

Claiming Ancestral Homelands: Mongolian Kazakh migration in Inner Asia

by

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I dedicate this work to my mom:

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the migration processes of Kazakhs from Mongolia to Kazakhstan between 1990-2011. Since 1990, when Kazakhstan gained sovereignty from the Soviet Union, approximately half of the 120,000 Kazakhs who lived in Mongolia migrated to Kazakhstan through a state-supported process of ethnic repatriation. Over twenty years that the repatriation program has been in place, Kazakhstan's attempts to claim its current territory as the homeland of all Kazakhs and to construct Kazakhs living abroad as its national diaspora have produced some complicated and quite unintended effects. Rather than participating in an orderly process of permanent mass repatriation, Mongolian Kazakhs have created a viable cross-border community, continuing to maintain social ties and kin relationships on both sides of the border.

This dissertation is about claims to homeland, belonging, and history in a space carved up by state borders and divided by competing political structures, economic systems, and unequal regional power relations. At the most basic level, it is about how people relate people to places, through ideas and practices of mobility and migration, historical narratives built around sacred places and ancestral genealogies, and categories of belonging or exclusion based on language, religion, and ways of life. A central aim of my dissertation is to show how people's lives can be organized around principles of seasonal migration, pilgrimage, kinship, and ancestry, as much as claims to citizenship in a nation-state. Mongolian Kazakhs articulate their ideas of homeland and belonging through appeals to ancestries, not polities, enveloping state-sponsored notions of 'repatriation' into a deep history of ancestral movements and cyclical seasonal migrations. This is predicated upon the creation and on-going maintenance of reciprocal

relationships of care among the land, the ancestors, and their descendants. For Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolia, such cyclical relationships to ancestries and movement represent very powerful, albeit not always overtly political forms of belonging. Ultimately, I argue for the actual possibility of alternative worldviews in which the nation-state, with its attending conceptions of history, relatedness, and belonging, has become but one aspect of people's experiences of creating a compelling and meaningful way of life.

Chapter One

Introduction: Altai, Mongolia, Kazakhstan

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.

(De Certeau, *Spatial Stories*: 129)

Oskemen/Ust'-Kamenogorsk: at the borders of four countries

In July 2009, after almost two years of research with Mongolian Kazakh *oralmandar* (pl. returnees/repatriates) in Kazakhstan, I was finally on my way to visit Mongolia. Summer is the busiest season for visits, and, from May to early September, one can see caravans of cars and minibuses traveling regularly between Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Since 1990, when Kazakhstan gained sovereignty from the Soviet Union, approximately half of the 120,000 Kazakhs who lived in Mongolia migrated to Kazakhstan through a state-supported process of ethnic repatriation. Over twenty years that the repatriation program has been in place (1991 -2011), Kazakhstan's attempts to claim its current territory as the homeland of all Kazakhs and to construct Kazakhs living abroad as its national diaspora have produced some complicated and quite unintended effects. Rather than participating in an orderly process of permanent mass repatriation, Mongolian Kazakhs have created a viable cross-border community, continuing to maintain social ties and kin relationships on both sides of the border. Kazakhs from Mongolia travel to Kazakhstan to visit friends and relatives, as well as to do business. Those who now live in Kazakhstan go back to Mongolia to reconnect with living relatives and their ancestors buried

there, to find suitable marriage partners, to attend life cycle ceremonies, to participate in commemoration feasts, and to visit graves.

Unfortunately, because I was not able to acquire a Russian travel visa, I could not accompany my Mongolian Kazakh friends, who were traveling by car from the city of Almaty in Southeastern Kazakhstan, passing through Russia, and then finally crossing the border into Western Mongolia. Although Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China, and Russia all meet in the mountainous region called Altai, Kazakhstan and Mongolia do not share a border. A seventy-kilometer wide strip of Russian territory separates Kazakhstan and Mongolia and going through Russian border checkpoints requires a detour of several hundred kilometers (see Barcus and Werner 2010).



Figure 1: Political borders of Inner Asia.

This land route through Russia was the primary way that Mongolian Kazakhs traveled to Kazakhstan at the beginning of their migration from the Bayan Ulgi Region in Western Mongolia. At their first border crossing as they left Mongolia, Mongolian Kazakh repatriates were met by Russian border checkpoint guards and customs officials before they could enter their “ancestral homeland” of Kazakhstan. In the early 1990s, many families brought their animals with them, some taking as many as several hundred heads of sheep and horses, the bloodlife of Mongolian Kazakh pastoral economy. Russian quarantine and border services did not allow the animals through and many were abandoned or slaughtered at the border (see Doszhanov 2005). Fifteen years later, several Mongolian Kazakhs I interviewed recounted to me the loss of their animals, yurts, and other possessions at the border crossing. The abandonment of their animals, their mobile homes, and other necessities of pastoral livelihood at the Russian border was the moment at which they began to realize that their semi-nomadic way of life in Mongolia might no longer be possible in Kazakhstan.

A second, much more expensive and time-consuming route to Kazakhstan, involved traveling fifteen hundred kilometers over unpaved roads eastward across Mongolia to the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, taking a train from Ulaanbaatar to Beijing, and then flying from Beijing to Almaty. In 1998, with great demand for easier travel to Kazakhstan, where half of Mongolian Kazakhs now live, Kazakhstani SCAT Airlines began to offer weekly flights between the Bayan Ulgi Region in Mongolia and the city of Oskemen near the Kazakhstani-Russian border. This is a much easier way to go between Kazakhstan and Mongolia as it does not require going through multiple border and customs checkpoints, and during the summer months, the weekly flights sell out well in advance.



Figure 2: Bayan Ulgiy Kazakh Autonomous Region in Western Mongolia.

So, when planning my trip to Mongolia in July 2009, without a Russian transit visa I had no other option but to take a train from my fieldwork site in the Almaty region to Oskemen, where I spent a day exploring the city while I waited for the weekly SCAT flight to Mongolia. It seemed to me that through its geographical location, its history, architecture and its demographics, Oskemen was emblematic of the tumultuous transformations of the Altai region: the Russian colonial expansion into Northern Asia since the 17th century, Soviet formations of the Kazakh nation, and the post-Soviet processes of nation-state building.

Currently, a sleepy looking provincial city of about 300,000, Oskemen, formerly known as Ust'-Kamenogorsk, was established as a Russian fort and trading post in 1720, at the confluence of the Irtysh and Ulba rivers, in the heart of the Altai region. At that time, it was the Southernmost fort in Russia's line of military fortifications that had been steadily progressing eastward since the early 17th century. As the Russians discovered, the mountains of Altai were

rich in mineral resources, including copper, iron, coal, precious stones, and gold. The name Rudnyi Altai (Mining Altai), which the Russians gave to the area, reflects the Russian Empire's primary motivation for expanding its control over the region. It is also telling that the first maps of the Altai region produced by the Russian government were geodesic maps that showed topographic measurements and rich natural deposits (see Rozen 1998).

Russian military personnel and gold miners were the city's first inhabitants. However, following the emancipation of serfs in 1865, the Russian government opened the Altai district for free migration and settlement from European Russia. After the declaration of the Settlement Act, hundreds of thousands of these newly freed Russian peasants settled in Altai, Eastern Siberia and the Kazakh steppes. In 1897, the population census showed that 84 percent of Ust'-Kamenogorsk was ethnic Russian (Gentile 2004).

During Soviet times, Ust'-Kamenogorsk grew into an important center of uranium mining closely connected to the nuclear industry. Like other cities in the Soviet Union that were connected to secret or strategically important military and industrial research, it was a "closed city." Population movement in and out of the city was strictly controlled and workers were brought in from other parts of the Soviet Union. Due to this non-Kazakh immigration, by 1959, the percentage of Kazakhs in the city dropped to just 4 percent (Gentile 2004; Gentile and Tammaru 2006). In the 1990s, mass outmigration of Russians from Kazakhstan, as well as immigration of mostly Kazakh rural populations into the city, tipped the demographic balance in favor of Kazakh ethnicity for the first time in the city's existence. Nevertheless, despite its new Kazakh name of Oskemen, the city itself and the Eastern Kazakhstan region as a whole, remain largely Russian and Russophone spaces, making them difficult to navigate for Kazakhs from Mongolia who do not speak Russian.

That night, while flipping through Kazakhstani local TV channels in my hotel room, I paused on a program that featured a round table discussion with a panel of scholarly experts. The moderator announced that the topic of that night's discussion was "Kazakh history," and acknowledged running into an immediate problem: "Is it *Kazakh* history or *Kazakhstani* history?" he asked his panel of participants and added: "Is the history of Kazakhstan the history of Kazakhs?" The two historians on the panel nodded and both said "yes" at the same time. However, another guest, disagreed:

This is not about Kazakh or Kazakhstani or any such 'national idea'. What this is really about is the idea of homeland [Rus. *rodina*]. In our school textbooks, we have this subject, 'History of Homeland' [*Istoriia Rodiny*]. I consider the USSR to be my homeland. But, in parenthesis, they put, 'History of RK' [Republic of Kazakhstan]. So this means that they have limited us by these parenthesis to the last 18 years.

One of the historians shook his head and responded: "But, we have to remember that, throughout our history, Kazakhs have always been squeezed between the [Russian] bear and the [Chinese] dragon."

At the end of the program, members of the live studio audience were given a chance to comment or ask a question; a middle-aged Kazakh woman took to the microphone and stated:

If I want to talk to my son about history [tarix], I have to tell him about the history of his ancestors. But I really only know about my parents. Maybe I know the names of my seven ancestors, but I do not know anything else about them. We need to study the history of our lineage [ru] and our tribe [taipa]. Kazakhs say that those who do not know their seven ancestors are 'zhetisiz'. But those who do not know their history are also zhetisiz.

The word zhetisiz, literally "sevenless," carries great moral weight in Kazakh and can be used as a powerful form of shaming. Its root comes from *zheti ata* (seven forefathers), which refers to the

practice of reciting the names of one's seven patrilineal ancestors. The knowledge and ability to recite one's *zheti ata* is a cultural ideal and final proof of being Kazakh. As the mark of true Kazakhness (*Kazakhshylykh*), it could serve to separate authentic "pure" Kazakhs who have preserved the knowledge and significance of their genealogies from those who, by forgetting their history and culture, become "ancestorless," *zhetisiz*, as the woman from the audience expressed it. She seems to have solved the problem of "homeland" and history that troubled the expert panel: "our history" that is important to pass on to her son, is the history of his ancestors, "the history of our *ru* and our *taipa*." In these exchanges, the scholars and audience members articulated contesting conceptions of homeland and the deep significance of historically and territorially based claims for the Kazakh nation and its newly independent state. Furthermore, the idea that those who are ignorant of their history are "orphaned," just like people without knowledge of their ancestors, demonstrates the intertwining of two different ways of remembering and articulating history and belonging: one shaped by practices of ancestral veneration and genealogically based understandings of descent and group identification and the other centered on ethno-national claims to territory delineated by the nation-state paradigm.

This dissertation is about claims to homeland, belonging, and history in a space carved up by state borders and divided by competing political structures, economic systems, and unequal regional power relations. At the most basic level, it is about how people relate people to places, through ideas and practices of mobility and migration, historical narratives built around sacred places and ancestral genealogies, and categories of belonging or exclusion based on language, religion, and ways of life. A central aim of my dissertation is to show how people's lives can be organized around principles of seasonal migration, pilgrimage, kinship, and ancestry, as much as claims to citizenship in a nation-state. Ultimately, I argue for the actual possibility of alternative

worldviews in which the nation-state, with its attending conceptions of history, relatedness, and belonging, has become but one aspect of people's experiences of creating a compelling and meaningful way of life.

I further explore the ways in which Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolia are ultimately able to construct claims to different versions of histories, where the boundaries of their cultural worlds do not correspond to the political borders of the nation-state. These sometimes complementary but often competing notions of Kazakh cultural identity are tied to complex negotiations of political citizenship, economic potential, and physical and spiritual health. Many Mongolian Kazakhs articulate their ideas of homeland and belonging through appeals to ancestries, not polities, enveloping state-sponsored notions of 'repatriation' into a deep history of ancestral movements and cyclical seasonal migrations. This is predicated upon the creation and on-going maintenance of reciprocal relationships of care among the land, the ancestors, and their descendants. For Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolia, such cyclical relationships to ancestries and movement represent very powerful, albeit not always overtly political forms of belonging.

Homelands

Over much of the twentieth century, Kazakhs in Mongolia typically located their ancestral homeland across the Altai Mountains in Xinjiang, the area which is now the western territory of China (Diener 2009; Werner and Barcus 2010). Their notions of homeland were situated around seasonal pastures and ancestral migration routes that crisscrossed the mountainous Altai region in Western Mongolia and Xinjiang. However in 1991, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan was established as an independent nation-state and began to generate territorially-based ideologies of its own political and ethnic genesis. By locating the ancestral homeland within the boundaries of the contemporary state, Kazakhstan has

actively sought a particular national legitimation, attempting to "root" Kazakh history and culture within the territory of the nation-state. Through its policy of "ethnic repatriation," the Kazakhstani government has also attempted to reach beyond the borders of the nation-state to "capture" the Kazakh diaspora abroad as part of its nationalizing project. Since 1990, almost one million Kazakhs living in Mongolia, China, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran and other countries have followed the call of Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev to return to the "land of their ancestors," which most of them have never seen before.

A week after arriving in Bayan Ulgi Kazakh Autonomous Region in Western Mongolia, I visited the home of Maqsat-agma¹ whose relatives I knew in Kazakhstan. Like many other Kazakhs from Bayan Ulgi, he moved to Kazakhstan with his family in 1992, under a five-year labor contract, and then returned to Mongolia when the contract expired in 1997. As his children came in, he introduced them to me: "This is my Kazakhstan *bala* (son/child), born in Kazakhstan," then pointing to his daughter, "My Mongol *kyzy* (daughter), born here." Then I asked him a question that I asked many others in Bayan Ulgi that summer: "Where do you see your children living when they grow up?" And like many, he answered immediately and emphatically: "In Kazakhstan. Because here there are no jobs and no future for them." He added: "I will not go back to Kazakhstan, but when my children get older and finish school, I will send them to a university to get education in Kazakhstan."

I continued: "What do you see as your homeland?" When I asked the question, I used the word *otan* for "homeland," which in the Kazakh language carries official, formal connotation,

¹ Kin terms, such as "uncle" (*agma*) or "grandmother" (*apa*), are polite forms of address and the use of personal names, especially for elders, in-laws, and (for women) male relatives, is generally considered extremely rude. Many Kazakh women, especially those from Mongolia and China, follow the custom of never uttering the names of any of their husbands' male relatives. As many Kazakh names refer to common household objects, plants, or animals, this prohibition extends to any use of that word by the women of the household.

usually rendered in Russian as *Otchizna* or Fatherland. For example, in official documentation and government speeches aimed at diasporic Kazakhs, Kazakhstan is referred to with the term ‘*tarikhi otan*’ in Kazakh or ‘*istoricheskaiia rodina*’ in Russian, meaning ‘historic homeland.’ Mongolian Kazakhs also occasionally used “historic homeland” when talking about Kazakhstan, but the terms that I heard them use most often were ‘*atameken*’ (‘ancestral homeland,’ literally ‘land of the forefathers’) and ‘*atazhurt*’ (literally, ‘ancestral pasture’). The root “ata” in *atameken* and *atazhurt* means forefathers or ancestors and it is this ancestral, genealogical connection to the country of Kazakhstan that is emphasized by many Kazakhs in Mongolia.

So, when I asked, “What do you see as your *otan*?” Maqsat-agma answered: “My *tughan zher* (land of birth) is Mongolia, but Kazakhstan is my *atameken* (ancestral homeland).” “So, does that mean you have two *otan*?” I asked. “No!” he raised his voice, seemingly exasperated by my lack of understanding. “I have citizenship in Mongolia, so my *otan* is Mongolia. If I had Kazakhstani citizenship, it would be Kazakhstan. But Kazakhstan is my *atameken*.”

The variety of terms that Mongolian Kazakhs used in speaking about Kazakhstan and Mongolia reflect the different ways in which claims to belonging and connections to place and ancestry are articulated and negotiated by them. In answering my question, Maqsat-agma took into account citizenship, ancestry, and place of birth as available forms of claims to identification and political membership. To complicate the situation even further, I continued with my questions: “In your opinion, what is the biggest difference in [Bayan] Ulgii between before and now?” He answered: “Before in Soviet times, we were close to Russia, learned Russian, were friends with Russia. Now we are no longer close to Russia. We are now close to China. All our goods, all our trade is now with China. So, that is the big difference.”

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the borders between Mongolia and Kazakhstan and China, which were almost impermeable for most of the 20th century, were now open to the flows of information, goods, and possibilities of travel. In the early 1990s, the mass migration of thousands of Kazakhs from Mongolia was part of the larger regional processes of mass population movements following the dissolution of the USSR. Many of these migration processes have been framed as “ethnic repatriation,” or, as Brubaker (1998:1048) has called them, migrations of “ethnic unmixing” in the aftermath of imperial collapse. The examples often cited in post-Soviet migration literature include the emigration of roughly 2 million Soviet Germans (Aussiedler) to Germany and the 2.3 million Russians who left Central Asia in the first decade of independence (Brubaker 1995; Kosmarskaya 2006; King and Melvin 2000; Sadovskaya 2001).

In this context, I do not ignore the extensive literature on nation-state in the former Soviet Union, but I do wish to de-center “the nation-state” as the sole focus of analysis. Many scholars working in Inner Asia are taking seriously the way that people themselves are organizing their sense of “inhabitation” and belonging. Alexander Diener (2005, 2007, 2009) has argued compellingly for the need to rethink the categories of national identification, ideas of diaspora, and conceptions of homeland in relation to Mongolian Kazakh histories and migrations. Jennifer Post (2007) describes how Kazakhs in Bayan Ulgi region use musical production and performance to maintain their local distinctiveness in response to the nationalizing efforts of both Mongolia and Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, Saulesh Yessenova (2005) presents an excellent description of the way rural migrants draw on the culturally specific strategy of *shezhire* (ancestry/genealogy) as a way of narrating their sense of connectedness in the face of urban exclusion. As I also show, frameworks of interpretation in Inner Asia cannot

be limited to the ‘here and now’ of the nation-state and its attempts to control conceptions of territory, history, and civil identity.

The very concept of the nation-state is predicated on modernist colonial imaginaries of time and space as linearly organized and measurable quantities, which can be demarcated and dominated (cf Fabian 1983; Ingold 2000; Kirby 2009). Through the project of emplacing peoples into particular times and spaces, Kazakhstan itself intentionally imparts what Liisa Malkki calls a “sedentarist metaphysic” (1992: 32) to its citizenry as a model of belonging: all Kazakhs belong on the territory of Kazakhstan and those who are outside its borders are in a state of “unnatural” and “uprooted” diasporic existence.

In explicit contrast to such linear notions of space and time, I argue that rootedness and movement are not antithetical but rather co-present in the experience of a Kazakh homeland as a cyclical inhabitation of landscape and ancestry. Nevertheless, like many other studies of return migration and transmigration, such as those by Takeyuki Tsuda (2003), Mariko Tamanoi (2003), and Keiko Yamanaka (1996) in Japan; Linda Basch et al. (1994) in the Caribbean and Philippines, and Liisa Malkki (1995) in Africa, I also suggest that processes of globalization are not necessarily erasing national identity but are, in many cases, catalyzing new conceptions of ethnic and national identification and re-conceptions of homeland. In the period of independence, as a result of Kazakhstan’s nationalizing practices within its borders and its symbolic and practical claims to the diaspora abroad, Kazakhs residing in various regions of Inner Asia have been brought into conversation about what it means to have a Kazakh cultural identity. Brought actively into contact with each other through media and long-distance communication, as well as travel, Kazakhs perceived as belonging to different groups or living in different places have also become comparative and contrastive points of reference for one another within and across their

own communities. While Kazakhstan frequently looms large as a point of reference in discursive negotiations of Mongolian Kazakh identifications, Kazakhstani Kazakhs also frequently evoke Mongolian Kazakhs and other returnees in their discussions about national belonging, political membership and cultural inclusion and exclusion.

In his discussion of alternative models of history and national belonging, Andrew Shryock (2004:13, drawing on Said 1978) argues that ethnographers' engagement with alternative models of belonging runs the real risk of being read simply as romanticization, or "attempts to deny coevalness" (see also Fabian 1983). He notes that there has been a continued resistance towards relations of time and space outside of expected frameworks, noting: "The idea that other time and spaces might coexist with, or circulate within, European and American models – that people might strive constantly, and sometimes with success, to maintain these Other times and spaces as part of their own modernizing projects – is seldom taken up as a possibility" (ibid.) By examining practices of migration in terms of particular if often divergent visions of ancestral past and national belonging, I show how Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolia imagine and inhabit a wide range of the possible understandings (cultural, ethnic, national) and social implications of the categories of belonging and political membership.

Rootedness as Movement / Movement as Rootedness

In Kazakhstan, whenever I brought up the topic of my research, *oralman* and return migration was a subject that invariably elicited spirited conversations, passionate debates, and often heated disagreements among locals in Kazakhstan, whether they were ethnically Kazakh, Russian, or anyone else. Since the very beginning, the official rhetoric of welcoming co-ethnics home has been fraught with ambiguities and controversies and the "oralman" phenomenon has created divisions even among Kazakhstani Kazakhs. For many people involved in repatriation

efforts in the newly independent Kazakhstan, the in-gathering of the Kazakh diaspora represented a redress of past historic wrongs of the colonial Russian and Soviet past, as well as the future hope of the Kazakh nation. However, the other, sharply dissenting position, shared by many Kazakhstani Kazakhs as well as Russians, is that Kazakhs living in Mongolia or China are descendants of those wealthy "traitors" who fled Soviet oppression while their own ancestors have stayed and suffered. In this view, excluded from the shared history of Soviet suffering, the Kazakhstani state owes these Kazakhs nothing. Rather, these returnees are seen as a drain on the country's already overstretched resources available to its more deserving and more "genuine" citizens. Nonetheless, both positions continue to share an assumption of the unambiguous definition of Kazakhstan as ancestral homeland for all Kazakhs and their current migrations as "diasporic return."

In this context, Mongolian Kazakhs hold a very special place in the national imaginary. A widespread perception in Kazakhstan is that the returnees from Mongolia are the poorest, most backward, as well as the purest and most traditional of all Kazakhs. This view was exemplified very early on when at the first official World Counsel of Kazakhs in 1992, President Nazarbayev officially acknowledged the Kazakh community in Mongolia as having enabled "the retention of traditional Kazak culture and language to a far greater degree than any other Kazak community in the world, including that of the former Kazak SSR." (quoted in Deiner 2003:210). As in other contexts that feature discourses of cultural loss, there seem to be tensions between notions of "civilization" or "modernity" and cultural "authenticity" (Lemon 2000:12). The symbolic resources of authenticity and legitimacy Mongolian Kazakh returnees in Kazakhstan can draw upon simultaneously serve as hindrances to their claims of membership in the modern state: while being an important part of the conception of the Kazakh nation, in practice, their belonging

in the national community is questioned in everyday forms of social interaction (see also Smith 2003; Tsuda 2009; Lubkemann 2003). For example, a newspaper article in a popular tabloid *Express K* (May 22, 2004) "The Long Road Home," (*Dolgaia doroga k domu*) describes the "typical predicaments" of Kazakh oralman:

There has appeared in Kazakhstan a new category of people who cannot be included either among locals or strangers. These are oralman. On the one hand, arriving into the country, they receive citizenship and become 'our own.' On the other, it is told about them that, in the houses given to them by the state, oralman 'out of habit' keep animals, and themselves prefer to live in yurts. Or that they generally do not have a roof over their head and increase the ranks of the unemployed... What are oralman looking for in Kazakhstan and what does Kazakhstan expect from them?

