agnates who view themselves as having descended from a common ancestor. *Uruu* is thus a relative term since its range of significance depends on ego and refers

- to various depths of genealogical descent. In the case of the Bürgö *uruu*, for example, grown-up males describe themselves as being five generations removed from their ancestor, Bürgö Baatyr.
2. My informants talk of a *chong uruu* when they refer to their ancestor Kaimazar from which they are eight generations removed. I translate *chong uruu* as ‘major descent line’, since the adjective *chong* indicates greater significance.
 3. *Salt* is a legal repertoire which has normative and cognitive elements and which is inherently connected to everyday interactions and performed in utterly mundane as well as highly ritualistic ways. I argue that *salt* is usefully conceptualized as ‘customary law’ because of its capacity to ‘customize’, that is, to gradually integrate elements of non-customary (legal) repertoires such as state law and Islamic law. The term takes into account that all the while people are invoking *salt*’s purported stability they are in fact dynamically adjusting its principles and rules. I call this process ‘customization’ (Beyer 2009).
 4. One anonymous reviewer of this essay pointed out that other objects such as Soviet passports and land titles also tied people to particular places and began to form part of their identity. I explore the relevance of such documents in contemporary intergenerational disputes between parents and their children in another article (see Beyer [2010]).
 5. In Engels, likewise, the three encampments were located further inside the mountains and not condensed as in the contemporary village set-up. They were called Chöngör, Kuugandy and Tegerek.
 6. These pastures, in turn, are also divided along *uruu* membership with each *uruu* having its own territory. The encampments consisted most probably not only of *uruu* members, but also of cognates and other non-kin (see also Irons [1975], Humphrey and Sneath [1999], Sneath [2007]).
 7. In Engels, this happened in 1939. When I asked Masalbek Ata, from Engels village, about this he remembered: ‘I still know what my father said. He told me that in 1939 he had to give 40 sheep and goats, and 11 cows and horses to the *kolkhoz*. That’s how the *kolkhoz* got animals.’
 8. As in Aral, the three winter encampment sites of what is today Engels were first turned into ‘*artels*’ and later into *birikmes*. In contrast to Aral, however, names changed only once: from Tegerek, Kuugandy and Chöngör in ‘Manas time’ to Örnök, Engels and Özgörüsh in ‘*Kolkhoz* time’. In 1950 the three *birikmes* were united to form *kolkhoz* Engels.
 9. *Kolkhoz* directors and leading personnel had to change their workplace frequently in order to not develop ties too close to the population. This strategy is also being applied in contemporary Kyrgyz politics where governors are usually assigned to head those provinces they themselves do not come from.
 10. The name Üch Emchek translates as ‘three breasts’. Villagers typically explain this name by referring either to the striking mountain outside their village that reminds them of a body, or by pointing towards the three mountain streams Chong-Aryk, Chöngör and Tegerek, which flow through the village. Both explanations emphasize the nourishing aspect of the landscape for the village.
 11. Kudaibergen Ata did not refer to ‘Jetigen and Kaimazar’ here since this would have included people from Engels who had split off already at that point.
 12. One *sotik* is 0.1 ha. The assigned land plots in the main valley and in other parts of the country were larger as they are less locked in by mountains than those in Aral. Engels received 21 *sotik* per person as they privatized a couple of years later when a different land law had come out.
 13. While according to the Talas Encyclopedia, 3824 people lived in Aral at that time, Klijn (1998, p. 61) mentions that land was allocated to 4500 individuals, that is, including those who were not residing in the village any more.
 14. This unit is the same as Pionir, as villagers told me. It coincides with the western-most encampment site. While I could never find out the history of this particular unit – which Klijn also does not mention in her work – it seemed to have been fully merged into Aral *birikme* by the time I was in the field. None of the younger men who worked together in this unit mentioned they were from Kashka Jol, for example. This divergence is common: the *uruu* names which Klijn’s informants from the ‘lower’ part of Aral gave her for the pre-colonial era (see [1998, pp. 94ff.]) only overlap partially with the ones my informants gave me.
 15. See Yoshida (2005) and Jacquesson (2010) for accounts of privatization in other parts of Kyrgyzstan.

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