Many people who move to Kazakhstan as adults express their continued attachment to Mongolia, even as they acknowledge that their children and grandchildren are coming to increasingly identify with Kazakhstan as their home. As they hotly contest the oralman label and all the forms of stigmatized differentiation it currently implies in Kazakhstan, they are compelled to continuously recreate their sense of belonging and press their claims to entitlement in the state through counter-narrative strategies of their own. These strategies seek to subvert the different claims of disconnections with Kazakhstan suggested by the returnee label by emphasizing alternate conceptions of Kazakh history and definitions of homeland. Rather than seeing themselves in diasporic terms, implying a sense of displacement and disconnect from their homeland, they simultaneously evoke both ancestral rootedness and mobility as fundamental to a sense of "belonging" to the land and to a shared ancestry.

For example, one elderly Mongolian Kazakh man now living in Kazakhstan framed the story of his life in the culturally familiar narrative form of *zheti ata*, that is, reciting the names of

the seven generations of his patrilineal ancestors and naming and describing specific places and landmarks that marked their migration routes and seasonal pastures:

We lived on the land of our ancestors, where they have been since ancient times, more than 700 years ago, on the Altai, at the Baiintau [mountain]. Over there, there is a small place called Daiyn, located by the lake Syrgemdy and the rivers Kobda and Sarsumbe, where lived the grandfather of my father, Kuzdei. Our ancestors wintered on the southern slope of those mountains, later those territories became Chinese, and in the summer they rode out to the summer pastures at the northern slopes, which now belong to Mongolia. I, in a sense, do not consider myself oralman who returned to his homeland, in Kazakhstan, in so far as we lived on the lands of our ancestors. My ancestors, whose names I know up to the seventh generation, were well-known people. My great-grandfathers in the fifth generation, Mami and Beis, were judges (*bii*). My great-grandfather Baidaly built a *medreseh* (school) near a Buddhist monastery, where Kazakh children were taught.

By framing his story in this way, he ascertained that his ancestors have lived in western Mongolia for the past 700 years and so he should not be called an oralman, literally, a returnee, a label he and many other Mongolian Kazakhs greatly resented. It allowed him to question the conflation of Kazakh homeland with the current political borders of Kazakhstan and to dismiss an accusation frequently expressed by other locals that Kazakhs from other countries abandoned their ancestral homeland in times of need and are now returning only in search of economic prosperity and an easy life.

His story, like many others told by Kazakhs across the Altai, connect current populations with ancestral names and places through narrating histories of movement that often ignore and sometimes pointedly challenge the political configurations of the current state borders. For many people in Kazakhstan, the fact that some Mongolian Kazakhs return to Mongolia, that many move between Mongolia and Kazakhstan several times, and that some also retain both Mongolian and Kazakhstani passports, serves as a further proof of their disloyalty and their duplicitous character. People frequently cite numerous newspaper articles or locally circulating

stories in which Mongolian Kazakhs are represented not only as unfairly benefiting from the government assistance for return migrants often unavailable to locals, but also as collecting the money and then leaving for Mongolia. Mongolian Kazakhs, on the other hand, make sense of such processes in the context of Kazakh history as that of dwelling through moving. The term *koshi kong* (usually glossed as migration or movement) is used by Kazakhs in Mongolia and in Kazakhstan to describe both the cyclical movements of Kazakh nomadic households along the regular routes between seasonal pastures and the current processes of cross-border migration to Kazakhstan.

Altai: “the golden cradle”

**Proud Altai, High-reaching Altai, Many-peaked Altai,
Blessed with wealth of sheep, beloved, endless steppe Altai
Soul wrenching cry of the multitude of people,
Blood spilled in countless battles,
Wounded through with a sword Altai.**

(taken from “Spatious Land Beneath the Skies,” Zuqai Sharbaqynuly 2008)

The majority of Kazakhs in Mongolia live in Bayan Ulgii, the westernmost province (*aimaq*), where they constitute almost 90% of the population. Bayan Ulgii was established as a Kazakh semi-autonomous province in 1940 and Kazakhs are granted a degree of cultural and political autonomy there, with schools, businesses, and government administration operating largely in the Kazakh language. Describing Mongolian Kazakh community in Bayan Ulgii and the neighboring Khovd *aimaq*, Werner and Barcus (2009:51) state that “geographically and politically, Bayan-Ulgii and Khovd are remote provinces within a remote country.” The Altai Mountains cut across the western provinces of Mongolia and contribute to the region's geographical remoteness. Additionally, the establishment of strictly enforced border controls between Mongolia and Soviet Union and China in the 1930s made it impossible for Mongolian

Kazakhs to maintain ties with relatives on the other side of the Altai Mountains in China, Kazakhstan, and Russian Altai.

Despite its current remoteness and isolation on the geopolitical “fringes” of the world powers, squeezed “between the [Russian] bear and the [Chinese] dragon,” as the historian on TV described it, Altai is central to Kazakh conception of their history and belonging. Mongolian Kazakhs refer to Altai as *altyn besik* (golden cradle) and *atazhurt* (“ancestral land”), because, as one Mongolian Kazakh man explained: “it the center for all Kazakhs, out of which people moved out to other *jailau* (winter pastures) and *kystau* (summer pastures).” As the “ancestral homeland” of Kazakhs and the "primordial" homeland of all Turkic tribes, Altai is central to the Mongolian Kazakh idea of who they are, where they have come from, and where they currently belong. As many Mongolian Kazakhs assert that "Altai" rather than the current state of Kazakhstan is their true ancestral homeland, it serves as a way to articulate alternate histories and forms of belonging that challenge the nation-state framework.

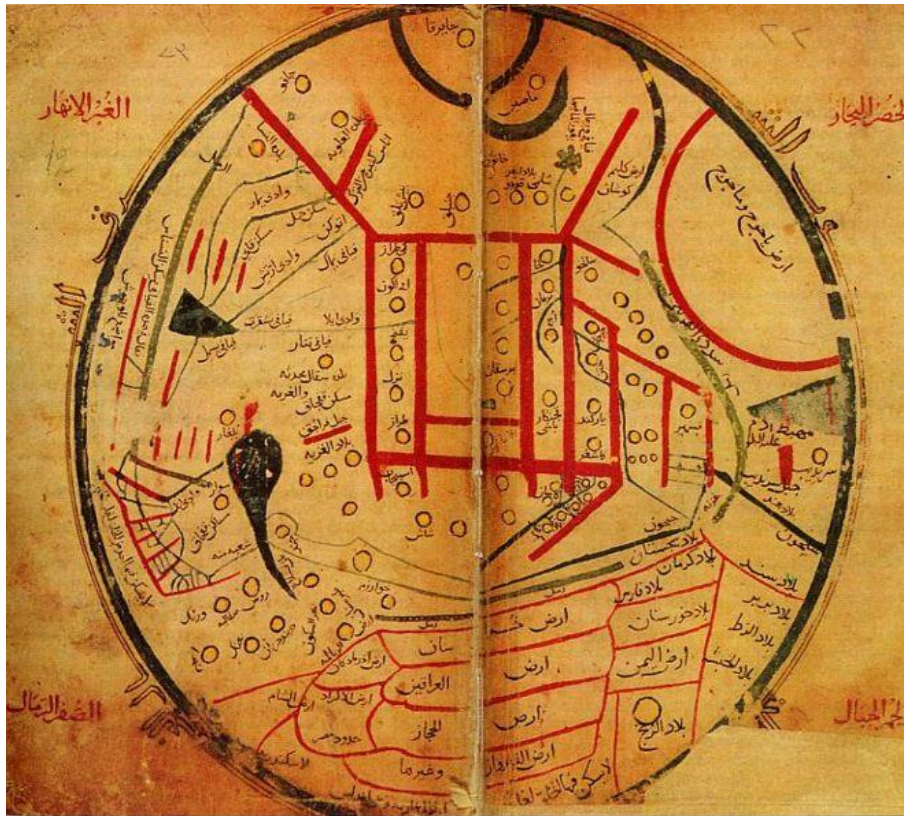


Figure 3: Mahmud Kashgari's world map (1072-1074)

The first known map of the areas inhabited by Turkic people is in Mahmud Kashgari's 11th century *Diwan Luyat at-Turk* (Compendium of the Turkic dialects). It is a "Turkocentric" world map, oriented with east on top, centered on the ancient city of Balasagun in what is now Kyrgyzstan, Kashgari's birthplace. It shows the Caspian Sea to the north, and Iraq, Azerbaijan, Yemen and Egypt to the west, China and Japan to the east, Hindustan, Kashmir, Gog and Magog to the south. Kashgari's cartographic depiction puts Altai at the center and incorporates the Turks into larger Islamic genealogies and histories. The red mark on the south side of the map identifies the location of the "footprint of Adam," Jebel Serandib (Adam's Peak), on the island of Ceylon, to which Adam was exiled after Paradise. Gog and Magog represent an apocalyptic evil power, walled off from the world by a range of mountains.

While Altai is seen by Kazakhs as their ancestral heartland, for Russians, from the seventeenth century on, Siberia and the Altai Mountains to the east of it have represented the ever expanding frontier of the Russian homeland. Scholars of medieval Eurasia argue that, before the seventeenth century, the rulers of European and Asian states did not conceive of their domains as clearly delimited by territorial boundaries (Perdue 1987; Kivelson 2006; Millward 1998; Brauer 1995). As Mahmoud Kashagari's map also illustrates, rather than firmly delineated borders, domains were depicted in cartographic images and travel accounts as consisting of political cores gradually transitioning into peripheries with diminishing zones of control (Brauer *ibid.*: 28-30). As Perdue (1987:265) argues: "The Muscovites of the seventeenth century, unconcerned with precise definition of their eastern border, saw themselves as part of neither Europe nor Asia. After Peter the Great's victory over Sweden in 1721, Russians replaced the image of themselves as a tsardom (*tsartsvie*) with the grander ambition of an empire (*imperia*) comparable to those of western Europe." Such Imperial spatial imagination needed sharp distinction between the homeland and the colony, but Russia, unlike England, Spain, or the Netherlands, had no large body of water separating it from the colonial periphery. In the 1730s, the Ural Mountains began to be depicted as the geographical border between Europe and Asia and as a civilizational boundary between the Russian Imperial core and its Asiatic colonies (*ibid.*)

As Purdue (*ibid.*) and Kivelson (2006) argue, the hardening of space and territorial boundaries in this crucial period (the late 16th -17th century) was also connected to changing patterns of control over the mobility and immobility of the population in the empire: "Establishment of serfdom and increased immobility in the heartland and colonial expansion and increased mobility in the borderlands are mutually connected" (Kivelson *ibid.*: 7). Increasing

enforcement of serfdom regulations dramatically restricted mobility in the Muscovy (Russian) heartland at the same time as Russian authorities needed to people the expanses of the Eurasian steppe and secure their defensive lines:

Constantly requiring more Russian peasants and soldiers to feed and man its fortress outposts, the regime had to undermine its own commitment to the stable immobility of serfdom and encourage, covertly or overtly, the resettlement of Russians along the imperial frontier. At the same time, hungering for furs and tribute from the conquered Siberian people, the authorities attempted to recreate the ordered, registered immobility of the heartlands among the nomadic peoples of taiga, tundra, and the steppe. (ibid.)

The interconnectedness of the use and meaning of space are also highlighted by Rozen (1998) as he examines the cartographic history of Russian imperial expansion into Altai. When Russians first crossed the Ural Mountains into Siberia, Altai, and later the nomadic (Khypchak) steppe, their reasons were mainly military security and natural resources. As mines and smelting factories in the Altai region multiplied, so did the construction of more military forts and increase in Cossack garrisons to protect them from nomadic raids. The Cossacks called these defensive lines "The Bitter Line" (*Gor'kaia Liniia*), supposedly because of the salty taste of water found in the Altaian and South Siberian lakes. For Kazakhs, "The Bitter Line" has come to signify the beginning of the end of their pastoral nomadic lifestyle in the region, hemmed in by blocking of migration routes and confiscation of land for Russian fortifications and Cossack settlements (Martin 2001).

Abolition of serfdom in 1861 exacerbated the crises of land scarcity and poverty in European Russia and the government officially opened Western Siberia and the steppe districts to Russian settlement with the Resettlement Act in 1889. All steppe land was proclaimed "state land" and therefore "free land" and opened to settlement by Russian and Ukrainian peasants arriving on the newly built railroads. Martin (ibid.:70) argues that the Resettlement Act signaled

for the first time, the empire's effort to regulate migration as an intentional policy of the central government.

As scholars of Russian colonialism show, “the assumption that sedentary agriculture stood unambiguously above mobile pastoralism on the hierarchy of world civilizations supported arguments in favour of organized settlement” (Campbell 2011; see also Martin 2001; Bassin 1999; Breyfogle 2007). From the very beginning of Russian exploration and settlement, the nomadic steppe was described as “empty” and “unpopulated” (*bezludnye*), with scattered bands of primitive nomads wandering around without any attachment to the land or to any particular place (Feoktistov 1992; Campbell *ibid*). The famed Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, on the first page of “The History of Pugachev” famously described the area beyond the Ural mountains such: “To the left spread out the sad deserts, where migrate the hordes of wild tribes, known to us under the name of Kirgiz-Kaisak [Kazakh].”

The long history and continuing significance of such claims for Russian nationalists is also articulated in the pamphlet “Russians, Kazakhs, and Altai,” published by the Russian separatist movement Lad, which was active in the North of Kazakhstan in the early 1990s and promoted the unification of the region with Russia:

And, probably, I will not reveal any new truths, if I say that, as it was in the past centuries, and so it is now, and so it will be in the future, that empty lands, uncultivated, not used for their purpose, always and everywhere have been taken away and will be taken away from bad masters. (Feoktistov 1992: 7)

Stuart Kirsch (2001) notes that “indigenous claims about ‘culture loss’ pose a problem for contemporary definitions of culture as a process that continually undergoes change rather than something which can be damaged or lost” (169). He argues that “it is possible to speak of loss in relation to the notion of kinship and belonging rather than possession” (*ibid*). The idea of

profound cultural loss is often remarked upon by outside observers, such as other (post)Soviets, Central Asians and Westerners. In literature, Kazakhs are often cited as “the most Russified of all Soviet nationalities” (see Dave 2004). It echoes the long-standing tropes of emptiness and absence that I described above. Indeed, it seems that Kazakhstan is often described by what it is not, what it seems to lack, rather than what it is. For example: Kazakhs are not “real Muslims,” lacking the “devotion” or “fanaticism”, as well as the religious knowledge, of its other Muslim neighbors. Discussions of short history of “islamization” among nomads and assertions that Kazakhs did not become Muslim until the 18th or 19th century are often reiterated in scholarly literature, although this view has been completely rebuffed by some prominent Central Asian historians, such as Devin DeWeese (1994; c.f. Khalid 2007). Moreover, others argue, Kazakhs are not really “Central Asian” and Kazakhstan itself is not part of Central Asia, either geographically or culturally. For example, in Soviet literature, the region was usually referred to as “Kazakhstan and Central Asia.” It is described as straddling Europe and Asia in a geographically “liminal” state of being: neither quite here nor there. For those in search of local “color,” Kazakhstan does not look or feel like “Central Asia” it seems to lack “history,” in a tangible, visual way. There are no architectural wonders of great Muslim cities, mosques, and mausoleums to draw tourists, like in neighboring Uzbekistan. Kazakhstani cities and towns present to a casual visitor a non-descript gray exterior of most provincial Soviet and Russian cities. Kazakh women, especially if one spends time in cities, mostly lack the colorful headscarves and recognizably “non-Western” clothing of Uzbek or Tajik women. Kazakh clothing, such coats (*shapan*), hats, dresses, and headscarves, usually appear at self-consciously “traditional” weddings and celebrations. So, in a heated discussion I once had with an American friend, who spent several years living in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, she emphatically stated that

there is no such thing as "Kazakh culture": "Everyone says that in the south [of Kazakhstan] it is Uzbek culture, in the North it is Russian, but where is Kazakh?"

Altai as Russian Shambhala

While it has been a rich source of natural resources, exploited and strip-mined by colonial powers since the 1600s, Altai has also been described as a “center of spiritual energy,” “the navel of the Earth,” and the mystical “Shambhala” by a long list of Russian and European spiritual seekers and more recent New Age devotees. Painter and essayist Choros-Gurkin, famous for his depictions of the Altai Mountains, described it thus:

For pagan Altaians, Altai is Living Spirit, generous and rich, a giant. His hand is open to all, his riches are unlimited, his beauty and grandeur are splendid and fabulous. He is the living nourishing father for a myriad of people, a myriad of animals and birds. He is fabulously gorgeous in his colorful clothing of forests, flowers, and herbs. Mists, his transparent thoughts, run to all other lands of the world. The alpine lakes are his eyes, gazing at the universe. The waterfalls and rivers are his speech and songs about life, about the beauty of the earth and mountains. His living spirit and power are rich, they permeate everywhere and rule everything. (Pismo G.I. Choros-Gurkina, 2006: 45)

Perhaps the most famous explorer of Altai was Nicholas Roerich: traveler, painter, writer, theosophist and devotee of Madam Blavatskaya, and possibly an American spy. (“Journey to the East” by Herman Hesse might have been inspired by Roerich and his search for the mystical Shambhala.) Roerich traveled to Altai in 1926, accompanied by his wife and son, on an expedition that took them from India to Eastern Turkestan, Mongolia, and Tibet. In his travel diaries, published as *Altai-Himalaya* in 1929, Roerich called Altai “the source of all humanity,” “the cradle of the world” and “the source of all wisdom.” As McCannon (2002: 169) argues:

Roerich was concerned above all with searching in the Himalayas and the Altai for the real-life location of the land of Shambhala, fabled in Buddhist mythology. Accordingly, Roerich tied his views of the Altai’s role in the ethnic and linguistic

history of Eurasia tightly to his belief that Central Asia and the Himalayas were peopled with descendants of the original inhabitants of Shambhala. Moreover, Roerich sprinkled his writings on these matters with references to Atlantis, the lost continent of Lemuria, and the root races spoken of in the Theosophical tracts of Madame Helena Blavatsky.

Like the mythical Shambhala, Altai is often described as outside of normal space and time: eternal, unchanging, hidden, mysterious, and inscrutable, like its mountains and the people who live there. In *Altai in the Mirror of Myth* (1992: 1), the Russian anthropologist Sagalayev criticizes such long standing images of Altai, as he reinforces the exact same tropes:

Altai is sick. It has been sick for a long time. Long before the year of 1917, the ailments that are now crippling it have become apparent. Are you admiring the radiant trident of the Belukha [mountaintop]? Look below. Have you seen those destitute villages, lopsided sheds, impassible roads, cut down pines? Have you felt this hostility to newcomers, (to simply strangers!) suspicion, and reticence? Have you not seen (by accident), how a horse rider (angrily) lashes the horse, sending it into a wild gallop - just so they both would become exhausted? Children, not fully knowing their own language? Here, people rarely think about the future and live as if in an eternally lasting today. The people have dropped out of the rhythm of time and space. They are tired of the game, the rules of which are incomprehensible to them and its goal unknown. They are worn out by the sense of the accidental nature of their existence. (emphasis in the original.)

Similar depictions of Altai as “a gem of pristine nature” and unspoiled “indigenous spirituality,” also echo through UNESCO’s designation of “The Golden Mountains of Altai” as a world heritage site in 2003. Nevertheless, despite such idyllic descriptions of natural and cultural pristineness, pastoral communities all around the Altai region are currently facing particularly severe ecological consequences of global warming, degradation of viable pasturelands, and increasing economic marginalization of their way of life.

Eurasianism, ethnoterritoriality, and the Kazakhstani Snow Leopard

As I argue above, Mongolian Kazakh notions of Altai as the ancestral homeland presents an alternative to the nation-state model of belonging. However, there also exist other conceptual

frameworks that present additional alternatives that envision the region and the Kazakhs within it as transcending national and state boundaries. The theory of Eurasianism is one such alternative idea adapted by the Kazakhstani government as part of the post-Soviet state-building effort.

Like the colonial frontiers of other Empires, Russia's eastern borderlands have been conceptualized as a space of encounters and contacts created by interaction. As Breyfogle (2007: 8) argues: "Those involved in studying, describing, and administering the Russian colonial expansion in Central Asia in the 19th century, studied the other colonies and made explicit comparisons...by the late 19th century references to the Caucasus as "our Algeria" or Amur river as a "Russian Mississippi" were common in official writing, as well as a widespread adaptation of borrowed terms such as "pioneer" (*pioner*), squatter (*skvater*), and colonization (*kolonizatsiaya*)." In Russian Eurasianism, this "in-between space" becomes the narrative symbol of exchanges and encounters between nature and civilization, settled and nomadic people and between East and West. In Russia, Eurasianism as an intellectual movement has a long history, intimately connected to the expansion of the Russian Empire and its conception as unique in its encompassing of Europe and Asia (Laruelle and Gabowitsch 2008; Hagen 2004).

Lev Gumilev (1912-1992) was a Soviet historian whose controversial theories of ethnogenesis put him at the forefront of the "neo-eurasian" intellectual movement. Valerii Tishkov (1997) characterizes his ideas as "the dominant paradigm" for post-Soviet discourses of ethnicity as a bio-social entity. His key works, *Ritmy Evrazii* (The Rhythms of Eurasia) and *Etnogenez I Biosfera Zemli* (Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere of Earth) have also become very popular in Kazakhstan. Their ideas were explicitly picked up by President Nazarbayev in his rhetoric of Kazakh ethnoterritoriality and the unique place of Kazakhstan as a bridge between European and Asian civilization. As Mark Bassin (2009:893) argues:

Ethnoterritoriality seeks to transform the notion of a primordial ethnic attachment to a designated homeland into a political prerogative and a legitimate basis for the exercise of power and control over the territory in question, its resources, and its inhabitants. If this ethnoterritorial attachment can be represented as organic and natural in some sort of quasi-biological sense, then its legitimating potential is substantially enhanced... the rodina or homeland is reenvisioned as a transcendent category, a veritable sakralnyi landshaft or sacred landscape. In this context, Gumilev's teachings about the unique natural-ecological embeddedness of each ethnos in its respective nurturing landscape fit, in Pal Kolsto's apt expression, like "a hand in glove."

In Kazakhstan, Gumilev has become "something of a patron scholar-saint," with his books widely republished, a university named after him, and President Nazarbayev's embrace of his ideas as a state ideology for Kazakhstan (Laurelle 2003). In his "Strategy 'Kazakhstan 2030'" (similar to the State of the Union address), President Nazarbayev echoes Gumilev's description of the "Great Steppe" as "the Heartland of Eurasia," and as a bridge and "liminal" space between East and West:

We are a Eurasian country, possessing our own history and our own future. Therefore our model will not be similar to anyone else's. It will absorb into itself the achievements of different civilizations. We will face no alternative on this score... It will be the Kazakhstani Snow Leopard, with its characteristic elitism, independence, intelligence, courage, nobility, bravery, and cunning. The Kazakhstani Snow Leopard will possess Western elegance, multiplied by advanced level of development, as well as Eastern wisdom and endurance.

In contrast to such visions of Eurasianist or statist ethnoterritoriality, I next focus on the ways that Kazakhs themselves understand their history and assert their belonging in Mongolia.

Claiming Culture

Most scholars describe Kazakhs as relatively recent arrivals to Mongolia, with documented migration and settlement dating back to the 1860s (Diener 2009; Werner and Barcus 2010). Nevertheless, many Mongolian Kazakhs assert a much longer, at least millennium old, presence in Mongolia and Western China. Reaching back to the times of Chingiz Khan, they

claim the “Naiman,” “Kereit” and “Merkit” tribes (*taipa*) recorded in “The Secret History of the Mongols” as their direct Kazakh ancestors. When recounting their own personal or family histories, many Mongolian Kazakhs emphasize their strong sense of attachment to Bayan Ulgii region as their land of birth (*tugan zher*) and as part of a larger territory of ancestral movement and regular seasonal migration. Significantly, the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan plays no role in most people's descriptions of their ancestral and family histories. Mongolian Kazakhs narrate the more recent history of the region in terms of the cross-cutting of political borders that have fragmented the integrated geographical and social field of Kazakh seasonal movements and dispersed kinship networks. Major political events of the 20th century, like the closing of international borders between Mongolia and China and the Soviet Union, the tumultuous political history of Xinjiang in the 1930s and the ‘40s, and the establishment of the socialist government in Mongolia, are narrated as intimate family histories of flight, displacement, separation and loss.

Since the opening of opportunities for communication, personal contact, and cross-border travel many people recount stories of emotional family reunions with relatives living in China and Kazakhstan and increasing contacts with the ethnic Kazakh community in Turkey. For those who do not seek to leave Mongolia, Kazakh language news and entertainment media from Kazakhstan and China, use of cell phones and internet to communicate with relatives abroad, and growing opportunities for education, short-term travel, and cross border trade, compel them to reconsider their place as part of this wider Kazakh world, as they also reassert their distinctiveness as Mongolian Kazakhs. Kazakhstan actively attempts to construct Mongolian Kazakhs as its national diaspora and to regulate their cross-border movements as an orderly process of permanent mass repatriation. But the failure of such explanations to effectively

capture the practical actualities of migration processes and people's understanding of them is reflected in a question one Mongolian Kazakh man rhetorically posed to me at the end of a long interview: “Now I will ask you a question. If a person who goes to Kazakhstan is an ‘oralman,’ what is the term for people who go to Kazakhstan and come back to Mongolia – what do you call them?”

Mongolian Kazakhs assert cultural and linguistic continuity and genealogical kinship with other Kazakhs, usually expressed through the notions of common descent and blood ties. At the same time, it is very important for many people to highlight and maintain their identification as explicitly Mongolian or Kerei Kazakhs, with distinct histories and specific genealogies (see Post 2007). Kazakhstani Government programs, such as “Cultural Heritage” (*Madeni Mura*), and organizations like World Association of Kazakhs ('WAK', a quasi-NGO, nominally headed by President Nazarbayev) are also meant to reach out to the Kazakh diaspora around the world in an effort to collect and preserve Kazakh “traditions and customs” (*salt-dastur*) through funding research and publications. However, some Mongolian Kazakhs perceive such practices, along with the nationalizing claims often accompanying them, as forms of cultural, political, and economic appropriation.

In the summer of 2009, one man in Ulgii, enthusiastically described to me his search for funding in an attempt to start his own nongovernmental organization, with the goal “to collect and preserve spiritual heritage of Kazakhs in Mongolia.” Ryzbek-gha began with talking at length about the changes the Kazakh community in Bayan Ulgii has undergone since the beginning of migration to Kazakhstan 20 years earlier. Like other Kazakhs in Bayan Ulgii, he lamented the loss of many cultural institutions and professionals, artists, and culture workers that

were involved in them, such as the entire troupe of the Ulgii Kazakh drama theatre who migrated to Kazakhstan en masse in 1992.

He also expressed regret at what he perceived as an appropriation by outsiders of a unique Mongolian Kazakh heritage of traditions, customs, and cultural objects preserved by their Kerei ancestors. Ryzbek-agma claimed that numerous researchers from Kazakhstan came to Mongolia to collect the treasure trove of authentic Kerei Kazakh traditions preserved by them. Although expressing pride in the purity of their traditions, he asserted such appropriation of uniquely Kerei Kazakh culture and heritage as stealing:

Many things in Kazakhstan they take from us, change, and claim as theirs, own them for themselves. For example, our songs [*kui*], taking them and singing them, calling them Kazakh folk songs. They are not Kazakh folk songs, they are from our own people, they are Kerei songs.

For him, such assertions of Kerei Kazakh distinctiveness expressed cultural, political, and economic claims. He enthusiastically described his proposition for creating a “patent” belonging to “Kerei Kazakhs of Bayan Ulgii,” which would ensure their group ownership of different traditional cultural objects, such as musical instruments, horse equipment, or traditional Kerei Kazakh ornamental patterns.



Figure 4: Bayan Ulgii, July 18th 2009. Photograph by the author.

In direct contrast to the Kazakhstani state culturally monopolizing claims, he admonished me:

Stop talking generally, like it belongs to 20 million Kazakhs, because they forgot these traditions. If you are buying something, or taking photos of something, you should write under the photo that it is made in Bayan Ulgii. Do not just say that it is generally 'Kazakh,' because it is not true.

Expressing sentiments shared by many Mongolian Kazakhs, Ryzbek-agma demanded the acknowledgement of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Kerei Kazakhs, the purity of their traditions and ancestral way of life, as well as their right to claim them as their own and to benefit from them. Nevertheless, in his attempt to undermine Kazakhstan's claims to the Kerei

Kazakh culture and history, he seems to appeal to the same statist logic of "patents" and ownership of "cultural heritage."

Ryzbek-agma also provided his own map of Altai. He ripped out a sheet of notebook paper and quickly sketched out an outline of a map. He used the map to literally inscribe people onto the land with a flourish of arrows. He began to explain:

Before, all around Altai was Kazakh land. There were no borders among Kazakhs. Then borders were made by Russia and China and Kazakhs got separated and forgot their language and culture, because they had no contact with each other. They [Kerei Kazakhs] were with Chingiz Khan, mentioned in the Secret History. Near Ulaanbaatar, there is a mountain – this was Kerei land, under a Kerei Khan named Turul Khan. Kazakhs had no single government, each had their own khan. But there, near Ulaanbaatar, that was Kerei land, that is why they have so many Kerei stone monuments near Ulaanbaatar. There were Naiman, Kerei, Qongrat with Chingiz Khan, all Orta Zhuz [Middle Horde]. This Altai mountain area belongs to Kerei and Naiman. It was all land of Orta Zhuz khans. Hentii is Chingiz Khan's land of birth. Before Chingiz Khan, only that was their land. Later, Chingiz Khan started fighting with all his neighbors and Kazakhs began moving further west, being pushed away.²

He continued with the detailed description of the westward movement of Kerei Kazakhs for the next several hundred years, eventually ending up on what is currently the territory of Kazakhstan. He concluded: "And after the Jungars destroyed Chingis Khan, they came back again, closer to their own Mongolian land. So they moved all around and came back again."

² Among Kazakhs, *zhuz* correspond to large tribal groupings that are said to be descended from the three sons of Alash, the genealogical primal ancestor of all Kazakhs. These genealogical divisions also roughly correspond to geographical territories that are considered the ancestral pastures of those *ru* (lineages). Kazakhs currently living in Mongolia, Northern Xinjiang, and Northeastern and central parts of Kazakhstan identify with the Middle Zhuz. The *ru* of the *Uly Zhuz* (Eldest Zhuz) migrated within the territories of modern Southeastern and southern Kazakhstan, parts of Northwestern China and parts of Uzbekistan. Most local Kazakhs in the Almaty region belong to the Eldest Zhuz. The Youngest Zhuz has historically occupied the Western part of the country around the Caspian Sea.

In Kazakhstan, while sedentarization of nomads, formation of villages and collective farms, industrialization, urbanization, and great migrations of the Soviet times moved a lot of people around, old divisions still roughly correspond to where most Kazakhs live in rural areas and the sense of the social geography of the Kazakh nation includes these divisions.

Finally, he reflected on the ambiguity of “homeland” and the ambivalence of “return” currently facing Mongolian Kazakhs contending with multiple and competing ideas of history and belonging:

Now, this is my opinion. Maybe it is not right but I am only expressing my own opinion. Migration [*koshi kong*] is right. But... But...not all Kazakhs are leaving. It is not for all Kazakhs. We are living in our own land, we are moving around in our own land. We are moving around in our own land, just as we always used to: winter, summer, autumn. It’s just now we are crossing borders.

In this way, Ryzbek-gha situates contemporary patterns of cross-migration within the historic pattern of ancestors, both warriors and nomads. His stories both identify and explain a historic division between Kazakh populations in the east and west. In the west, at least, all these ancestors and their current descendants rightly belong on “their own” land. In this view, movement becomes not uni-directional or exceptional but rather ongoing and cyclical. Migration is not a problem to be resolved but a pattern and a deeply held way of life.

Methodology

This dissertation draws on twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork among Mongolian Kazakh return migrants and local government officials in Kazakhstan between 2006 – 2009, as well as a four week research trip to Bayan Ulgi, Mongolia in July-August 2009. I conducted nine months of research from December 2006-September 2007 in Shamalghan, a small village about thirty miles outside of Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan and its former capital. Living in Shamalghan, the birth place of Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev, drew my attention to questions of genealogy, history and place identification, which later became some of the main themes of my research. I returned to Kazakhstan for additional ten months of fieldwork in September 2008 - July 2009, when I lived in Uzynaghash, formerly an “urban style village,”

which grew into a town of about 25,000 people. More than 300 families from Mongolia and over 2000 families from other countries, such as Uzbekistan and China, have moved into the area in the last ten to fifteen years, replacing thousands of Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans who left Kazakhstan at around the same time, resulting in considerable changes to the social and economic face of the town.

The first nine months I spent in the field changed my planned methodological and theoretical approaches to the research topic. Initially, I intended to conduct my research at two field sites, the town of Kaskelen near Almaty and an industrial town of Rudnyi located in the North, near the Russian border. I had hoped this would provide a comparative perspective necessary to examine the importance of local state officials and locally situated processes and relations in the emergence of new practices of citizenship and national belonging in different regions of Kazakhstan. However, during the first several months in the field, I began to realize the advantages of staying at the same site for the duration of the research project. It was taking me some time to establish relations of mutual understanding and trust with the Mongolian-Kazakhs and government officials whom I had met. It was only after several months of knowing me that people began to talk with me about topics that many found too sensitive or uncomfortable to discuss with a stranger and an outsider. These included feelings of frustration and disappointment some returnees expressed about their “historic homeland,” about complicated and sometime hostile relations between migrants and other locals, and the interpretation and implementations of laws and regulations by local officials, which often diverged considerably from the official government line.

In Shamalghan, living with a family of Omirzhan-agma and Nara-apke, my Mongolian Kazakh hosts, I was quickly drawn into networks of mutual hospitality and visiting. Aside from

interacting with and interviewing Mongolian Kazakhs in their homes, I spent time at the local bazaar, where many of them worked. At the bazaar, we chatted and drank tea, regularly visited and talked with other villagers, and attended frequent feasts and celebrations given by local families, such as during Nauryz (Central Asian New Year), when visiting and gift-giving among friends and neighbors was common. I was able to observe a variety of situations in which Kazakhs from Mongolia and other locals interacted with and talked about each other, such as while going shopping, visiting a health clinic, or registering a child for school. Even during my frequent trips to the city, people sometimes passed the time in a crowded bus talking and making jokes about “oralman.”

It is estimated that out of roughly 60,000-65,000 Mongolian Kazakhs who migrated to Kazakhstan since 1991, about 10,000 eventually returned to Mongolia. After two years in Kazakhstan, Omirzhan-agma and Nara-appe decided to move back to Mongolia with their two children in the summer of 2009. I then spent three months living with a family of a local government official in the same village. I maintained friendly relations with three other officials in the government administration (*akimat*), spending whole days in their office, observing and talking to them about their work. Thus, I was also able to examine the officials’ perceptions and representations of Kazakhs from Mongolia and other countries. I spent the last two months of my research in 2007 in the city of Almaty, interviewing scholars, journalists, and NGO workers who were involved in working with and speaking for and about return migrants. I also worked in the Library of the Academy of Sciences surveying accounts and representations of return migrants in Kazakh and Russian-language newspapers dating back to the last seventeen years. This helped me to form a fuller picture of their role in the discussions about the nature of national belonging and Kazakhstani statehood in mass media.

When I returned for ten additional months of fieldwork in 2008-2009, I continued to pay attention to the interactions between return migrants and local state officials, but also became more interested in tracing ideas and practices of belonging and relatedness through a variety of sites and interactions. Through my observations, conversations, and interviews I became aware that conceptions and practices of citizenship and national belonging might best be illuminated through a focus on ancestral veneration, kinship and hospitality.

I spent the last month of my research, July - August 2009 in Bayan Ulgii Kazakh Autonomous Region in Mongolia. Because of the short period of time I was able to stay in Mongolia, I could not observe and participate in the everyday lives of people there as deeply as I did in Kazakhstan. However, those four weeks helped me trace various connections that continue to bind Mongolian Kazakhs on both sides of the border, as I met and spoke with people who decided to remain in Mongolia as well as those who returned to Mongolia after living in Kazakhstan for some time. I also became aware of their deep attachment to and sense of belonging in Bayan Ulgii region. I realized that genealogy and local history were a common passion among Mongolian Kazakhs, as numerous people shared their family histories and recited their genealogies for me. I was also gifted many books of poetry and Kazakh history that illuminated their deep historical and ancestral connections to Mongolia and the region of Altai as a whole.

While in Kazakhstan, I conducted fieldwork in Kazakh and the Russian language. Since I am a native speaker of Russian, a language that remains the lingua franca of the region, I was able to engage many people in Kazakhstan in the language in which they are most comfortable. Yet, most Kazakhs from Mongolia do not speak Russian, and therefore my research with return migrants in Kazakhstan and in Mongolia was almost exclusively in Kazakh – a language I only

began to learn in graduate school. My knowledge of both Russian and Kazakh also offered me the opportunity to examine mass media and scholarly literature in both Kazakh and Russian, which allowed for more comprehensive coverage and comparison across what is often perceived, by locals and foreigners alike, as separate linguistic spheres.

Chapter breakdown

Chapter one introduces the readers to the economic and political situation in Mongolia in the early 1990s and the beginning of mass migration of Kazakhs from Bayan Ulgi to Kazakhstan. I situate the recent Mongolian Kazakh migration to Kazakhstan within a regionally and historically informed approach that treats mobility and movement not as an aberration but as an integral part of the history of the region and Kazakhstan.

Chapters two and three focus on the settlement of Kazakhs from Mongolia in the Almaty region of Kazakhstan, where I conducted fieldwork. In chapter two, I examine how Kazakhs from Mongolia variously map onto, reflect, and challenge currently salient divisions within Kazakhstan, such as Russian-speaking vs. Kazakh-speaking, urban vs. rural, modern vs. traditional. I analyze the apparent tensions between notions of “modernity” and cultural “authenticity” in descriptions of Russification and cultural loss in Kazakhstan. Chapter three focuses on genealogies and histories of Kazakhs in the Almaty region and explores their connection to local politics and the practices of government institutions. Chapter four highlights the significance of kinship and hospitality, seen as the defining characteristics of *Kazakhshylykh* (Kazakhness) and as an essential part of Kazakh “nomadic heritage.” I argue that, more than serving simply as cultural idioms or political metaphors, ideas and practices of kinship and hospitality significantly shape the negotiations of political and cultural authority, legitimacy, and claims to belonging across political borders. I conclude with the discussion of the concept of

iman (morality) as expressed through idioms of *Musulmanshylykh* (Muslimness) and *Kazakhshylykh*. These ideas serve as moral sources of authority for understandings of governance, power, corruption, and social justice, as they are linked to ideas of patronage, reciprocity, hospitality, and gift-giving.

Chapter Two

The Beginning of the Great Migration

This chapter focuses on the beginning of Mongolian Kazakh migration to Kazakhstan in 1990-1995. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of Kazakhstan as a sovereign state in 1991 have had profound effects on reshaping conceptions of diaspora and homeland and practices of citizenship and national belonging on both sides of the Kazakhstan/Mongolia border. I focus on how Mongolian Kazakhs describe and explain the beginning of mass migration to Kazakhstan and highlight the interaction of economic and patriotic reasons that led to widespread support for “repatriation” among Kazakhs in Mongolia and in Kazakhstan in the first few years of independence. The people I interviewed explained that acute labor needs, collapse of integrated regional infrastructure, new political considerations, and heightened feelings of Kazakh national pride in the wake of independence, were all inextricably intertwined in the decision “to turn the heads of their horses toward Kazakhstan.”

I also highlight the important role of the Kazakhstani state in encouraging Kazakh repatriation from abroad and promoting the idea of Kazakhstan as the “historic homeland” (*Kaz. otan tarixi/ Russ. istoricheskaiia rodina*). At the same time, I show how Mongolian Kazakhs emphasize their own agency and decision-making in the face of difficult economic conditions and conflicting conceptions of who they were and where they belonged, as these were coming from both outside and within their relatively small and tightly knit community in Western Mongolia. At the end of the chapter, I examine histories of movement and immobility in the

context of spatial practices of the Soviet state as well as post-Soviet economic and social transformations in Mongolia and Kazakhstan.

“The flight of all the people raises a cloud of dust stronger than the winter snowstorm.”³

I met Saghat-*agha*⁴ in the summer of 2007, when I came to interview him in his small, one-room house near Almaty. He moved to Kazakhstan from Mongolia in 1992 with his wife and four children during the first wave of migration. This is how he described the beginning of migration from Mongolia at the time:

Yes, from every district; oh, if you would have seen that![*emph.*] The whole world - all cars, like in a war, at the Battle of Kursk,⁵ from morning till dusk - dust, the whole world - all dust...[*pause*]...I used to dream- aah! [*shirkin-ai*: expression conveying a wish for a dream to come true] Someone should make a movie about all this. This is now history! Tomorrow it will be history. It was so wonderful! Wonderful! The later ones, they came with suitcases like tourists.

People in Kazakhstan and Mongolia who participated in the repatriation efforts in the early 1990s recalled it as a time of excitement, euphoria, and high hopes. In the above quote, Saghat-*agha* uses the word *tarix* for “history”: “...*mynau endi tarix qoi, erteng tarix bolady*” (this is now history! [*emph.*], tomorrow it will be history.) *Tarix* conveys a sense of History as universal, significant, worthy of recording. As Saghat-*agha* says: “Someone should make a movie about all this.” This was a momentous time that is now in the past and recalled with nostalgia: “The later ones, they came with suitcases like tourists.”

³ From the “Migration Song” qtd. in Deiner (2010).

⁴ “Agha” is a Kazakh term meaning “older brother” or “uncle” and is used as a respectful form of address toward any older man.

⁵ The Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943 was one of the most devastating battles of WWII between Soviet and German forces.

This sense of “making history” and being a part of history is visible in the proliferation of video and audio recordings of the “Great Migration” (*Uly Kosh*), as Mongolian Kazakhs began to call the mass migration in the early 1990s. Kazakhstan sent state-sponsored television crews and newspaper journalists to Bayan Ulgii to document the migration, usually described in glowing terms and accompanied by photographs which have since become iconic: Kazakh elders kneeling to kiss the earth as they get off the airplane in Kazakhstan, or smiling repatriates shaking President Nazarbayev’s hand.



Figure 5: Kazakh repatriates from Afghanistan arriving in Almaty. Source: “Koshi-kong tolastamaidy.” Egemen Kazakhstan, 28 January 2011.

Many people in Bayan Ulgii have also kept more private records, such as photo albums and home videos saved on VHS tapes, which many are now transferring to digital format to ensure preservation.⁶

And, in another characteristically Kazakh mode of historical narrative, the events and emotions of those years were commemorated in numerous poems and songs, the most popular of which were quickly picked up and circulated. “Have you heard the Migration Song?” people would immediately ask me when we talked about the beginning of migration, and would sing or quote from the song. Diener (2010) also reports that the song was very popular in Bayan Ulgii in the 1990s and provides the translation:

The spring storm is rather strong, “movement” called storm even stronger.
Gurvan Oigor’s vast camp is empty with none of people and livestock remaining after the storm of “migration.”
Sorrow fills people’s hearts being separated from relatives in peaceful time.

Hey our friend Kerei, Naiman, and Uak,
Why are you leaving Bayan Ulgii?

Though it is hard to leave the motherland where one was born and leave the horse one used to ride,
Accepting the invitation of the country of our origin, we have decided to move away.
Good bye my country where we have grown up...

Though it is easy to move, it is so hard to be separated.
Hard to forget pure water and snow-covered peaks.
So why are we moving, are the movement and myself twins?...

This song is a greeting for our brothers and sisters,
who left the country for the stranger’s land,
Who have become homesick.

Brothers and sisters who are to move having prepared their transportation,
We wish you the best luck in your way. (199-200)

⁶ These are considered more intimate, family records, because people asked me not to quote directly, although noone minded me watching the videos, often accompanied by their extensive commentary, and taking general notes.

The sense of sadness and loss mixed with happiness and hope expressed in the song is also reflected in many accounts as well as home videos I watched in Ulgii.⁷ A compact, closely related community of Kazakhs in western Mongolia was dividing, separating. While many people left in masse, with whole extended families and villages migrating together, some families were separated, as some relatives decided to leave and others to stay behind. In a place where neither family names nor postal addresses are used, siblings, parents and children, life-long friends, and neighbors were separating, often for the first time in their lives.

Not only were individuals and family affected, but the Kazakh community in Mongolia also experienced the unravelling of its social fabric, including the institutions of Kazakh culture that had existed there since the 1940s. In the first five years of migration (1990-95), Bayan Ulgii lost many professionals, such as doctors, teachers, journalists, and technical specialists, who were among the first to leave for Kazakhstan. A Kazakh radio station in Ulgii lost almost all of its journalists, a Kazakh language publishing office that operated in Ulgii since the 1950s closed down, as did the Kazakh Drama Theater, opened in the 1940s, after its entire troupe left for Kazakhstan.

In his book about the history of Kazakhs in Mongolia, *Chronicle of the Crying Years (Zhylaghan zhyldar shezhiresi)*, Zardykhan Kinayat described the “migration fever” that seized people in Bayan Ulgii as “tumbling head over heels” (3). Zoia, a teacher I worked with when I visited Bayan Ulgii in 2009, described her reaction upon returning to Ulgii after a two months’ absence in the fall of 1991. Zoia was a Russian language teacher at an Ulgii high school, but, as the Soviet Union withdrew from Mongolia, she realized that Russian language skills might not be as valuable in the future. Old ties and relationships were ending as new ones formed. This was

⁷ Ulgii is the name of the central town of the Bayan Ulgii region.

the end of the old stability, as Kazakhs faced a new, uncertain future full of challenges and opportunities. Going to Kazakhstan was one opportunity among other possibilities—one that was compelling to many.

In the summer of 1991, Zoia decided to go to Ulaanbaatar, to attend a training course for teaching English. She described her shock at what she saw when she returned to Ulgii in September:

All these people who were leaving for Kazakhstan, they just left their houses, left their animals, and did not even clean up. It looked like something after a war. I saw it all from a plane. So many trucks, people leaving, and those left behind crying, crying. The people who were leaving were very happy that they were going. Because, earlier, the borders were closed and they could not go to Kazakhstan. They were so happy, and, at first, when they came [to Kazakhstan], they were welcomed. But then, I don't know why, but things changed. They were not so welcome anymore, people started saying bad things about the returnees.

Like Saghat-agma, she also describes the migration as something resembling war, destruction, and chaos.

The massive scale of the first 3 years of migration, 1990-1993, is visible in the photographs and videos shot in Bayan Ulgii, with long caravans of departing Russian Kamaz trucks, piled high with folded *kiiz ui* (Kaz. lit. “felt house,” Russian “yurt”), suitcases and wooden chests (*sundukh*) filled with belongings, topped by a family *shanraq*. The *shanraq*, a wooden circular opening of the yurt that lets smoke out and sun in, holds great symbolic significance for Kazakhs.



Figure 6: Family Shanraq, Ulgii, Mongolia. Photograph by the author.

As Buchli (2007) describes it, the wooden shanraq symbolizes home, family, and lineage, similar to hearth in other cultures. Connected to the hearth and smoke below and sky above, shanraq symbolizes the continuity of the lineage, as it is passed down from youngest son to youngest son. The shanraq passed down many generations from a family patriarch to the youngest son upon death, is called *kara shanraq* (black shanraq), signifying old age and continuity, as the smoke opening turns black with age from soot. In the absence of actual shanraq or yurt, Kazakhs in Mongolia and in Kazakhstan refer to the parental house as *kara shanraq* and it serves as the gathering point for family events. Similarly, Mongolian Kazakhs often refer to Kazakhstan as their *kara shanraq*, signifying notions of home and shared ancestry and, for some, a moral obligation to “return.”

As I discuss in Chapter Four, such language of ancestry and kinship provides return migrants in Kazakhstan with powerful claims to belonging as well as ways to critique the shortcomings of the repatriation program through appeals to the sacred duty of hospitality and reciprocity among kin. However, as Deiner (2009:184) argues, “diasporic” self-conception was not particularly prevalent among Kazakhs in Bayan Ulgii before the 1990s. As I also described in

the introduction to this dissertation, Mongolian Kazakh notions of their history and belonging did not center on the territory of Kazakhstan and acknowledgement of shared kinship with other Kazakhs did not necessarily entail a “return myth” of diasporic homecoming.

Rather, the call to migrate to Kazakhstan first came from a small group of Kazakh elites living in Ulaanbaatar and they were among the first to spearhead the movement. In the early 1990s, both economic and “patriotic” reasons for repatriation were expounded by Kazakhs from Ulaanbaatar in Bayan Ulgi and Khovd, first by word of mouth and later through local Kazakh newspapers and Kazakh language radio station in Bayan Ulgi. (ibid; Ginsburg 1999; Humphrey 2002; Kuscu 2008).

‘Chicken is not a bird and Mongolia is not abroad.’⁸

I interviewed Saghat-apa⁹ in the fall of 2008 in her home in an elite and expensive suburb of Almaty, nested higher up in the mountains, above the pollution and bustle of the city. Now retired and widowed, she lives with her youngest son and unmarried daughter and spends a lot of her time at home in devotional activities, like praying and reading Koran and other religious literature. In 1990 she was one of several Kazakhs in the Mongolian central government who spearheaded the migration to Kazakhstan. Saghat-apa worked at the Ministry of Economy and Labor in Ulaanbaatar and was involved in negotiating the first labor agreements between Mongolia and Kazakhstan in 1990-91.

Saghat-apa emphasizes economic factors in her narrative of how the migration began and also highlights her own role in it as that of serving on behalf of her people:

⁸ ‘Kuritsa ne ptitsa, Mongolia ne zagranitsa’ (popular Soviet saying).

⁹ “Apa” means “aunt.”

Why did we migrate? Because communism fell in Mongolia. The Soviet Union fed Mongolia. And when it could not feed it anymore, it fell. It was unable, had no strength. Mongolia was like a child without care. Democracy came and how to live? It was chaos. Then there was also the national question. In the past, it was punished, but now the national question was being openly raised. The Mongols say: “Chingis Khan, my Chingis Khan,” and we Kazakhs are wandering, “And who are we? Where is there for us?”

At the time, for her and many other Kazakhs in Ulaanbaatar, that answer seemed clear: Kazakhstan. Saghat-apa argues that Mongolian Kazakhs were the ones to initiate the migration before the Kazakhstani state had ever realized the possibilities or acknowledged the existence of a Kazakh diaspora abroad. She also emphasizes the practical, economic considerations that compelled Mongolian Kazakhs to search for a new home. They expected to encounter the same language, pastoral lifestyle, and cultural traditions as they were used to in Mongolia.

Back then, there was no such concept as migration [*koshi kong*] yet. It was still communist, so people were afraid that they would be called nationalists. So, we highlighted the economic question: ‘Here are all these unemployed people. They need to go work somewhere, feed themselves and their children. And where could Mongolian Kazakhs go? They only know the Kazakh language, so that means to Kazakhstan. There the Kazakhs are the same, same sheep and animals, same work, the language is the same, and they can accept us.’

In her current telling of the story, Saghat-apa seems to downplay the initial role of ethno-national identification with the Kazakhstan state and a sense of newly found patriotism among Kazakhs in Mongolia as Kazakhstan proclaimed its sovereignty and later independence from the USSR. She recalled the economic problems of the time:

Also, there was not enough food supply, the economy was in crisis, all the Soviets left for their homeland. At the time, I went to Moscow as part of a Mongolian delegation. But there was no help from there, it was hard for Kazakhs. Then, I thought: we should go to our own Kazakhs. The migration organization [in Bayan Ulgii] would report how many kilograms of flour and so on have been saved because we left. There were [ration] cards for staple foods and in Kazakhstan it was also the same. Here cards and there cards. We needed to go, using the chaos to come to our historic homeland. The following year [1991-92],

other people started making labor agreements too. That is when they started bringing people on airplanes and in Kamaz [trucks]. They all went to the North [of Kazakhstan], didn't know where they ended up, among Russians. Among those people many went back later.

As Saghat-apa describes, deteriorating conditions in Mongolia in the early 1990s were part of larger economic transformation taking place in the former Soviet Union and its “satellite” states in Asia and Eastern Europe. Compared to Kazakhstan, the “economic transition” and divestment of state property in industry and agriculture happened much quicker in Mongolia. As the Soviet Union yanked the support rug from under Mongolia in 1991, the pastoral collectives (negdel) were quickly dissolved, their livestock was distributed among the collective members and housing and other formerly state property was privatized. This was also accompanied by skyrocketing inflation and unemployment (Barcus and Werner 2008; Kotkin and Elleman 1999; Humphrey 2002). In Kazakhstan, on the other hand, President Nazarbayev opted for a more gradual process of economic reforms and dissolution of collective farms and privatization of land and state property did not begin until 1996. As Saghat-apa explained, many Mongolian Kazakhs hoped for better life in Kazakhstan, because they thought it was still socialist. The migration is thus both a “return” or “gathering” of Kazakh people and an economic escape from new capitalism.

While people everywhere in Mongolia experienced economic hardships and the dismantling of state support infrastructure, the Western region was hit particularly hard by the withdrawal of Soviet subsidies and food supplies. Given its remote location from the rest of Mongolia, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bayan Ulgii received many consumer goods, including necessities such as flour, from the Altai region of the Soviet Union right across the border. Economic agreements between Mongolia and the Soviet Union subsidized the cost of these goods and provided stable prices for the pastoralists' animal products such as meat and

wool. As Werner and Barcus (2009) describe, “supply routes between Western Mongolia and Russia were severely disrupted by economic restructuring in the early 1990s and consequently, all goods that were imported to the region were in short supply, and available goods were no longer sold at subsidized prices” (51).

In 2009, many people in Bayan Ulgii described to me the loss of economic as well as geopolitical ties with Russia as one of the most significant consequences of Soviet withdrawal from Mongolia. As Maqsat-agma, who I quoted in the Introduction, told me: “Before, in Soviet time, we were close to Russia, learned Russian, were friends with Russia. Now we are no longer close to Russia. We are now close to China. All our goods, all our trade is now with China. So that is the big difference.” Consumer goods and food products from Russia are still sold at the Bayan Ulgii market, but now they are too expensive for most people to afford. Most goods are now supplied through active cross-border trade with China, which also provides some Mongolian-Kazakhs, including many women, with opportunities to earn cash income as “shuttle traders” (see Lacaze 2010).

Like many other Mongolian Kazakhs I spoke with, Saghat-apa emphasized the initiative of Mongolian Kazakhs themselves in beginning the migration to Kazakhstan.

They could not receive us in Kazakhstan. They did not even reply to us, because they were afraid of Moscow and the Soviet Union was shaking like this [shakes her body]. Kazakhstan was not independent yet, they could not spare any time to care about us, about the Kazakhs. But I knew that we had to come right at that moment of chaos. If this chaos were to stop, they might not let us leave, because there is only two million people in Mongolia.

Kazakhs from Bayan Ulgii acknowledge the importance and the pervasiveness of Kazakhstani state’s nationalizing rhetoric in the early years of migration. However, they also point out that government legislation and practical support for migration and settlement lagged

far behind the massive scale of migration through the 1990s. In contrast to claims that Kazakh repatriates from abroad served as pawns in a competition to control the nature of nationalization within Kazakhstan (Diener 2009:216), they also emphasize their own role in changing the demographics and socio-political situation in the early years of independence. Makhum-agma, who moved to Kazakhstan in 1991 and is now a successful businessman in Almaty, told me:

To move was the initiative of Mongolian Kazakhs. In Kazakhstan then, nobody knew that so many people wanted to move. Even before the declaration of sovereignty, there already came three hundred families. Just made the decision, left everything [in Mongolia], and came. There were patriotic feelings. In two - three years, sixty thousand people moved.

[He then continued]

This has influenced the immigration of Russians from the Northern regions. Two million people left then and it solved the social problem [*eto reshilo sozianuu problemu*]. They abandoned their apartments, jobs. [He began to laugh] When they saw all these Kamazes [trucks], airplanes, they just abandoned everything and left. Otherwise, they would not have left. Grabs his suitcase and to hell with it [*chemodan берет i na fig*]. We descended like paratroopers [*desant*], scared them off. This was happening in the northern regions like Karaganda, Pavlodar.

Kazakhs arriving from Mongolia discovered that Kazakhstan's languages and cultures, its history of Russification, and decades of Soviet transformations contrasted with their expectations that, as Saghat-agma put it, "there the Kazakhs are the same, same sheep and animals, same work, the language is the same, and they can accept us." I will explain the nature of the "social problem" Makhum-agma is talking about in the next section, where I focus on the situation across the border and describe the processes of settlement of Mongolian Kazakhs in Kazakhstan in the first years of independence.

“It is better to be a common person in your homeland than to be a sultan in a foreign country.”¹⁰

When I interviewed him in 2007, Marat-agma, a retired official who worked for the Almaty migration bureau in 1992-1993, recalled with apparent wistfulness:

It was a very exciting time. They came on planes and we also organized cars from the regions, Kamaz trucks, to go to Mongolia and bring them here with all of their things and household stuff. There was such a stir, such happiness and excitement that we were welcoming our compatriots. Local people came and greeted them at the train station and everybody welcomed them and made celebrations and prepared food. There was great patriotism at the time, but now it is not like that anymore. The attitude of the local people toward the returnees [oralmandar] has changed, the patriotism has faded.

Unlike Mongolian Kazakhs, who generally highlighted economic reasons for immigrating to Kazakhstan, those involved in migration and settlement issues on the Kazakhstani side often emphasized “the patriotism” of the early years of independence as the main reason for welcoming their Kazakh brethren. Gulnara Mendikulova, a well-known Kazakh scholar of migration and an enthusiastic early supporter of repatriation policy, called this feeling of euphoria “childhood sickness” (*detskaia bolezn*), growing pains of the new-born nation: “The reason was this great feeling of happiness, national self-consciousness [*natsionalnoe samosoznanie*]. We were finally free of 250 years of being under someone else, finally independent. So, we wanted to welcome all Kazakhs back.”

While the image of “childhood sickness” evokes an idea of innocence, many have argued that Kazakhstani government had other than purely altruistic reasons for supporting Kazakh repatriation from abroad since the earliest days of independence. Economic problems, specifically labor shortages, faced by some regions of Kazakhstan in the early 1990s, made

¹⁰ Kazakh proverb.

recruiting Kazakhs from abroad an appealing solution for many local administrators and collective farm directors. At the time, it seemed like a perfect fit of supply and demand: Kazakhs in Mongolia needed jobs and Kazakhstan needed workers to till its fields and herd its livestock.

Kazakhs in both Mongolia and Kazakhstan made assumptions about the other: Mongolian Kazaks assumed that Kazakhstan would be the same and would be easy thanks to language, the pastoral lifestyle, and other expected conditions. In Kazakhstan, Mongolian Kazakhs were expected to be good for such jobs as farming and animal husbandry, although this was not always the case.

Demographic consequences of large-scale emigration of the 1990s had a devastating impact on the labor market in Kazakhstan. The new republic lost two million people or twelve percent of its total population of 16.4 million between 1993 and 1999 (Sadovskaya 2006, UNDP report 2006). Most of those who left Kazakhstan at the time were ethnic Russians and Germans, who, like the Kazakhs in Mongolia, heeded the call of their historic homelands and hoped for a better future for themselves and their children there. Of more than three million people who left Kazakhstan in the first fifteen years of independence, over two million people were ethnic Russians moving to Russia and seven hundred thousand people immigrated to Germany under the right of return granted to ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.¹¹

Especially in the early 1990s, when the exodus of non-Kazakhs from the republic reached its peak, the media, academics, and politicians talked about a "demographic crisis" that endangered the very future of Kazakhstan as a sovereign nation-state (Doszhanov 2006, see also

¹¹ Almost 1 million ethnic Germans were deported from Volga German autonomous region in Russia to labor camps and special settlements in Northeastern Kazakhstan in 1941.

Dave 2004). People in Kazakhstan often emphasize the apparent disproportion between the country's large size (commonly described as "the size of Europe" or "twice the size of France") and its low population of "only" fifteen million people. The problems are connected to the perceived inability to "develop" properly (the comparison to Europe reflecting the global hierarchies of "progress"), as well as a great fear of China's huge population and flow of labor migration from neighboring Uzbekistan. As Maqash Tatimov, the outspokenly nationalist demographer and political scientist who enjoys a lot of support from the government, asserts: "Kazakhstan, in a perspective future, might become an 'underpopulated island' in the overpopulated world of the twenty-first century. The consequences of this are fatal [*pagubny*] not only for the indigenous population of our country, but to all of those who consider themselves Kazakhstani and are in fact such." (Tatimov 2001: 3).

Tatimov uses the term "indigenous population" to refer specifically to Kazakhs living on the territory of Kazakhstan in contrast to "Kazakhstani," used by the government (but hardly anyone else in Kazakhstan) to promote an inclusive "civic identity" for the country's multi-ethnic population. At the same time, in the government's nation-building rhetoric, Kazakhs living outside of Kazakhstan are referred to as a national "diaspora" and "compatriots" (Rus. *sootechestvinniki*). Such understandings of nationhood and statehood, ambiguously employed by various actors within and outside Kazakhstan, allow for the notions of national belonging and membership both to overflow state boundaries and to exclude large segments of the populations residing within state borders (Verdery 1998; see also Brubaker 1992; Dave 2004).

This expresses another kind of demographic anxiety on behalf of Kazakh nationalists: the fact that, on the eve of independence, Kazakhs constituted a minority "in their own country." According to the last Soviet census taken in 1989, Kazakhstan entered independence with

Kazakhs representing 39.7% and Russians 37.8% of the total population. How far one can trust census figures, which have always been at the mercy of political considerations, is very controversial. Many contend that these figures reflect the contingencies of Soviet ethnic policies, where you could not have Russians as more numerous than the "titular" nationality and therefore Russian numbers were officially underreported (Dave 2004). Continuing importance of ethnic representation in Kazakhstan is underscored by Tatimov: "It should be taken into consideration that ethnic statistics in Kazakhstan, similar to racial statistics in the USA, have extremely important political significance" (Tatimov 2001: 3).

I met with Maqash Tatimov in 2007, in his office at Kazakhstani Central University in Almaty where he is the dean. He spoke enthusiastically about the importance of research on Kazakh repatriates and described their importance for restoring the Kazakh genetic pool (*genofond*). He described the *genofond* of the Kazakh nation as desimated by the "genocide" of Kazakhs during Soviet collectivization and the famine of 1929-1933, which according to Tatimov claimed 2.3 million Kazakh lives. He also spoke of the weakening of the Kazakh *genofond* through destruction of their traditional nomadic pastoral lifestyle and decades of imposed Russification.

Such arguments explain why Kazakhstani government embraced the policy of the repatriation of Kazakhs from abroad as "the miracle solution for a rapid increase in the Kazakh share of the population" (Diener 2005:328). In the official government conceptions of migration and repatriation policies, Kazakhs living outside Kazakhstan have been described as "demographic reserve," which "stabilizes the demographic situation and changes the ethnic balance, compensating for the immigration losses and ethno-demographic disproportions of past decades" (Kozybaev: 2007; see also Kolsto 1998).

Therefore, from the start, the contributions of Mongolian Kazakh returnees to building the future of their reclaimed homeland have been seen only in demographic and ethno-cultural terms. Their potential lies exclusively in their pure Kazakh blood and their retention of an authentically traditional Kazakh nomadic lifestyle, valorized and romanticized as the unique Kazakh national heritage. For example, echoing frequently heard sentiments, one government official at the regional level Migration Department, upon hearing that I was conducting research with Mongolian Kazakhs, launched into a spirited description of her own work with the returnees, describing them as "pure seed and stock", infusing much needed pure blood into the veins of the intermixed and sickly Kazakh nation.

From the very beginning, Kazakh "return migration" has been, by definition, "ethnic migration." Official definition of "oralman" (repatriate) in the current Law on Migration is: "foreign citizens or stateless persons of the Kazakh ethnicity, who permanently resided outside Kazakhstan on the date of gaining sovereignty". This definition does not include people who, for example, were born in Kazakhstan but who are not ethnically Kazakh. This has led one prominent Kazakhstani scholar of migration, highly critical of the government policies, to tell me in a private conversation that "the migration politics of Kazakhstan are politics of the past century."

As Saghat-apa describes above, Mongolian Kazakhs in Ulaanbaatar used Kazakhstan's need for labor and population as an opportunity to negotiate labor agreements between Mongolia and Kazakhstan and the first labor agreement was signed by the Mongolian Labor Ministry and the Kazakh SSR Ministry of Labor in 1990, before the Soviet Union was officially dissolved (Zaxankyzy 2001; Kinayatuly 2001). In the next five years (1991-1995), most labor contracts were negotiated directly between state farm directors and village *akim* (mayor/head) in

Kazakhstan and the Migration Organization set up to facilitate the process in Ulgi. These were five-year group labor contracts that usually involved 10-20 families and specified which type of labor they were being hired for: milkmaids (*doiarki*), animal herders (*chabani*), or “general agricultural laborers.” As part of the labor contract, Mongolian Kazakhs were also usually provided with housing, some animals (usually 10-20 sheep and sometimes a cow), free healthcare, pensions for the elderly, and free education for the children.

With very few exceptions, most Mongolian Kazakhs and their families who came under these labor contracts were being hired for agricultural work on state and collective farms in the Northern regions of Kazakhstan. Some, especially many Russians, told me that this pattern of settlement of Mongolian Kazakhs was a deliberate attempt on the part of the Kazakhstani government to "dilute" the number of Russians and increase the number of ethnic Kazakhs in those Northern and Eastern regions. According to the 1989 census, Eastern Kazakhstan region (*oblast'*), located right across the border from Mongolia, was 27% Kazakh and 66% Russian. In Karaganda region to the west of it, where coal mining, heavy industry, Gulag labor camps, and Stalin's ethnic deportations in the 1930s and '40s brought workers, exiles and prisoners from all over the Soviet Union, Kazakhs were only 17% of the population.

However, until 1997, when the first Law on Migration concerning the repatriation and settlement of Kazakh returnees was passed, there was no centralized legislation or regulation of these processes. Rather these were the regions that suffered the most population losses with the exodus of non-Kazakhs from the republic in the early 1990s and, therefore, turned to Mongolian Kazakhs for their labor needs. As Mongolian Kazakhs came to northern and eastern areas of Kazakhstan, they encountered lack of Kazakh schools and kindergartens, prevalent use of Russian over Kazakh, and places where Kazakhs were sometimes a small minority. Many

Mongolian Kazakhs described "living among Russians" and "Russian language" as the main difficulty in adapting in Kazakhstan. As Saghat-apa described:

...They didn't know where they ended up. In the North, among Russians. We did not know Russian. There were no schools [in Kazakh], only in Russian. So, among those people, some went back [to Mongolia]. We did not know who to go to. Nobody wanted to listen, they just left us anywhere. In the districts where Russians lived, it was hard. Afterwards, people moved, like a second migration inside Kazakhstan. They went where they had relatives, in Zhetisu (Southeast), where it is comfortable. Then, for many years afterwards, we would hear that somewhere there were left some shepherds, uneducated, with no knowledge. They did not know where they ended up, where they live, why they live, do not understand anything, left in the mountains. Such rumors there were. ...So these were the difficulties for these families. Whoever was left among Russians and also in the mountains. The children could not go to school. Where is the school, how many kilometers? The people who had problems were those who ended up on the mountain pastures, with five, six, ten kids and the school is many kilometers away. But these were just a few people, not most.

Like Marat-aga, the retired migration official I quoted above, Mongolian Kazakhs who came to Kazakhstan at that time also recall the excited crowd of welcoming locals at train stations and the initial goodwill of the local government. However, their descriptions illuminated a radical disconnect in the initial understanding of the repatriation situation between the locals and the returnees. The Kazakhs who came to Kazakhstan from Mongolia were not illiterate nomadic pastoralists, yurt-dwelling remnants of Kazakh traditional past, as the locals imagined them to be. The very first groups of repatriates from Mongolia in 1990-1991 were overwhelmingly members of Mongolian Kazakh professional, academic, and cultural elite, most of them living in the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar at the time. Among them were doctors, teachers, engineers, journalists, artists, and academics. Thus, they were baffled by the reception they encountered upon their arrival. Makhum-aga who earlier described the Mongolian Kazakhs as "descending like paratroopers" on the frightened Russians, explained:

They thought that everybody who came were shepherds, only knew how to herd. There were even jokes, about how, when our Kazakhs came off the train, we were all doctors, scientists. The locals thought we were all going to be poor and dirty, but we came off the train wearing ties, with briefcases. They were waiting, said they wanted to disinfect us, and we got really angry. Later, we joked: ‘now you’ll be a shepherd and you’ll be a dairymaid. Here, take this big stick, go feed the animals.’ Everyone was given animals, sheep, the doctors and the teachers. Of course, many of us ran away to the city after a few months.

In the next section, I turn to history of labor practices and mobility in Kazakhstan in order to better understand how such notions of backwardness and modernity are connected to labor and spatial hierarchies and moral evaluations of persons and ways of life and how these have affected Mongolian Kazakhs’ experiences of settlement in Kazakhstan.

Labor Practices and Mobility in Kazakhstan

For them [the Kazakhs] religion is livestock, the people is livestock, knowledge is livestock and influence is livestock.

(Abai, quoted in Olcott 1995:20)

Prior to Russian colonization and settlement, Kazakh nomadic practices knit together different ecological zones by moving livestock across latitudes and altitudes, creating large-scale grazing systems that exploited seasonal and spatial variability (Kerven et al. 2004). For example, in the mountainous Altai region, this involved moving from lower-level elevations in the foothills where the livestock wintered up into high mountain pastures for summer and back to the drier plains for autumn, a migration cycle of about 200-300 kilometers. Further South, in the flat desert regions, pastoralists wintered in the desert, moved to spring pastures in the semi-desert, further north into steppe ranges for the summer, and returned south in autumn, completing a cycle of up to one thousand kilometers every year (ibid: 163). However, as I describe in the Introduction, growth of Russian fortification lines along the Eastern borderlands and the opening of land used by Kazakhs pastoralists to Russian settlement following the Resettlement Act of

1889, severely limited the use of pasture land and water and cut off the migration routes used by nomadic pastoralists. By the turn of the twentieth century, Kazakhs were facing what some scholars describe as Russian settlement following many Kazakh reformers at the time were embracing sedentarism as the only option for Kazakhs to survive (Dave 2004; Khazanov 1984).

Already by the turn of the 20th century, there were more than two million Russian settlers on formerly Kazakh lands. After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, the following civil war, and a brief period of attempted independence (1917-1920) led by the Kazakh elites, the territory of what became Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR) and later the independent state of Kazakhstan were incorporated into the Soviet Union.

The 1920-30s were a period of forced sedentarization and collectivization of Kazakh nomads and subsequent famine, resulting in what Maqash Tatimov and other Kazakh historians called the Kazakh genocide (*genotsid*). According to the first official Soviet census in 1926, when KSSR was established, of the total population of the republic, Kazakhs were 3,627,612 (58.5%) and the other two most numerous nationalities were Russians and Ukrainians, with 20.6% and 13.9%, respectively, totaling about two million (Dave 2004).

The next Soviet census that was held in 1937 was controversial. As Dave describes, the census results were destroyed and its organizers were sent to the Gulag as saboteurs because the census showed much lower population figures than anticipated. Another census was held in 1939. It shows that, even according to the official Soviet figures, between 1926 and 1939, Kazakhs lost 1.3 million people and fell down to 37.8 percent in Kazakhstan (Pianciolla 2001). While the loss of life during the famine was great, a lot of the population losses in the Republic came from the fact that hundreds of thousands of Kazakh nomads fled across the border to China

and to other Soviet republics. The Kazakhs who ended up outside of the Soviet Union were referred to as *otkochevniki* (from the Russian word for “nomad”). As Pianciolla (2001) describes:

People began to leave Kazakhstan during the first winter of requisitioning, in 1927-1928; the exodus was to continue in the years to come. People moved to cities and train stations, then fled Kazakhstan to all the surrounding regions: China, Siberia, Central Asia, and the Urals. Two hundred thousand Kazakh herdsmen (less than 10 percent of the Kazakh rural population) fled the republic in 1930. Starting in the autumn of 1931, the emigration wave assumed gigantic proportions: more than 1.5 million rural Kazakhs fled. According to some estimates 200,000 fled to China, whereas another million poured into other Soviet republics. The 1931-1932 exodus was the first time refugees left without taking their animals with them and the first time that large numbers of people died. A new term was coined in bureaucratic language to indicate a former herdsman who had lost his livestock and become a refugee - *otkochevnik* (from *kochevnik* "nomad"). (242)

Many people in Kazakhstan today consider all return migrants to be the descendants of these “*otkochevniki*,” who fled their homeland, as some argue, abandoning it in time of need. As I argued in the Introduction, Kazakhs in Mongolia strongly contest this version of their history and claim centuries of habitation in Chinese and Mongolian Altai. However, such views continue to influence the way many Kazakhstani Kazakhs evaluate Kazakhs from abroad and negate their claims to belonging in Kazakhstan.

The horrific scale of the requisitioning and sedentarization campaigns and famine could be seen not only in the loss of human life but also in the catastrophic loss of livestock, the foundation and lifeblood of Kazakh livelihood and society. Nearly all of the nomads’ animal wealth was lost in the first four years of collectivization, as Kazaks slaughtered their animals or fled to other countries rather than hand them over. For those collective farms that were able to maintain a herd, little fodder was available and driving the herds to the pasture was forbidden. By the end of the collectivization process, the nomadic pastoral lifestyle in Kazakhstan was effectively over: the remaining Kazakh survivors of the famine were successfully sedentarized

due to the decimation of their herds, the impossibility of resuming pastoral activity in the post-famine environment, and the resettlement program that organized former herders into collective and state farms.

Even as the practice of outpasturing livestock was revived later in a very limited form in the 1950s, it was a very different system from that followed by Kazakh nomads. Shepherds (*shaban/chaban*) were sent alone, without their families, to outlying pastures where they tended livestock belonging to the collective farm. In situations where families tended the collective livestock, children were sent away to boarding schools (*internat*), where they spent most of the year away from their families. Late 1950s brought major reorganizations in Central and Northern parts of Kazakhstan: more land was taken for agricultural cultivation and small villages, which were often formed on the basis of the preexisting nomadic auls of related families, were reorganized into large state and collective farms. Livestock production at these farms relied on centralized, inputs, distribution, and infrastructure and state subsidies. Khazanov (2012) argues that these practices resulted in loss of traditional herding lifestyle and its value for Kazakhs, replaced by an inefficient state regulated system.

The Gulag system of labor camps and deportations of entire groups of people, Germans, Koreans, Chechens, Turks, Kurds, and others, from other parts of the Soviet Union, also brought millions of involuntary settlers to Kazakhstan in 1930-50s. I argue that Kate Brown's (2007) argument about the centrality of the Gulag in Soviet history is especially salient with regard to Kazakhstan, where so many Gulag work camps and "special settlements" were located.

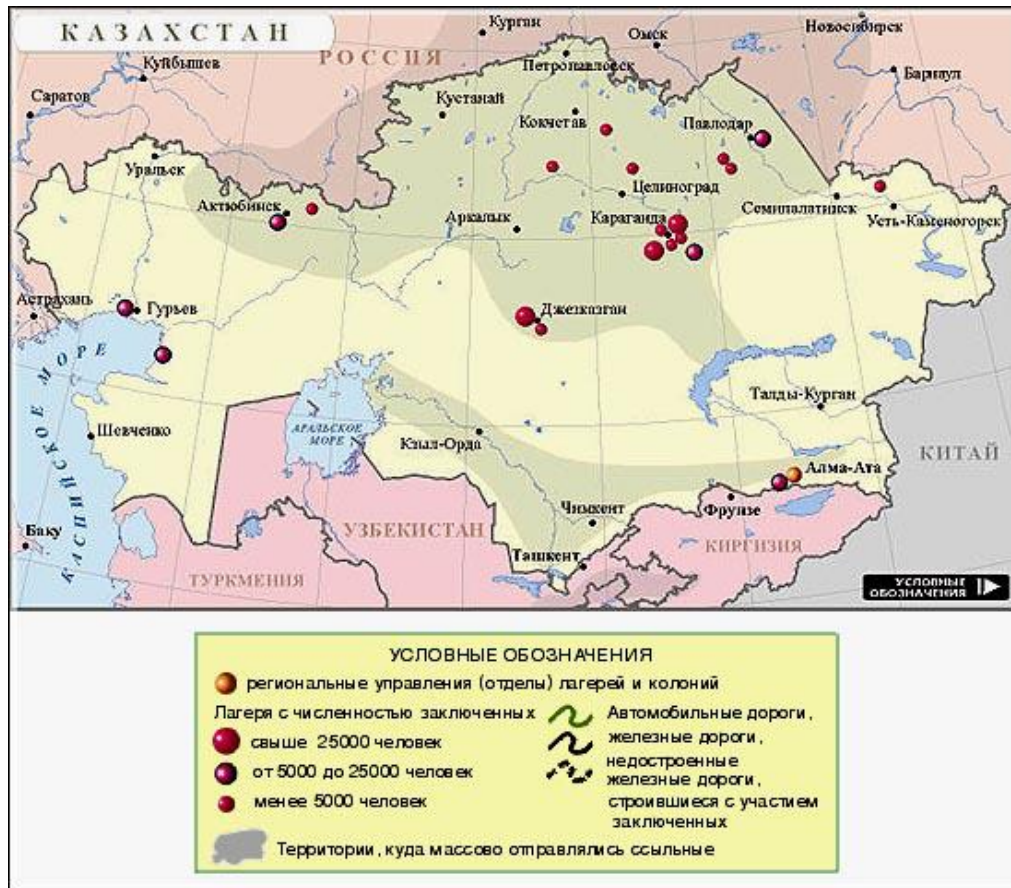


Figure 7: Kazakhstan - Map of the Corrective Labor Camps 1930-1950. NIPTs Memorial and Geographic Faculty at the Moscow State University.

As Brown argues, labor camps and special settlements for exiles and deportees were part and parcel of the “spatial regime” of zoning and incarceration through passports and propiskas (resident registration) which structured Soviet life even for those who were not labeled as criminals. As she notes, Soviet citizens referred to the Gulag as the “little zone” (*malaiia zona*) and the rest of society as the “big zone” (*bol'shaia zona*).

I would...envison the Gulag as located along a continuum of incarcerated space which, like the highways built with convict labor, rolled off from “regime-zone” cities, proceeded to “open” cities and towns, exited in the collective farms (where villagers without passports had no right to leave), swerved, hardly stopping, in deportee special settlements (where villagers were restricted to a 25-kilometer zone) and dead-ended, inexplicably, as Gulag-constructed highways sometimes did, at the varied zones of unfreedom of the Gulag. (78)

The technologies of incarceration and zoning of space worked through criminalizing need, mobility, and desire. Most "workforce" in the camps were not political prisoners. "The technologies of zoning space for security reasons - passport checks, sweeps of cities and border zones for illegal migrants, draconian sentencing for minor crimes - produced the millions of mundane convictions that populated the Gulag" (ibid: 69). As many people in Kazakhstan told me, such zoning regimes and residency registration requirement also kept Kazakhs out of cities and in the rural areas and collective farms as a captive labor force. As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, Soviet organization of space and labor and criminalization of mobility continues to influence ethnic, social, and labor hierarchies in Kazakhstan (also see Brown 2001). Building cities and "urban-style" rural centers meant to eradicate the difference between (prosperous) city and the (backward) village. That failed fantastically, instead creating internal hierarchies of privilege and great inequality: "[z]oned space bolstered a narrative of morality and justice: if you are not part of the privileges, it's because you did not deserve it." (ibid: 43).

Conclusion: Mobility and Immobility in Mongolia and Kazakhstan

The collapse of the collective system in both Kazakhstan and Mongolia in the 1990s led simultaneously to more mobility, as people were now able to migrate across state borders, and to less mobility, as the semi-nomadic lifestyle of Kazakh pastoralists became increasingly difficult to sustain. Both in Kazakhstan and in Mongolia, the dissolution of the collective system led to new forms of economic relationships and social stratifications which were also different from the "presocialist," usually seen as "traditional," forms of pastoralism among nomadic Kazakhs. As Sneath (1999) and other scholars of pastoralism argue, while these post-Soviet changes may resemble a return to some sort of more traditional, more genuinely native form of subsistence pastoralism based on kin relations, it is rather a collapse of large-scale pastoral systems which in

many respects resembled structures that are much older than the collectives (229.) These scholars make the point that: "Rather than assuming that there is some 'default position' or generic Inner Asian society to which people have recently returned, we [need to] analyse the range of new institutions that are taking shape" (Humphrey and Sneath 1996:3).

Khazanov and Schlee (2012) describe the situation in Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet economy.

In Kazakhstan, the retreat of state control in the rangelands has allowed the former infrastructure to disintegrate or to be stolen. Roads to high mountain summer pastures are no longer maintained. Barns and winter houses have been demolished and the materials removed to private buildings. Agricultural machinery owned by remaining farm cooperatives is left to rust for lack of funds to repair them. Fencing and telephone wires are plundered and sold. Wells in the desert have broken pumps. Without essential infrastructure, it has become very difficult for pastoralists to make use of the seasonal pastures.

Concurrent with the loss of state support to collective farms, an economic crisis in Kazakhstan accompanied the shift from a centrally-planned to a market economy. One of the casualties of this crisis was the national sheep population, which crashed by two thirds from 35 to 9 million in a couple of years (Behnke 2002). These numbers are as drastic as those of animals lost during the collectivization period.

Similar processes of decollectivization and the loss of animals occurred in Mongolia, about which Finke wrote (2012: 232) "Privatization and the dissolution of the collectives can be seen to have as radical, albeit less violent, a change as collectivization." Pastoralism continues to constitute the foundation of subsistence for a large number of people in Mongolia. Semi-nomadic and nomadic practices of pastoralism continue as a way of life for many people, although perceived as increasingly threatened and disappearing. As Sneath (1999) describes, in Mongolia,

cattle breeding constitutes 70 percent of agricultural gross output. Pasture occupies 80 percent of the territory but actually only 30-50 percent of them are in use. Areas nearby the administrative centers, like the town of Ulgii, are overloaded with cattle and exposed to pasture disgression. On the contrary, the remote pastures are much less used, as it is difficult and expensive to move animals and people. Sneath (ibid.) argues that this new, small-scale subsistence pastoralism, now common in Mongolia, was never "traditional" or "natural."

From a narrowly technological perspective this would appear to be a return to pre-revolutionary pastoralism; animal- transport instead of trucks; cutting hay by hand instead of a tractor. However, in terms of the sociotechnical system of pastoralism this is not a genuine return to some sort of "traditional" form, but a collapse of large-scale pastoral systems which in many respects resembled structures that are much older than the collectives. (231)

Without institutional support there is a tendency to "fall back" on an achievable system that does not require much labor and is also relatively immobile. Pre-socialist systems of pastoral movement were not the simple subsistence strategies of individual households. Such a complex system required jurisdiction over large numbers of people and areas of land (230-231).

In this chapter I described how the Soviet spatial regime reshuffled huge populations, replaced the nomadic Kazakh lifestyle with sedentary collective farming, and turned Kazakhstan into a multiethnic republic. As a result of these processes in both Kazakhstan and Mongolia, people have lost substantial mobility as pastoralists, while they gained some additional freedom of movement with the opportunity to travel, work, and live outside of Mongolia. In the next chapter, I focus on how these hierarchies established in Soviet times continue to structure Kazakhstani society in significant ways and examine how Kazakhs from Mongolia map onto, negotiate, and challenge these social and moral hierarchies.

Chapter Three

"Black Russians" and "Pure Kazakhs": Kazakhstan as a Soviet "Laboratory of Nations"

Since the time that the United States began to civilize the Iroquois, Creeks, Choctaw, and other redskins, the Indian wars in the country have virtually ended. Since 1858, in the United States, 162 schools for Indians have been established and an Indian trust has been formed to assist the savages wishing to settle.
(Chokhan Valikhanov [1904] *Sochineniia* 1835-1865)

"After 15 years, even a bear would have enough time to learn the state language..."
Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.
"Only a stick will teach a bear how to pray."
Folk proverb.
(Quoted in Open Letter: "Let's stop actions against the Constitution!" 2009)

This chapter focuses on the experiences of Mongolian Kazakh return migrants in Kazakhstan, specifically in the Almaty region, where I conducted my fieldwork. When Mongolian Kazakhs came to Kazakhstan, they confronted and were confronted by the historical-social realities of post-Soviet Kazakhstan: legacies, for better or worse, of two hundred years of Russian colonization and six decades of profound Soviet transformations. I examine two major themes that Mongolian Kazakhs and locals of all nationalities note and comment on continuously and which have a ubiquitous presence in everyday conversation as well public discourse: 1) The multiethnic nature of the Kazakhstani state as its most important Soviet legacy and, distinct but closely related to the first point, 2) The "Russification" of Kazakhs as a nation, culturally and linguistically. First, I examine the history and socio-linguistic landscape of the city of Almaty, formerly

the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan and still its largest city. In the second part of the chapter, I move out to small towns and villages outside Almaty, where most return migrants live.

As Kosmarskaya (2002) argues, most scholarship that examines Kazakhstan as "bipolar society" focuses on interactions between Russians and other ethnic groups on those who choose to leave rather than stay and why. These kinds of accounts are also typically built on large surveys and reflect a very static picture of Kazakhstani society, showing much more distance between different groups than is actually the case. They erase much of the internal diversity that exists within Kazakhstani society while, at the same time, exaggerating other kind of divisions and cleavages. I examine how Kazakhs from Mongolia variously map onto, reflect, and challenge currently salient divisions within Kazakhstan, such as Russian-speaking vs. Kazakh-speaking, urban vs. rural, modern vs. traditional. I analyze the apparent tensions between notions of civilization" or "modernity" and cultural "authenticity" in descriptions of Russification and cultural loss in Kazakhstan. I argue that the symbolic resources of authenticity and legitimacy on which Mongolian-Kazakh returnees can draw also serve as hindrances to their claims of membership in the modern state. A widespread perception in Kazakhstan, is that Kazakhs from Mongolia are the poorest, most backward, as well as the most traditional, most authentically Kazakh, having retained the purity of Kazakh language and culture lost among "russified" and "deculturated" Kazakhs of Kazakhstan. At the same time, hierarchies of ethnicity, language, labor, and residence leave some return migrants literally homeless in their ancestral homeland and, as some have described, as a "diaspora in their own country."

Vernyi/Alma-ata/Almaty: "City of Prophetic Dreams" ¹²

"It was in 1933 that I first saw that curious city, so unlike any other city in the world, and I still remember how it amazed me then." This is the opening line of Yuri Dombrovsky's novel, *The Keeper of Antiquities* (1969), about a young archaeologist who is sent from Moscow to work in the new Central State Museum of Kazakh Republic, opened in Alma-Ata in 1931. Dombrovsky's second book, *The Faculty of Useless Knowledge* [1996] (1975), is perhaps better known in the former Soviet Union and abroad, but in Almaty, it is his color-saturated, exuberant descriptions of 1930s Alma-Ata, as Alexander (2009) says, "everybody, but everybody cites":

...I noticed that the greenery in this town was laid out in terraces. The first layer was made up of the acacias. Above the acacias were orchards; above the orchard poplars; higher than the poplars were only the mountains and the forests that covered them. It was the orchards that confused me most of all: how on earth could I find my way about if the whole town was one huge orchard – apple orchards, apricot orchards, cherry orchards, almond orchards - pink blossom, white blossom, yellow blossom. (4)

In the early 1930's, when the young Keeper of Dombrovsky's novel arrived in Alma-Ata, it was still "a sleepy Cossack village (*kazach'ia stanitsa*) of the turn of the century" (6):

Later I realized that there were as many wild creatures in this town as there were people. In the evenings, eagle-owls hoot in the town park. As soon as it begins to grow dark, bats appear in the streets, orioles sing perched on the bus-stops in the middle of the town. Pheasants roost on weather-boarded roofs in the suburbs (here they still call them by the Cossack old name of 'stanitsas'). A gorgeous red and yellow peacock pheasant will sit there looking anxiously around him – he has flown in from the grassy foothills of the mountains and he can't think why. In the fall, wild goats wander into town and drop their kids in suburban gardens.

¹² From Vladimir Lugovskii's "City of Dreams"

In short, nowhere in the world, as a zoologist once told me, does wild life penetrate so far into a big city as in Alma-Ata. (6)

The Keeper quickly learns, as everyone who comes to Almaty does, that that the city, in its material form and its social geography, as it is experienced by its inhabitants, is shaped by the Alatau Mountains: "A spur of the Tien Shan range...It is as if two great wings had spread themselves round the town, holding it up in the air and keeping it from falling" (5). The mountains, when they are visible through Almaty's current pollution, provide the surest way to get oriented anywhere around the city and visitors quickly pick up the Almaty way of giving directions and location by using "up" and "down." Printed maps of Almaty, sold in shops and newspaper kiosks, are oriented with South (where the mountains are) on top, rather than using a standard map layout, where the geographic North is always on top.¹³

In a less lyrical vein, Alexander (2009) argues that the natural environment has largely determined the architecture and layout of the city from its very beginnings. The mountains, which trap the air and contribute to the air pollution and the horrible smog, also effectively dictate in which directions the city can and cannot grow and how the land around the city can be used. Almaty is also located in an area of high seismic activity and is subject to earthquakes and mudslides. Twice, in 1887 and in 1911, the town has been almost completely destroyed by earthquakes and in 1921 a massive mudflow caused considerable destruction and a great loss of life. As Alexander states: "Harmonious

¹³ As Kotlyarova (2009) describes, those who moved from Almaty to the new capital, Astana, transplanted this way of speaking to the flat steppe: "for example: to live above; the shop is below; Zheltoqsan street is above Bogenbai Batyr"(7).

development of nature and people was thus always unlikely from the founding of the small Tsarist fortress in 1854 in a pretty but singularly unfortunate location" (ibid: 163).

Russian military officers, imperial administrators, and civil servants who came to build this distant colonial outpost perceived its development as a struggle of the settled civilization and order of the city and productive cultivation of land against the destructiveness of untamed nature and the unproductive existence of nomads. Emptiness and absence, of both the natural world and the human environment, were recurring themes in Russian colonization of Siberia, the Far East, and the nomadic steppe. However, unlike these places further north, the fertile Zhetisu region, as its name suggests (Zhetisu means "seven rivers" in Kazakh, which Russians translated as Semirech'e), has had a long history of both irrigation agriculture and nomadic pastoralism, which took advantage of the abundance of water and rich mountain pastures in the foothills of the Tian-Shan mountains. But, unlike Russian conquests further South, in Bukhara, Khiva, and Khokand,¹⁴ Zhetisu had no great cities full of magnificent architecture and written history, such as Timur's (Tamerlane) Registan in Samarkhand or thousand year old mosques and mausoleums of Bukhara. So, unlike Russian Tashkent and other colonial cities that grew around and alongside native cities with their own "urban civilization," Vernyi could be imagined as a blank slate, a lonely outpost of Russian civilization amidst the primordial nature, untouched by the wanderings of scattered nomadic bands.¹⁵ Petr Semenov, a Russian geographer whose travels in the

¹⁴ Russian forces took Tashkent in 1865 and made it the capital of the new Turkestan Governor-Generalship. The Khanate of Kokand was annexed in 1876 and also incorporated into Russian Turkestan. The Khanate of Khiva, although remaining nominally independent, became a Russian protectorate in 1873. See Soucek 2000.

¹⁵ For comparisons of Russian Tashkent to the colonial cities of the Western Empires (British, French, and Dutch) see Northrop 2004, Sahadeo 2007.

Tian-Shan mountains brought him such fame that Tsar Nicholas II authorized the addition of "Tian-Shansky" to his last name, described visiting Fort Vernyi just two years after its establishment on the banks of Bol'shaya (Big) and Malen'kaya (Little) Almatinka rivers: "I remember how, on the naked foothill, on the bank of Almatinka, stood a few wooden huts and yurts. Now, there is a wonderful town, drowning in greenery...I testify that when I was in Vernyi, not a single little bush grew there..." (quoted in Kozybayev 1983: 608).

From the very beginning, Fort Vernyi's planners, architects, and administrators thought to make nature an important part of the city. However, this was not wild nature, but cultivated by human thought and labor, and, in the fashion of other colonial empires of the late 19th century, shaped by scientific improvements.¹⁶ Vernyi was planned with street grids of right angles and wide avenues, but a lot of effort also went into the "greening" (*ozelenenie*) of the town by planting trees and incorporating spaces for gardens and public parks. General Kolpakovskii, the first Russian Governor of Vernyi, commanded the planting of elms, poplars, and mulberry trees along the city street and oversaw the planning of the first "public park" (*kazennyi sad*) in 1857. As Vernyi grew from a garrison fort into a settler town, Russian settlers brought maps and measuring instruments and also stem cuttings of trees, a wide variety of fruits and vegetables not native to the region, and many ornamental plants. The plants rooted themselves in the new land and created new localized varieties and amazing hybrids that spread and thrived in the water-rich mountain foothills.

¹⁶ See Home (2013) for the importance of planting and ideas of "green city" for urban planners and architects in the British colonial cities around the world.

As the natural landscape needed proper "planning and planting" (Home 2013) to transform into an urban environment, the people also required careful cultivation to shape them into civilized and productive citizens and proper urbanites. At the center of the most enduring stories about Vernyi's history is horticulturalist Eduard Baum who, after arriving in Vernyi in 1874 as the forest inspector of Semirech'e region, passionately dedicated himself to the "noble mission of greening" (*ozeleneniia*). Baum used the stick and carrot method to disseminate his ideas among Vernyi populace. In 1875, he issued an order, obliging every resident of Vernyi to plant twenty fruit and ornamental trees along the streets and in front of their houses and the seedlings were provided to each household free of charge. Fines were issued to those who failed to comply with the order and for cutting down any trees. Almaty inhabitants especially like to tell that Baum allegedly issued an order for public whipping of any person who cut down a Tian Shan fir. In 1892, he successfully lobbied Governor Kolpakovsky to donate state land on the outskirts of Vernyi for a family-oriented "entertainment park" (*uveselitel'nyi park*), which became known as Baum's Grove. One hundred and twenty years later, Baum's Gove is still there, testifying to the endurance of Baum's ideas and their importance in Almaty history. It still has many of the original trees planted by Baum and his workers, many of which are over 100 years old, and the neat straight alleyways, favorite with Almaty bicycle enthusiasts, follow the layout of the grove drawn by Baum in 1892.

However, from the very beginning, stories about Baum's Grove were full of dark rumors. In Baum's time, it became notorious as haven for criminals and runaways. Its dangerous reputation as a gathering place for drunks, drug dealers, and criminal gangs persisted through Soviet times. My friend who grew up in Almaty told me that when she

was a teenager, in the 1980s, Baum's Grove was known not as a family entertainment park, as envisioned by Baum, but as a seedy hangout and a place to dump bodies. As much as Kolpakovskii, Baum, and the Soviet administrators and educators after them committed themselves to cultivation of civilized order and proper productivity in nature and in people, chaos and disorder always seemed to thwart even the most carefully laid out plans with earthquakes and mudslides, and human nature failed to live up to the ideals of social engineering. The Cossacks and peasants of Vernyi had to be cajoled, fined, and whipped into "refining" (*oblagorazhivat*) the military fort into a proper city, because they themselves were far from civilized 'cultivators.'

Aport: "The Patriotic Apple"

The Aport, a local variety of apple, is the symbol of Almaty. It was pictured on the Soviet emblem of Alma-Ata and billboards with images of aport are all around the city. The official version of Aport's origins, quoted in Kazakhstani history textbooks, says that in the mid-1860s, a Russian settler, Egor Red'ko, brought with him to Fort Vernyi several cuttings of apple trees from his native Don region. Several years after being planted in Zhetisu soil, these completely unremarkable trees began to produce amazing apples, of quality unseen before: "They were of huge size, bright color, and amazing taste and fragrance" (Rumyantsev 2000: 172). Red'ko, like a Russian Johnny Appleseed, generously shared these cuttings with all his neighbors and "soon the miraculously transformed variety from Voronezh [region] spread across the whole Vernyi district" (ibid).

In Soviet times, Aport was a symbol of Kazakhtan's and Soviet pride: Almaty residents love to recall the time when special Aport orchards were cultivated especially

for gifts delivered to the Kremlin and the Soviet leaders in Moscow. "In Soviet times, it was a custom to bring something especially valuable from every region to Moscow, to the Kremlin: for example, cognac was brought from Armenia, grapes from Moldavia, and we were ordered to deliver aport, there was even an order that came annually from the Central Committee...". Not only Soviet leaders were enamored of the miraculous apple. The story goes that Senator Ted Kennedy visited Alma-Ata in 1972 and after tasting the apple exclaimed: "I have traveled almost the whole world but have never tasted such wonderful apples!" (ibid).



Figure 8: Aport harvest.

Foreigners coveted Aport, but no matter what they tried, could not get it to grow in a foreign soil. "No matter how much Germany's best specialists tried, there, the aport fruit rotted from the inside. They have attempted to grow aport in other European

countries and even beyond the ocean, in USA, but it was all in vain. Aport turned out to be such a 'patriot' that it did not take root in any of the foreign gardens." (ibid)

The story of Aport, the "patriotic" apple, symbolizes so many different things for people in Kazakhstan. The story of its origins, transplanted from Russia into the Kazakh soil, tells the history of contact and hybridization between autochthons and aliens (Rus. *prisheltsy*). It can symbolize friendship or become the proverbial "apple of discord." It is said that the secret of the Almaty Aport is that the trees brought from Russia combined with the indigenous wild apples that grew in the foothills of Tian Shan; a compelling image for the grafting of the two people, the indigenes and the foreigners. The wild and the cultivated trees came together to produce a new hybrid form that grows nowhere else but in the soil of Kazakhstan; the beautiful fragrant apple that people would exclaim "used to be THIS big," putting two fists together.

Ryskul worked in a government office in charge of oralman settlement in Kaskelen district, about 30 km outside of Almaty. She was a taciturn and perpetually tired looking woman whom I saw become excited only once, when she accompanied me on a visit to a Mongolian Kazakh family in her district. As they talked about their experiences of moving to Kazakhstan, she joined the conversation with her own recollections of moving to Almaty from the north in the '80s:

When I was living in...[unclear in my notes], I heard how people talked about Almaty region, as this paradise, all in orchards, trees, flowers everywhere. The water flowing from the mountains into the aryq [canals] and it is so crystal clear, you can drink it right out of the aryq. And how there are orchards everywhere, grapes, apples, you can pick apples off the trees and they are so big, like two fists. When I heard this from people, I did not believe any of it. It can't be like this. But when I came here, I saw it was all true. The orchards, and the apples, and the water in the aryq. This place was so beautiful. I remember just picking up apples and eating,

eating, until I got sick. I never believed it could all be true, but it was just like people said it was.

Alexander (2009) describes similar recollections of Soviet Alma-Ata from her interlocutors and also notes "the curious stylistic uniformity of accounts whatever the genre: taped oral history, written autobiography, fiction or history" (154). As she argues:

...it is in such lyrical accounts, felt with nostalgia, that ideas of the right order which has been overturned in tales of decay is glimpsed....The lyrical mood is intertwined with a notion of the ideal socialist city: the urban aesthetic of natural abundance and greenness which is underwritten by a normative idea of how best to provide the material environment for a model socialist system. (ibid)

By the time I came to Almaty in 2004, the famous apple orchards were gone and Almaty residents now buy bottled water. Standing on top of the famous Medeo skating ring and looking down at the city, one could see that the orchards have been replaced by Kazakh McMansions.



Figure 9: Almaty, view from Medeo. Photograph by the author.

Higher up toward the mountains, on the south side of the city, where the air is cleaner, there are quiet residential streets, high fences with guard houses attached, and expensive American cars parked in the driveways. Almaty residents still orient by "up" and "down" directions, but it has developed new meanings of wealth, social class, and increasing segregation, as rural migrants and oralmandar are crowded in shanty settlements on the northern outskirts of the city, down by the bazaars, the bus depot and the train station. When 2009 was announced as the Year of Aport, pictures of the apples proliferated on posters and billboards all over Almaty. However, as locals decried to me, the real Aport was nowhere to be found. They assured me that the apples sold at the city bazaar, claimed as real Aport by unscrupulous sellers, were much inferior fakes. The

vanished Aport was a symbol of the disappearance of the prosperous and "cultivated" past.

The Aport provides rich metaphors for notions of human transplantation and hybridization in Kazakhstan. For many people, Kazakh and not, Red'ko and others like him have a claim to the land through cultivation and the fruits of their labor. And for Kazakhstani Russians, the labor that they have contributed to the transformation of land in its natural and human-made forms, provides them with tangible signs of belonging that are part of the landscape. These include the trees, flowers, and orchards of Almaty; the "Virgin Land" of the empty steppe, flowering with wheat and corn; factories, mines, oil rigs, and space launch facilities. They make visible in the landscape itself, the kinds of claims common among Kazakhstani Russians that they "have built Kazakhstan" with their labor and gave "culture" to the uncivilized nomads. These claims, taken to their extreme, also appear in the rhetoric of nationalists in Russia who consider the former colonies to be a part of the Russian homeland. Famous Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in 1990, in his book *How Should We Rebuild Russia* (Kak nam obusstroit Rossiu), in the opening paragraph titled "Regarding Kazakhstan":

Its current huge territory has been carved out by communists mindlessly, by whatever means: if nomadic herds pass through somewhere once a year, then that is Kazakhstan... But, it has been constructed out of southern Siberia, southern Urals, and the central barren expanses, which since then have been transformed and built up by Russians, cons, and the exiled people. And today, in the whole of the inflated Kazakhstan, Kazakhs are conspicuously less than half [of the population]. (1)

Nevertheless, for most people I talked to in Kazakhstan, it is not nationalist claims to ownership that frame their recollections of Soviet life. Svetlana was another

government official in a district about sixty kilometers from Almaty, who I got to know personally in 2009, as she was getting ready to retire from the government job to manage her own restaurant. She grew up in a small village not far from the district center where she now lived. Describing herself as a quarter German, a quarter Russian, and half Kazakh, Svetlana, bilingual in Kazakh and Russian languages and with a wide social network of friends, neighbors, and relatives that crossed ethnic and language boundaries, she considered herself a quintessential "Kazakhstani." She began her long career as a government official working at the village soviet, then became a principle of the village school, was later elected the village akim (mayor), and moved from there to the post at the district akimat (government administration). She worked with the returnees in her district and her attitude toward and interactions with the newly arrived migrants cannot be seen outside her own social emplacement and life history. When asked about the village in which she grew up and lived her entire life, she, like many other Kazakhstanis, framed her recollections in terms of the orderliness, cleanliness, stability, and abundance of Soviet times. The harmony of natural and social environment was highlighted through her vivid images of green shady streets, paved sidewalks, and flowering gardens, mirrored by the description of multiethnic coexistence in which everyone, Kazakhs, Russians, and Germans, lived happily together: "Everyone tried to keep up with everyone else and tried to make their yards green, beautiful. And then the Russians and the others began to leave and new people came." Moving into the homes of those that left, she explained, they did not take care of what was left, but began to keep animals that trampled the beautiful gardens and broke the neat fences: "So, they came, and that is why the village now looks so unattractive."

Similar to Svetlana's home village, the district center where she now lives and works has also seen enormous changes in the two decades since independence. Many of the ethnic Russians, Poles, and Germans have left. The neighborhood where I lived in 2008-09 was once known to all the locals as "West Berlin" and praised for its solidly constructed German houses, beautiful apple orchards, and neat picket fences. Now that Kazakhs from Mongolia, China, and Uzbekistan live in most of these houses, the other locals bemoan the physical and social changes in the neighborhood and in the town after "our" Germans have left.

For the locals, including many of the government officials, post-Soviet changes meant that much of the economic and social infrastructure, the significant things that used to make up the everyday fabric of their lived social-material space were gone. Gone are the collective farms and the light manufacturing that provided stable jobs, benefits, and pensions, free universal day care, free healthcare, and many municipal services that used to be taken for granted, like garbage collection, tree planting, and road upkeep. The shady streets and paved sidewalks, nostalgically recalled by the locals, are often talked about in the context of the degradation of living space, mirrored, again, by the degeneration in the quality of the people dwelling in it, described as poor, uncultured, and uncivilized nomads, unused to living in houses.

Svetlana Boym (2001) wrote that "the twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia" (xiv). However, she adds that nostalgia has a utopian dimension to it as well:

Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory. While futuristic utopias might be out of fashion,

nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension--only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes it is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space. (ibid.)

When I talked to Kazakhstani locals, Kazakhs, Russians, and others, they often spoke of "ran'she" ("before"), without a specific date, indexing the rupture point between the Soviet "ran'she" and the post-Soviet "seichas" (now). For those who grew up before independence, whether they are more reminiscently nostalgic or critical in their evaluation of the Soviet ran'she, it is almost always framed as stability, order, and socio-economic security, counterposed to the chaos and dispossession of the 1990s (see Nazpary 1990; Yurchak 2003).

While Mongolian Kazakhs also had a contrasting point of reference, they, not surprisingly, described the experience of rupture in spatial terms, moving from Mongolia to Kazakhstan. Subverting the idea of return myth, closely connected to discussions about the nature of "diasporic experience" in nationalizing narratives, oralmandar in Kazakhstan wax nostalgic about Mongolia as their "land of birth." As I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four, contrasts between Mongolia and Kazakhstan, and Mongolian and Soviet Kazakhs, were widespread and deeply moralized through notions of kazakhshilikh (Kazakhness). Mongolian Kazakhs criticized Kazakhstani Kazakhs' lack of hospitality, loss of nomadic customs, linguistic Russification, and absence of religious knowledge and practice. For many of them, Kazakhstani Kazakhs are first and foremost shala kazaks (literally, "half-Kazakhs"), or kara orys ("black Russians") with, as a few have pointed out to me, Kazakh faces and Russian souls.

Like the comparisons with socialist times for Kazakhstani Kazakhs, comparisons with Mongolia are used not only for idealization of the past, but as a specific and direct critique of the current situation, which allows one to evaluate and articulate better alternatives. It also plays an important part in the aesthetics of claim making: for locals, it is the Soviet, built environment and material and cultural progress, for Mongolian Kazakhs, it is their preservation of Kazakh culture and language. However, like for the Portuguese "retornados" described by Lubkemann (2003), the symbolic resources of authenticity and cultural legitimacy on which Mongolian Kazakhs can draw also serve as hindrances to their claims of membership in the modern state (82). While being an important part of the conception of the Kazakh nation, in practice, their belonging in the national community is questioned in everyday forms of social interaction (see also Smith 2003; Tsuda 2009). How Mongolian Kazakhs map onto and negotiate the social geography of Kazakhstan is demonstrated by Omirzhan-*agha's*¹⁷ story of attempting to pass for a "local" Kazakh.

I often will not tell people that I meet that I am from Mongolia, because right away they think then, 'oh oralman, Mongol.' But I do not speak Russian well, so I tell them I am from Shymkent or Kyzyl Orda [southern cities], where people do not speak Russian. And also people hear my Kazakh and they hear that I speak differently, so they ask me where I am from and I say from Shymkent. You know, like when riding on a train and people are talking, they ask you where you are from. I do not want to say that I am from Mongolia, because maybe they think, 'Oh he is oralman, he is from Mongolia, he is poor, uneducated.' So I tell them that I am from Shymkent.

¹⁷ I lived with the family of Omirzhan-*agha* and Nara-*apke* for four months, March –June 2007, while conducting fieldwork in Shamalghan village. After three years in Kazakhstan, they returned to Mongolia that summer and now live in Ulaanbaatar.

In Kazakhstan, "Shymkent," or "the South," as a predominantly "Kazakh" region, is often opposed to the North, which is perceived as largely Russian and European, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally. Local Kazakhs liked to tell me a joke which started, "Shymkent is our Texas of Kazakhstan" (*Kazakhstanskii Tehas*). "How is it like Texas?" I would respond with the expected question. "Because there is no law!" people would answer and laugh. While the South is described as Kazakh speaking, traditional, and Muslim, such characteristics are also often interpreted to mean "tribal," "patriarchal," "corrupt," and "backward." As Omirzhan-agma's creative way of "passing" for a local demonstrates, Kazakhs from Mongolia variously map onto, reflect, and challenge currently salient divisions within Kazakhstan, such as Russian-speaking versus Kazakh-speaking, urban versus rural, modern versus traditional.

"If You Want to Become Russian, First Become a Kazakh."¹⁸

In his article, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," (1994) Yuri Slezkine borrows a metaphor from a Soviet scholar, I. Vareikis, who wrote in 1924 that the USSR was a large communal apartment in which "national state units, various republics and autonomous provinces" represented 'separate rooms'" (414). Like Slezkine, many other scholars have argued that the Soviet Union constructed, invented, and celebrated ethnic identities where few had existed in a discernible form in Central Asia. It was also the first modern state to implement large-scale affirmative action through the creation of enumerable, though mutually exclusive

¹⁸ A saying attributed to Uzbeks.

nationality categories (Martin 2001) thus conferring an objective and material salience upon them (Hirsch 1997). Soviet ideology of nationhood has transmitted to the successor states a set of "deeply structured and powerfully conflicting expectations of belonging" (Brubaker 1994: 56) by forging a natural or primordial connection of nation, language, and territory (Suny 1993; Slezkine 1994; Martin 2001).

Similar to Brown's (2001, 2007) argument about Soviet spatial practices and their connections to labor and mobility I discussed in previous chapter, Brubaker (1994) argues:

Nationality as an official component of personal status was introduced in 1932 as one of a number of elements contained in the newly instituted system of internal passports. That system was central to the neofeudal ties that bound the coercively recruited labor force of the new collective farms to the land; more generally, it was central to the control and regulation of migration. But it was the passport system as such, not the legal nationality that was encoded in it along with much other information that was crucial for this purpose. Indeed the passport-based regulation and coercive control of labor supply and internal migration could have been effected just as easily without the encoding of nationality. The later uses of official nationality were unrelated to the original purposes for which internal passports were created. (54)

However, as nationality became "an obligatory and mainly ascriptive legal category" (ibid.), it was recorded in all the documents that accompanied Soviet citizens through their lives, in internal passports, school records, job applications, and routine bureaucratic encounters, such as registering a car or getting a library card. (This practice continues largely unchanged in Kazakhstan.) The assumptions that underpinned the nationality categories carried with them distinct histories and hierarchies of cultural and moral evaluations that went far beyond mere ethnic categorization. These assumptions were not incidental to one's life chances in terms of opportunities for mobility, residency,

and relationships with the state. Such divisions in turn further reinforced the hierarchy of urban and rural, nomadic and sedentary forms of life, and Kazakh and Russian languages.

Although this was not an official policy of the Soviet government, it was common for Kazakhs in Almaty to tell me that internal passport and residency registration (*propiska*) regulations were used to keep Kazakhs out of cities. Keeping the rural Kazakh population immobilized at the collective farms provided the state with cheap agricultural labor. As Pohl (2012) also argues: "It seems likely that there was relatively little flow of native population from the country to the town and that the growth of the urban population derived primarily from European immigrants" (217).

Soviet Alma-Ata, as a Russian city and Kazakh national capital, embodied these tensions and contradictions. In 1936, only a few years after *The Keeper* in Dombrovsky's novel described it as a Cossack village, Alma-Ata became the capital of the Kazakh Autonomous Socialist Republic and was beginning to be transformed into a model Soviet city. By the end of the 1950s, Alma-Ata had a new city center, laid out in a strictly perpendicular grid, according to the plans developed by Leningrad architects, decorated with fountains, parks, and ornate Stalinist palaces. The pride of Alma-Ata, Medeo outdoor skating rink, was built in 1951 on the southern outskirts of the city, at 5,500 feet above sea level, making it the highest outdoor skating rink in the world.

Like other Soviet Republican capitals, Alma-Ata became a cultural and educational as well administrative center of Kazakhstan. It had its own Kazakhstan branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Kazakh State University (KazGU), a Central State Library, an academic publishing press, and a Central State Museum (where the young *Keeper* came to work.) Cultural institutions that opened in Alma-Ata during the

1920-1940s included Abai Opera and Ballet Theater (founded in 1936), Kazakh National Conservatory (1944), the Kazakh Drama Theater (1926), the Russian Drama Theater (1933), and the Uighur Music Theater which opened in 1934. These cultural and educational institutions recorded, produced, and disseminated specifically national histories, art, and folklore and contributed to creation of national consciousness among Soviet people (Bustanov 2013).

The population of the capital, like many cities in Kazakhstan, was overwhelmingly Russian (over 80% of the population listed their ethnicity as Russian in 1989) and Russophone space (and arguably still remains so). Visually and audibly, the Sovietness of the capital was embodied through Russianness. Soviet internationalism, for which Kazakhstan was praised, as the most multiethnic republic, was neither culturally neutral nor linguistically unmarked. It spoke Russian, went to the opera and the circus, and lived in a stationery house with furniture in it.

Tamara-apa was one of the few Kazakhs from Mongolia who visited Kazakhstan during Soviet times. She was in Moscow in 1976 for a one year training course to be a Russian language teacher and went on a class trip to Alma-Ata. At the time, many Mongolian Kazakhs went to Russia, Ukraine, and other Soviet republics for education, but none of them went to Kazakhstan. The Soviet Union tried to minimize cross-border contacts and many people in Kazakhstan told me that they had no idea that millions of Kazakhs lived outside of the Soviet Union. Tamara-apa told me that she was struck by the fact that in Alma-Ata "there was not one single person who spoke Kazakh, not even in stores."

I was walking down the street and I heard a man curse, he said bad words in Kazakh. I got so happy, [she laughed] because I heard Kazakh, even

though it was cursing. Kazakhs are small people, surrounded by Russians. This is the law of survival ["*zakon vyzhivaniya*," she said in Russian]. Almaty was a Russian city.

Such cultural, labor, and languages hierarchies became mapped onto the urban/rural divide. So, assumptions about Kazakhs from Mongolia already preceded their arrival: perceived as rural and Kazakh speaking they were also assumed to be uneducated, culturally backward, and unproductive. Gulnara Mendikulova was a scholar who I quoted in chapter one as an early supporter of Kazakh repatriation. However, when she started talking about her own research with Kazakh returnees, she talked about how upset she was when some people chided her for not speaking Kazakh.

They don't know what it was like here. There was one Kazakh school in all of Alma-Ata. In 1987, the first Kazakh kindergarten was open in Alma-Ata and in a newspaper they wrote that [she quotes in a disdainful tone of voice, as if the report was making fun of it] "some people got together and made a big feast" [*ustroili bolshoi pir*]. When some Kazaks ask, "why you do not speak Kazakh?" I get mad. You herded your sheep up in the mountains, what do you know about what it was like here. Here was a completely different situation. They should be grateful that we preserved our language and our culture at all.

When I asked whether she thought that not knowing the Russian language was a problem for Mongolian Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, she replied: "Oralman all live in rural areas. What do they need Russian for at all? Everyone around them speaks Kazakh. What are they going to speak to their sheep in Russian?" ("*Chto oni s baranami svoimi po russki budut govorit?*")

Northrop (2004) argues that "the USSR, like its tsarist predecessor, was a colonial empire. Power in the Soviet Union was expressed across lines of hierarchy and

differences were simultaneously geographic, ethnic, political, economic, and cultural. Soviet policies, categories, and priorities had the effect of treating colonial people differently because of their special status along all of these axes" (22). While scholars disagree whether the USSR could be considered a colonial empire, many Kazakhs drew comparisons between themselves and the situation of other colonized people in the world. In 2004 in Almaty, I was discussing the language situation in Kazakhstan with a Kazakh friend who had a PhD in English literature, was fluent in Russian, English, and Italian, but learned Kazakh only later in life. She quoted to me a passage from James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

-Do you understand what he says? Stephen asked her.
-Is it French you are talking, sir? the old woman said to Haines.
Haines spoke to her again a longer speech, confidently.
-Irish, Buck Mulligan said. Is there Gaelic on you?
-I thought it was Irish, she said, by the sound of it. Are you from the west, sir?
-I am an Englishman, Haines answered.
-He's English, Buck Mulligan said, and he thinks we ought to speak Irish in Ireland.
-Sure we ought to, the old woman said, and I'm ashamed I don't speak the language myself. I'm told it's a grand language by them that knows.
(*Ulysses* 1.424-434)

She then told me that the proudest day of her life was when she bought Mukhtar Auezov's novel *Abai's Path* (*Abai Zholy*), famous for its beautiful use of the Kazak language, and was able to read it without using the Russian translation.

Kirsch (2001) notes that "indigenous claims about "culture loss" pose a problem for contemporary definitions of culture as a process that continually undergoes change rather than something which can be damaged or lost" (169). Here, as he argues, "it is

possible to speak of loss in relation to the notion of kinship and belonging rather than possession" (ibid). The idea of profound cultural loss is often remarked upon by outside observers, such as other (post)Soviets, Central Asians and Westerners. (In literature, Kazakhs are often cited as "the most Russified of all Soviet nationalities" (see Dave 2004). It echoes the long-standing tropes of emptiness and absence that I discussed earlier. Indeed, it seems that Kazakhstan is often described by what it is not, what it seems to lack, rather than what it is. For example: Kazakhs are not "real Muslims," lacking the "devotion" or "fanaticism", as well as the religious knowledge, of its other Muslim neighbors. Discussions of short history of "islamization" among nomads and assertions that Kazakhs did not become Muslim until the 18th or 19th century are often reiterated in scholarly literature, although this view has been completely rebuffed by some prominent Central Asian historians, such as DeWeese (1994, c.f. Khalid 2007). Moreover, others argue, Kazakhs are not really "Central Asian" and Kazakhstan itself is not part of Central Asia, either geographically or culturally. (In Soviet literature, the region was usually referred to as "Kazakhstan and Central Asia.") It is said to straddle Europe and Asia in a geographically "liminal" state of being: neither quite here nor there. For those in search of local "color," Kazakhstan does not look or feel like "Central Asia": it seems to lack "history," in a tangible, visual way. There are no architectural wonders of great Muslim cities, mosques, and mausoleums to draw tourists, like in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstani cities and towns present to a casual visitor a non-descript gray exterior of most provincial Soviet and Russian cities. Kazakh women, especially if one spends time in cities, mostly lack the colorful headscarves and recognizably "non-Western" clothing of Uzbek or Tajik women. Kazakh clothing, such coats (shapan), hats, dresses, and

headscarves, usually appear at self-consciously "traditional" weddings and celebrations. So, in a heated discussion I once had with an American friend, who spent several years living in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, she emphatically stated that there is no such thing as "Kazakh culture": "Everyone says that in the south [of Kazakhstan] it is Uzbek culture, in the North it is Russian, but where is Kazakh?"

"Asphalt Kazakhs": Cultural Russification and Language Loss

I am not an "asphalt" Kazakh, I was born and grew up in an *aul* [village]... Since childhood I have known how to ride a horse. Because, our ancestors especially respected the horse. From the earliest years, our consciousness is stamped with the images of the wonderful horses, praised in the folk stories and legends about the famous heroes: Taiburyl of the warrior Khoblandy, Shalkuiruk of Er Tostik, Kulager of Akhan ser. I love this noble animal very much, but, unfortunately, do not have enough time for riding. And this love was instilled in me at the time by the adults, especially by my father.
(President Nazarbayev in his memoir, *In the Flow of History (V Potoke Istorii)*).

The expression "asphalt Kazakh" (*asfal'tnyyi kazakh*) is common among Kazakhstani Kazakhs and, like "kitchen Kazakh" (*kuhonnyi kazahskii*), which is used in reference to language, it anchors moral judgments about ethnic identity and cultural authenticity to particular material and spatial metaphors. The "asphalt" evokes not only the meaning of an urban Kazakh person, but one who is Russian-speaking and separated from his culturally authentic Kazakh roots in a village. In this context, President Nazarbayev's assertion that he is not an 'asphalt' Kazakh and his invocation of village roots, horses, and famous Kazakh heroes taps into a particular form of *national*

legitimation, promoting unbreakable bonds among language, people, and state as a deeply moral issue, to which all true Kazaks have to be committed (Brubaker 1994).

Generally, in discussions concerning Kazakhs as a nation, language and culture are intimately connected: one cannot be Kazakh without speaking Kazakh. It is most often through the idiom of language loss that loss of culture is expressed and debates over cultural legitimacy and authenticity are often articulated as debates about language. And like the expression "asphalt Kazakh," which connects the idea of particular kinds of persons with their material environment, the expression "kitchen Kazakh" spatially anchors the ideas and practices of language use within the circumscribed and highly gendered space of domesticity, family, and home.

In Soviet Kazakhstan, sciences, technical professions, business, jurisprudence, were all taught almost exclusively in Russian, and if one wanted to participate in research and academic conversations, one had to write, publish, and debate in Russian. The two-track language system in technical and academic higher institutions continued the institutionalized practices of separate but not equal that already began in schools. Linguistic stratification translated into hierarchies of labor, social prestige, and gender: the Agricultural Institute had Kazakh language instruction, so did the Women's Pedagogical Institute (*Zhenskii pedagogicheskii institut*), and there were Kazakh folklore and ethnography departments at the Academy of Sciences, but these were very specific exceptions. Many cities and regions with non-Kazakh majorities had no Kazakh language schools, but even when instruction in Kazakh was available, parents often decided to send their children to Russian schools. Russian schools were generally considered better

(in terms of teachers, resources, and instruction) and Russian literacy was important, as one could go only so far in Kazakh.

In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, it is common to hear discussions of the Kazakh language as "artificially stunted" in its natural development by the spread of Russian. Not allowed to develop, it lacks "modern" vocabulary and concepts and is therefore impossible to use for business or science (see Dave 2007). As in Irvine's (1989) analysis of connections between language use and political economy, Kazakh and Russian are an example of a linguistic situation in which symbolic capital in one sphere does not always translate into economic capital or higher socioeconomic status in others. Linguistic abilities are "part of the social division of labor itself, not simply indexing social diversity" (252). Many in Kazakhstan argue that such bilingual hierarchy continues in independent Kazakhstan and lack of Russian language skills is a problem for many return migrants and rural Kazakhs.

In 2008, I had a discussion about the role of Kazakh and Russian languages with Esengul and her husband Bakha, both journalists at Kazakh language newspapers in Almaty, who moved to Kazakhstan from Mongolia in their early twenties. I asked them whether they thought that lack of Russian language skills is a problem for Mongolian Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. They corrected my blanket statement, pointing out that social and economic hierarchies are significant for evaluating the language situation.

Esengul: Well, certainly, the government is adapting to the Kazakh language. But you have to differentiate: the higher you look, the more Russian-speaking it is. The higher it is, the more Russian-speakers there are in the government. For prestigious, higher-paying jobs or for higher government position, one has to be fluent in Russian. The top of the power is still Russian-speaking. So, you have to differentiate: top, middle, low. The higher you get, the bigger the problem. For me, as a journalist, it is also a problem, because I have to interview people in both Kazakh and

Russian, even though I work at a Kazakh language newspaper. And, even though I can do an interview in Russian, I am not fluent.

Bakha: I think, if a person is educated, literate, smart, that person would manage to get along. Everywhere you go now, to government offices, for jobs, there are Kazakh speakers. I cannot say that the language problem does not exist, but it has to be differentiated by social status. The main problem is that there is no established language policy. One second, the government is promoting English, then Russian, then Kazakh. But there is no language discrimination. If you look, there are signs and advertisements in Turkish, and in Chinese, and any other language. The most important thing that needs to be done is to lift the Kazakh language. The interethnic language must be Kazakh. Russian has already lived out its days. In Mongolia, we learned Russian as the only foreign language, we watched television in Russian, although we did not really understand it. Now, they learn Russian in school as one of the foreign languages. The problem is that Kazakhstan and the Kazakh language were not allowed to develop along a natural path. This underdevelopment is artificial (*Rus. Isskustvennyi*).

Esengul: But at the top, everybody speaks Russian and after them everybody speaks like that. When the Kazakh language will be normalized, I don't know.

As Bakha points out, language policies of the Kazakhstani government have been inconsistent and ambiguous. In 1991, both Kazakh and Russian were proclaimed to be "the state languages of Kazakhstan" in the initial version of the Constitution. This was met with a lot of protest and heated debates about the status of Kazakh and Russian languages continued (Dave 2004). In 1997, after several changes to the Constitution and much heated parliamentary debate, Kazakh was officially proclaimed a "state language" and Russian as the "official language on a level with a state language" and the officially designated "language of interethnic communication" (*iazyk mezhetnicheskogo obscheniia*). The wording of the 1997 Language Law reflects the kind of careful balance

that came to characterize President Nazarbayev's rule, his mantra of stability and interethnic accord. The law states that "the state language of the Republic of Kazakhstan is the Kazakh language" and then refers to it as "the state language," avoiding the use of "Kazakh language." Differences in the Russian and Kazakh language versions of the law, although seemingly innocuous are also telling. In Kazakh, the title of the law reads "Concerning Language in the Republic of Kazakhstan (*Kazakhstan Respublikasyndagy Til Turaly*), where *til* is (technically) grammatically singular. However, the Russian version of the title reads "Concerning Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan" (*O Iazykah v Respublike Kazakhstan*), the Russian "iazyki" (languages) being definitely plural. The Language Law defines what is meant by "the state language," listing its specific functions and its intended reach, socially and spatially: it is the language of "state management, legislation, legal proceedings, and office management, functioning in all spheres of social relations on the entire territory of the state." It is specifically in such spheres as government and business that the Kazakh language has been seen as most absent or most deficient.

As Deiner (2009) argues, it is important to consider that the law "On Migration of Population" was also adopted in 1997, drawn up at the same time that the law "On Languages" was under consideration in the Kazakhstani parliament. The law "On Migration of Population" was the first draft law to be formulated and written in the Kazakh language, rather than originally written in Russian and then translated into Kazakh, as was the case with other government legislation. Deiner argues that "the authors of the law were purported to be those seeking to prove that the Kazakh language is suitable for legal purposes, and the migration of diasporic Kazakhs provided a perfect

issue through which this case could be made" (336). The migration legislation concerning oralman was drawn up against a background of heated discussion pertaining to national language policy, the role of Kazakh and Russian languages in the construction of Kazakhstani state. The almost complete absence in these discussions of the voices of return migrants themselves leads Deiner to argue that they "serve as pawns in competition to control the nature of nationalization within Kazakhstan" (ibid).

Continuing use of Russian language in Kazakhstan is "the public secret that most everyone knows but none dare speak, ... which keeps the leaky ship of State afloat" (Taussig 1992:65). Thus, the Language Law legislates that all public signs (including shop signs) have to be in both Russian and Kazakh. The law attempts to regulate the visual details, stipulating the placement and size of the respective letters: "All texts of visual information shall be placed in the following order: from the left or the top - in the state language, from the right or the bottom - in the Russian language and shall be written in the letters of equal size." However, the law cannot regulate the fact that, in Almaty, many public signs in Kazakh range from slightly awkward linguistic constructions to either ungrammatical or incomprehensible and often both. Very often the source of confusion is that something is a calque from Russian and makes no sense in Kazakh.

In April 2007, I was driving through the city with Omirzhan-agma and his son Akhberen, 9 years old at the time, who entertained himself by reading aloud every sign and billboard we passed. Akhberen read aloud, "paterler astynda kilt," as we passed by an advertisement banner hung over a major intersection, and Omirzhan-agma finally laughed out loud and told him to stop reading the signs or he will "spoil" his Kazakh. Maybe, he said reprovingly to his son, those shala Kazakhs understand this, but we cannot

understand what it means. This makes no sense in Kazakh, he said to me, as translated literally it said "apartments under key." It took me a minute to realize that this indeed meaningless in Kazakh construction was a calque from the Russian "kvartiri pod kluch," meaning finished apartments, ready to be moved in. My knowledge of Russian certainly helped to eventually get the meaning of the sign, but it was not automatic. "Pod kluch" would have been an expression local Kazakhs would have left in Russian, even if the conversation was in Kazakh. This sign, just like business documents and government laws, routinely written in Russian and then translated into Kazakh, did not aim at linguistic transparency, but was there to fulfil the law and everyone knew it.

The "Human Flood": Rural-urban Migration

When Mongolian Kazakhs I spoke with talked about their experiences in Kazakhstan, many told me that their secondary migration within Kazakhstan, after their labor contracts have ended, was as significant, or in some ways even more so, than the initial immigration from Mongolia. While many people left close friends and family behind in Mongolia, the first years of repatriation involved mostly mass migrations of extended families and even whole villages. As most people signed collective labor agreements, they were often able to stay together, living compactly and working at collective farms. However, for the majority of those who came in 1990-1992, the five-year labor contracts ended in 1995-96, which also coincided with the final dissolution of the remaining collective farms and the beginning of the privatization process in Kazakhstan. By that time, most collective farms and state industrial enterprises were already bankrupt or on the verge of collapse. Mongolian Kazakhs and other return migrants faced additional problems. As land, housing, and farm property were being

privatized, Kazakhs from Mongolia, most of whom were employed at the collective farms in the Northeast, lost not only their jobs but also housing and land that was provided to them by their labor contracts. As a temporary labor force, they were not Kazakhstani citizens. Therefore, according to law, they could not buy, sell, or own land, did not have any rights in receiving anything that was distributed in privatization, and could not privatize their land or the houses they have been living in. Moreover, throughout the 1990s, most Mongolian Kazakhs continued to linger in a bureaucratic limbo, while their applications for Kazakhstani citizenship were taking years to process. Over 90% of Mongolian Kazakh returnees did not receive Kazakhstani citizenship until 2000, ten years after the repatriation began.

Thus, due to the breakup of collective farms and their privatization in 1996, as well as the end of the 5-year labor agreements, many Mongolian Kazakhs (more than 10,000 by some accounts) went back to Mongolia. A few years later, by 2000, as the economy in Kazakhstan improved, many of the same people came back to Kazakhstan again, in a process that was developing into a pattern of cross-border migration, challenging the nation-state framework of permanent diasporic repatriation.

For those who stayed in Kazakhstan (about 55,000-60,000 Mongolian Kazakhs), the Law on Migration was finally passed in 1997 and migration quotas were established for those who qualified as oralman. As part of the quota system, assistance was offered to those who settled in the areas designated by the government, including housing assistance. Most of the quotas, like the labor contracts before, went to the Northern and Eastern regions. Many Mongolian Kazakhs chose to opt out of the quota system rather than live there. Like other people in Kazakhstan, of all nationalities, they migrated further

south and to the urban center of Almaty, closer to opportunities for jobs and better education. If they left their initial places of settlement, they lost all the benefits and housing they might have had and were in the same position as any other rural migrants, or in many cases even worse, because they did not have citizenship. As waves of migration "flooded" the city, it was becoming more difficult to distinguish, legally and practically, "oralman" from other rural Kazakh speaking migrants and from Uzbek labor migrants (gasterbeistery) from across the border. While Kazakhs from Mongolia were the largest group of repatriates in the beginning of migration, the vast majority of oralmandar (over 80%) now come from Uzbekistan. Like the labor migrants who come to Kazakhstan from Uzbekistan, most oralmandar prefer to rely on networks of relatives already established in Kazakhstan, rather than take advantage of available repatriation quotas. Neither were particularly eager to register with the state, as the hassle and potential risks outweigh the benefits the state might provide.

Svetlana, the government official who waxed nostalgic about the orderliness of Soviet time, described the beginning of mass migration from rural areas to towns and cities in the early 1990s.

That really was a wave of movement. Before it was not like that. Before, such things have not been noticed. Before, life was so settled. If moved to Gorniy [village], then he lives there for years. And then, as this unclear situation started, everything began to stir. I think, if it was possible to look down from space like this, everything must have moved like this: like this, like this, like this [she moved her hand and arm in wavelike motion]. Everybody was running somewhere, everybody was going somewhere: from there to here, from here to there, and like this endlessly.

Migration of rural Kazakhs to Almaty already began in the 1980s, and in the early '90s coincided with outmigration of many non-Kazakhs. It is estimated that in 1991-1996,

more than 25% of the population was involved in migration within Kazakhstan and abroad. These migrants, like most of Kazakhstan's countryside were Kazakh and Kazakh speaking. In 2010, the Almaty city administration estimated that, while the city has approximately one and half million officially registered inhabitants, an additional million people live in the city unregistered.

Most of the million unregistered and therefore "illegal" Almaty inhabitants live in migrant settlements that grew on the outskirts of Almaty in the 1990s. At first, the city government did not care much about rural migrants settling on what was then useless land, unfit for construction, built in the area of dangerous mudslides. Many people there lived in a state of daily anxiety. As one woman in the Duman neighborhood told me, at night, she put her three children to sleep right by the door. Even though it was cold and drafty by the door, she thought they had more chance to make it out if there was a mudslide or an earthquake and the house collapsed. Building in these dangerous mudslide zones, without any building code, was the main justification put out by the government for not allowing to legalize the houses there and for beginning to dismantle some of the settlements in 2006-2007 (see Yessenova 2010). I was repeatedly told by government officials that return migrants did not live in these neighborhoods, but that was untrue. Like other migrants, many lacked papers and the necessary residency registration, again blurring the line between inner migration from the country side and external labor and return migration. As Reeves (2013:522) argues, "foregrounding migrant (il)legality as a space of relations rather than an unambiguous line is helpful for thinking beyond the dichotomies through which migrant residence is typically analyzed: legal versus illegal,

documented versus undocumented, authorized versus unauthorized, regular versus irregular.”

Besides neighborhoods newly built on the empty land at the city's edges, many rural and return migrants now live in what were formerly suburban dachas, the summer cottages of Soviet urban dwellers who went there on weekends and summer vacations to enjoy a small plot of land and a garden. Dachas were not meant to be permanent dwellings and they often lacked insulation for the winter, and, unlike city apartments, most had no indoor plumbing, heat, or gas. The dachas are now filled by people who live there all year round. The houses still continue to lack running water and gas; they are heated by coal, adding to the city pollution, electricity is illegally "pulled" from the power lines and water is hauled from street pumps. Dachas present additional problems that again blur the legal/illegal divide: living at the dacha, one cannot officially register as city resident, as dachas are not considered permanent shelter. As officially dacha residents have no permanent place of dwelling, this causes difficulties in receiving government services, registering children for school and finding legal employment.

"We are like a diaspora in our own land"

I am writing to you on behalf of the residents of Taskala-2 village, the oralman. We moved to Atyrau in 2005 on a migration quota. We have built houses and for more than two years already we live like on a desert island: we have neither light, nor gas, nor water, even though all the highway roads pass nearby. More than once we have written to the administration of the village and the region. They reply to us that the treasury does not have the means. But is it really such a big problem for an oil capital? Or do the authorities spit on the problems of ordinary people.[sic] If even for a minute they would give a thought as to how families with small children and the elderly who need special care survive a cold winter. Such indifference to big problems of little people is for us painful and humiliating.
(Kamshat Aliyeva, letter to the Atyrau city newspaper, August 2, 2007.)

For many locals in the Almaty region, including the government officials, the returnees were the most obvious culprits of the land shortage problems, perceived as having an unfair advantage in the distribution of limited resources. Land problems are most often blamed on secondary migration of returnees from places of their initial settlement, usually in the northern regions of the country, where the population is low and land is not perceived to be scarce. Even when, in my conversations with government officials, I attempted to point out that the number of returnees is dwarfed by the massive rural-urban migration of Kazakhstani Kazakhs, they continued to ignore the issue of internal migration and put the blame squarely on the returnees. Svetlana echoed the frustrations I heard from many other officials when she explained: "There are too many of them. There is a lot of empty land in Atyrau, Kokchetau, Kostanai [northern regions], but they all want closer to Almaty. They say 'the weather is bad there'. So they all want to live here and there is no space, no land here".

Moreover, for the government officials the issue of land was not only a question of distribution. Considering how contentious the land question has been, the fear of the possibilities of social tensions and political conflict also made it part of the local government's concern to control and limit, rather than welcome, return migration. As Svetlana continued to explain: "Now, it is mostly oralman who receive land. And now, because of this, the locals also have woken up (prosnulis). They also go to akimat asking for land. Before, they didn't think of asking, lived with big families in small saman houses. And now, they are also going and asking for land".

Rather than seeing land as scarce resource and as an object of contention, Mongolian Kazakhs perceive the land as a piece of ancestral homeland, imbued with great symbolic as well as material value. The symbolic and material value of land (*zher*) is inextricably intertwined and having a piece of land on which to put a house is an act of tangible reclamation of ancestral homeland. Like many other migrants struggling to find a place to live close to the city, Saghat-agma lived in a 2 room temporary lean-on (*vremianka*), with 11 other members of his household, including his three grown sons and their wives and children. In a common arrangement, they were able to live there in exchange for "watching" the land for the owner who lived in the city. Having no official contract or legal agreement, and, perhaps even more importantly, no close social connection with the landlord, they were in a state of daily anxiety. As Saghat-agma put it: "if we see the landlord on the road, we are thinking: is he coming to ask for money, or is he going to ask us to vacate the house?" While many rural migrants in Kazakhstan also experience similar hardships, Saghat-agma, as other returnees, used the language of return and ancestral homeland to hold the government responsible for the failure of its own promises to them: "Here we came to build a house on a little piece of land which was left by our ancestors, but they demand a *propiska* (registration) from us." Being without land, or without a place (as *zher* can be understood as both in Kazakh) is described as both a terrible material hardship and a pitiful state of being: "So, our children are seen wandering here and there in the land (*zherde telim-telim bop zhur*) begging anyone they see for a registration and a job." In my conversation with Esengul and Bakha, who I quoted earlier in the chapter in the discussion of language ideologies and practices in Kazakhstan, they repeated a sentiment that I heard from other return migrants and which

turns the nation-building logic of Kazakh repatriation on its head: "we are like a diaspora in our own land."

Esengul: Oralman now in Kazakhstan are like the fourth *zhuz*. *Oralman* are a social stratum (*sozialnaia prosloika*). For example, to be an elected representative, one has to live in Kazakhstan for ten years, so the *oralman* cannot be represented in government. This is an infringement of rights. In the new changes to the Constitution, the Assembly of Peoples gets nine representatives in parliament, one for each nationality. This is discrimination, infringement on the rights of oralman. Oralman should also get one [representative] then. These nationalities already adapted as Kazakhstanis, but not oralman. Adaptation is a long-term process. It will take not ten, not even fifty years for oralman to adapt. But the national policies of the state do not integrate the nationalities but, on the contrary, divide them. We are like a diaspora in our own country.

Shamalghan and Uzynaghash: Living Together and Apart

As Almaty is a symbol of Kazakhstan's Russification, Shamalghan and Uzynaghash represent the "multiethnic" nature of Kazakhstan and its Soviet legacy. Soviet descriptions of Kazakhstan celebrated the republic as a success in the "multinationalist" (*mnogonatsional'nyi*) and "internationalist" (*internatsional'nyi*) socialism building project. Kazakhstan was described as "land of a hundred peoples" (*zemlia sta narodov*); "planet of a hundred languages" (*planeta sta iazykov*), and "laboratory of the friendship of peoples."

The towns and villages surrounding the city of Almaty are known to be very "mixed" ethnically. This is due, people explained to me, to the presence of many "repressed" groups living there: Germans, Chechens, Turks, Kurds, Koreans, Assyrians, and others. Even before I went to live in the village of Shamalghan, people in Almaty told me what a unique place it was. My Kazakh teacher got excited when I told her I am moving there to live with a Mongolian Kazakh family. She told me that it is a very

interesting place and has been, in her words, "a very interesting and unusual place" since Soviet times. It has always been known and famous for a number of "repressed people" (*repressirovannye narody*) that lived there: Germans, Chechens, Turks, Tatars, and Kurds. She said that it has always been known for being ethnically mixed and "everyone who lives there speaks Kazakh and respects Kazakhs very much. Other people agreed that the district was very "multinational" but also mentioned that it was notorious for interethnic altercations, especially between Chechens and Kazakhs.

In the neighboring town of Uzynaghash, where I conducted fieldwork in 2008-2009, many small businesses were owned by *oralmandar* from Mongolia, China, Uzbekistan, and Turkey. Mongolian Kazakhs set up a canteen inside the bazaar, catering to the Mongolian Kazakhs selling furniture there by serving fried meat paties, "hoovshuur," a specifically Mongolian dish. Chinese cafes served yughur and Western Chinese dishes, noodles, and spicy meats. All of these served vodka. Chinese Kazakhs dominated the barbershop business and there were four of them, right next to each other, inside the enclosed part of the bazaar. Mongolian Kazakhs had their own section of the bazaar, surrounded by a metal fence, where they sold furniture, home-made and imported from China.



Figure 10: Business signs in Uzynaghash. Photographs by the author.

In Shamalghan, ethnic boundaries were as often casually dismissed as they were subtly upheld. Ethnic stereotypes, expressed often jokingly, sometimes quite seriously, abounded, but were easily put aside for those one knew personally: "My brother-in-law is Russian, but he is alright, he doesn't drink." I felt that the seeming casualness and frequent crassness of ethnic talk and joking actually concealed a potential minefield, around which those who knew it stepped quite carefully, in their own post-Soviet Kazakhstan version of political correctness. It was only I who did not understand the unspoken rules, as implicit assumptions were brought to light only when breached. This is how our elderly neighbor, Baba Masha [Grandma Masha], described her trip to the post office to me one morning, as we chatted across the fence:

I had to pay a phone bill and it is far to walk to the center, so there is a Turkish woman (Turchanka) that lives nearby. She was getting in her car and I asked her where she was going and she said to Kaskelen. So I asked her to take me to the post office. So she drove me to the post office. I paid my bills and then I bought a few things for myself, medicine and other stuff, and I was walking back. Then I saw an acquaintance Turkish woman (znakomuy turchanku). She took my bag from me.- Baba Masha, let me

walk you to Mira [street] - she said. - Well, if you are going to walk me to Mira, you should walk me all the way home- I say to her and laugh. She walked me to Mira and she stopped in a shop. And there, a Kazakh girl (*devushka Kazashka*) said, - Let me help you babushka (grandma)- and took my bag. And then by the next shop, another Kazakh girl (*esche devushka Kazashka*) also helped me and carried my bags all the way to my house. That's how I got home. (She laughed)

People also self-identified themselves in ethnic terms. There was another neighbor who lived across the street, a hefty woman, always flashing a mouth full of gold teeth at me in a big smile. I therefore introduced myself and told her I was from the US and the woman looked very interested. "Oh, from the US" she said. "So, are there people like us in America?" I didn't understand what she meant by the question, so I paused with my answer. "Are there Turks[Turki] in America?" she asked. "Well, yes" I said. "Many different people live in America." "Many Turks?" "I think so, yes. At least in New York there are a lot." When I came to her house for tea a couple of days later, a pop group from Turkey was playing on their stereo and the house was decorated with Turkish made carpets, coffee accessories, and posters of Turkish music stars and soap opera actresses.

I got used to people casually speaking Kazakh around me, assuming that I did not understand them, because of the way I looked like an *akh kulak* (literally "white ear," a term for "Russians" and "Europeans" in general). Among many uncomfortable encounters, I especially recall a mundane bus ride on the outskirts of Almaty, which turned quite tense when an elderly passenger began to berate the bus driver for calling out street names in Russian rather than Kazakh. He then spent the next 20 minutes loudly talking in Kazakh about Russians who do not want to learn Kazakh, staring pointedly at the only European-looking face on the bus, mine, while all the other riders looked very uncomfortable and clearly tried to avoid staring at me. It seems that public and

anonymous urban spaces, such as buses, bazaars, and shops, were especially prone to bringing out some of the underlying tensions not usually expressed.

Another kind of public performance of ethnicity happened during public celebrations, organized by state and local government for national holidays, such as Independence Day and Nauryz (Central Asian New Year celebrated in spring.) When I lived in Shamalghan in 2007, I attended a Nauryz celebration in the town of Kaskelen, the district center. There, like in almost identical looking Nauryz celebration in Almaty, the holiday was also a stage for the enactment of the Soviet-style friendship of peoples. Except for Kazakhs, each nationality represented in the district had their own booths lined around the square. Each booth bore the name of a particular ethnic group -Russian, Ukrainians, Uzbek, Kurds, Kabardino-Balkhars, etc., and people in "national" clothes served the "national" food of each group (Ukrainians had borsch, Uzbeks served plov, Yughurs had dumplings).

As much as this kind of public performance reiterated Soviet "national in form" multiethnic celebrations, it was also an enactment of ethno-national and social hierarchies. Kazakhs were not included in the peripheral circle of ethnic minority booths, but had rows of tables set at the center of the square, serving *baursaq* (fried bread) and *Nauryz kozhe* (a kind of gruel made especially for Nauryz). Next to them, were three large yurts with rich *dastarkhans* (lit. tablecloth, spread of food, feast) for the government officials. Besides food, there were performances from each of the groups: dancing Uzbek girls with tiny tea saucers on their heads, a choir of Russian women accompanied by an accordion, Kurds doing a sword dance. All these performances were also taking place on the side, as the main stage, faced by rows of chairs, had performances of Kazakh music

and then an *aitus* (Kazakh improvisational poetry competition). The mood was festive, people wandered around to different booths, tasting food, and enthusiastically clapping for all the performances. This was a holiday of inclusion, a celebration of safe difference through food, music, clothes, and dancing children. So, this made the exclusion of certain people all the more glaring. While smiling women in the booths loudly called on the passers-by to taste their food, Lyuli women (mostly called *tsyganne* (gypsies) by the locals) got only an exasperated "ket" (go away) when they tried to join in the sharing of food.

In discussing similar public celebrations in Uzbekistan, Adams (2010) presents such celebrations as mass spectacles of state nation-building ideology, reproducing old Soviet forms for a passive audience. Although such celebrations might look stereotypical in form and tightly managed by government officials, in the process, they also become negotiations of local hierarchies and national ideologies which do not always reinforce the idea of the state and nation-building.

As I personally experienced while living in Shamalghan, more than public displays of ethnic identification, it was often the everyday experiences of living together that evoked the ideas and practices of group identification and ethnic inclusion and exclusion. In April 2008, while spending a weekend in Almaty, I received a phone call telling me that Omirzhan-agma and Nara-apke (my Mongolian Kazakh host family in Shamalghan) have been in a really bad car accident, crashing into a minibus full of people, and have been rushed to the local hospital. First, in panic, I ran to the wrong hospital, but finally found my way to the right district hospital with the help of a policeman and a couple he flagged on the road, who went out of their way to give me a

lift in the back of their milk truck. When I got there, there were dozens of injured people lying in the hallway, on the floor, on stretchers, and on gurneys, while doctors and nurses ran in and out of intensive care rooms, too busy to pause to answer my questions. I frantically ran around, slipping on puddles of blood, unable to find Omirzhan or Nara, calling their names, sounding increasingly hysterical. A "Russian" woman who was sitting on one of the chairs in the hallway noticed my distress and asked me who I was looking for. Stopping in my frantic search, hoping she might be able to help, I told her that I am looking for my friends (*druz'ia*) who were brought to the hospital in one of the ambulances. "Oi", she said sympathetically, then leaned over and patted my arm: "There were no Russians, only Kazakhs" (*Russkih nikogo ne bilo, tolko Kazahi*). Even in that state of utter shock, her quiet remark struck me still for a moment. Somehow, her unspoken assumptions that my "friends" would not be among the "Kazakhs" brought in from the site of the accident stuck with me as the clearest memory of that day.

Chapter Four

Local entanglements: genealogy, history, and politics

Elim-ai/ Oh, My People

The first time I met Kazakh returnees from other countries was during my first visit to Almaty in the summer of 2004, before I began my dissertation fieldwork in 2006. Through a confluence of odd events involving various people in Ann Arbor, London, and Almaty, I ended up with a Kazakh research assistant, conducting household surveys in one of the migrant settlements on the outskirts of Almaty. At that time, Duman (festivity) was an illegal migrant settlement, officially not part of the city administration or infrastructure. Even though Duman was one of the oldest and largest migrant neighborhoods, dating back to the perestroika years of the late 1980s, the people who lived there, in the eyes of the city officials, were illegal squatters. The settlement began when the first waves of rural migrants came to Almaty and started to build homes on what at the time was empty land outside the city limits. As the number of people began to grow rapidly, some young *komsomol* (Communist Youth League) members from the city became involved in helping to organize a self-governing council, as well as carpentry and brickmaking workshops that operated as member cooperatives. At the time, they also helped to secure tacit recognition from the city government. Duman was never legally recognized and people were not able to claim legal ownership of the houses they built and the land on which they lived. However, as that land was worthless in the 1990s, the

city administration simply kept their eyes closed and as government officials changed, Duman continued to grow.

However, by 2004, this situation changed considerably. The housing boom in Almaty made previously worthless land into coveted real estate and government officials were no longer willing to ignore the people they now pronounced "illegal squatters." By this time, there were multiple unrecognized migrant settlements on the outskirts of Almaty and the city government began to threaten evictions and destruction of "illegal" homes. So, when my research assistant Saule and I went to Duman to collect our survey data on rural-urban migration, this was an especially bad time to be barging into people's homes at inappropriate times, breaking just about every rule of Kazakh politeness and hospitality, and asking rudely direct questions about their families, homes, and lives. Our notebooks and survey forms immediately made people suspicious and my "Russian" face, unremarkable on the streets of Almaty, immediately stood out among overwhelmingly Kazakh inhabitants of Duman. We looked and acted like government employees or journalists and neither were particularly welcome in Duman at the time. People who lived there could not register as legal residents of Almaty and did not own deeds for their homes and land plots, so attention from the state was unwelcome. Journalists were also met with suspicion and, occasionally, thinly veiled hostility. As tensions with city government and rumors of unrest in Duman and other neighborhoods grew, there was increased attention and visits from newspaper journalists and television crews. Many people seemed to resent the attention, because local media tended to have very negative coverage of the "migration problem," describing neighborhoods like Duman as "Kazakh Bidonville" and "ghettos" (see Lobanov 2006). Even sympathetic accounts of rural

migrants and their situation focused exclusively on the negative aspects, describing poverty and unemployment, lack of infrastructure, poor construction, crowded conditions, and precarious illegality.

Nevertheless, even in this situation, Kazakh ideas of proper hospitality did not allow most people to simply turn suspicious-looking strangers like us away from their door. With very few exceptions, most people we met in Duman over those two weeks, invited us in, seated us at the table, and served us tea before starting any conversation about who we were and what we were doing in their homes. Most people we talked to in Duman had moved to the city from other rural areas and told us stories of leaving villages and small towns all over Kazakhstan in search of job opportunities, better schools for their children, or medical care for elderly parents. Many people also came from areas around the Aral Sea in Western Kazakhstan, where land and water are so polluted, they had been forced to leave in order to escape an environmental disaster. More surprisingly for me at the time, I also met people who told me they moved to Kazakhstan from other countries. Most Kazakh repatriates I spoke to were from the neighboring countries of the former Soviet Union, mostly Uzbekistan, while others came from China, Mongolia, and as far away as Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan.

During that first summer in Almaty, there was one encounter that I especially remembered. It was during one of our routine household visits, trying to collect information for the survey. This particular visit was with an elderly woman—an *apa*—grandmother, as she would be respectfully called in Kazakh. She told us that she moved to Kazakhstan from China just a few months earlier, as she put it, "to die in the land of her ancestors." We sat around the table, sipping tea and eating bread, and at first, she

seemed quiet and understandably suspicious of us. As she started to tell us about her life, *apa* grew more animated and she spoke about her mother. Her mother was born in Kazakhstan and in the 1920's fled with her family across the border to Chinese Xinjiang, like hundreds of thousands of other Kazakh nomads who were escaping famine, violence, expropriation of livestock, and the forced sedentarization campaigns of the Soviet government. As political unrest began to grow in Xinjiang as well, some Kazakhs later migrated further north to Mongolia, while others trekked south, crossing the Hindu Kush on foot and settling for a time in Pakistan and Kashmir.⁴²

Apa told us that she herself was born in China, but her mother told many stories about her land of birth. Growingly visibly emotional, the woman recalled how as a little girl, she would listen to her mother's stories, her homesick descriptions of the great Kazakh steppe, the green grass, and the sharp smell of *jusai* – an aromatic wild onion that grows in the Altai region. Starting to cry, *apa* sang us a song, which, she said, her mother sang often to her when she was a little girl – "*Elim-ai*" ("Oh, My People!"). Widely known and loved among Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and abroad, this song of lament, popularly attributed to a legendary Kazakh epic singer, Kozhabergen zhyrau, describes the hardships of the Jungar wars in the 18th century and is said to have been passed down for 300 years.

From the top of the Karatau mountains the migrating auls⁴³ are descending
and a baby camel who lost his mother walks alone.
So hard is the loss of his close kin
as pure tears drop from the black eyes.

⁴² An article, describing the migration of Kazakhs from Xinjiang across the Hindu Kush was published in National Geographic in 1954 with the title "How the Kazakhs fled to Freedom" by American journalist Milton J. Clark. See also Lias 1956, Benson and Svanberg 1988, Jacobs 2010.

⁴³ Aul is a nomadic encampment usually consisting of several related families.

Elim-ai Elim-ai

What times are these?
Times of difficult trials for the people
and the loss of past happiness and wealth.
The flight of all the people raises a cloud of dust
stronger than the winter snowstorm.

Elim-ai Elim-ai

What time is this?
Is it the time of lawlessness and panic?
Will the happy past ever come back?
Kin and homeland are left behind.
Longing for them, a sea of tears pours from my eyes.⁴⁴

Apa went on to say that her mother never forgot about her homeland, never stopped missing it, longing for it. And her mother now many years dead and herself an old woman, she came here for what her mother told her about the land of her ancestors: the wide open steppe, the pure land, the blue sky of her homeland. As she was saying this, apa actually pointed out of the little low window set in the thick clay wall of her one room house. As my eyes followed her finger, all I could see were the tips of the Alatau mountains in the distance, as usual, barely visible through a black choking soot of Almaty's notoriously thick cloud of pollution. (In 2007, Almaty made it on the list of the world's 25 dirtiest cities, ranking 9th, right below Mumbai and Baghdad.)

⁴⁴ Excerpt from the Kazakh version of Elim-ai cited by Ilyas Esenberlin (1986) in his historical novel Zhantalas (Despair). A very similar version of the song is quoted in Russian translation by Tynyshpayev (1992).



Figure 11: View of Almaty.

It seemed that nothing at that moment could be further from the images conjured by apa so vividly from her mother's recollection of the *altyn besik* (golden cradle) of her birth. The ancestral pasturelands of her Naiman ru (clan/lineage) were actually located 500 miles to the north from where we sat, in a country called Kazakhstan, which did not exist at the time her mother left for China. Apa herself returned to the ancestral homeland she never knew and was living in an illegal migrant settlement which, although it was home to thousands of people, did not exist on any official city map and where, as one city official told us with a sigh, "the state does not reach."

This chapter, like the one before it, focuses on one specific place in Kazakhstan, outside the city of Almaty, the Shaprashty heartland. However, while, the previous chapter focused on Soviet ideas and practices of nationality and history and notions of

language and culture, in this chapter, I highlight that ideas of identity and history did not appear in a cultural and historical vacuum during Soviet times and neither did they leave a cultural and moral vacuum behind them with the end of the Soviet Union. For many Kazakhs, rediscovering their genealogical roots, pre-Soviet histories, and ancestors allowed for articulations of identification and belonging to the Kazakh nation that simultaneously embraced and questioned the heritage of Russian colonialism and Soviet nationality policies. Mongolian Kazakh returnees, as well as those from other countries, are an integral part of and participants in these engagements with history and genealogy and of how Kazakhs more broadly perceive themselves and their histories.

What I examine in this chapter is the importance of genealogical histories, the expressed connections to place and ancestors as experienced and narrated by persons, who like *apa*, face the tensions of both belonging to the nation and being excluded from it. My argument hinges on the political importance of this tension, as the very idea of a Kazakh nation and its connection to a Kazakh state are both recreated and subverted through the forms of genealogical belonging expressed in these tensions. I highlight the role of ancestral histories, local genealogies, and attachments to place in practices of national identification and local politics in Kazakhstan. I move beyond the nation-state's criteria for citizenship to show how on the local level people negotiate their perception of who is Kazakh and who is *oralman* by drawing on and narrating their genealogies in interactions with state institutions and their representatives and in their struggles over membership, resources, and various sources of legitimation and authority. This is not limited to interactions between state and citizens, but also includes negotiation of claims to the land and the nation, articulations of differences with Kazakh citizens, and everyday

struggles over membership, resources, legitimacy, and authority. In this way, I consider the different value judgments, ideas about community and about belonging within the framework of sociality, including "imagined communities" of various kinds—not just of the nation-state. As DeWeese () states "The point is that if we look only for the overtly political, we will miss much that informs the foundations of political life."

The first part of the chapter focuses on history and genealogy, lineage, tribe, and ancestors. Specifically, I consider a lawsuit that reveals the interrelations of different and competing forms of power, authority, and legitimacy in Kazakhstan. The second part of the chapter delves into everyday experiences of returnees and locals in interacting with state institutions and government officials. It shows how those aspects of understanding what constitutes Kazakhness informs state practices. I consider this in the context of interactions between the state/government and the tribalist framework. I consider how these frameworks are often understood to be in opposition to each other. Based on mechanical structuralist models, many scholars claim that regionalism and "clan" interests are pitted against other clans and the central state, in formations that the political scientist Kelly McMann has called the "paradoxically weak-strong state" (McMann 2004: 241; also see Jones Luong 2004; Cummings 2002). Instead, I look at spatial hierarchies and claims on a local level, through the particularities of specific encounters with institutions and practices of the state, local government officials, and specific articulations of concepts like political authority, citizenship, and governance on the local level. Rather than assuming an opposition, I examine the circulation of ideas and practices, as well as claims and identifications at different scales of interaction, politics, and government. Throughout, I question the objectification of notions such as the state

and its power by pointing to the ways in which Mongolian Kazakhs challenge not only specific practices of the state, but also the configurations of power, and legitimacy contained within the discourse of the Kazakh nation-state.

By capturing the state through the flow of interactions, I reconsider the state in terms of the emergent relationships between ideas of place, locality, and home. I also reconsider group identifications in genealogical, regional, territorial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious terms. In considering how these notions interpenetrate and inform each other in the process of their actualization, I show the varied lines between state and society, public and private, and the exercise of personal and institutionally authorized and legitimated power (Gupta YEAR: ##).

In many ways this chapter is not about the state, as it does not examine the state in or for itself. Rather, it considers the state insofar it is one way of articulating community and belonging among others, such as spatial divisions, ethnic differences, linguistic hierarchies, and economic inequalities. I consider how all of these dimensions of belonging come together with ideas about the morality of persons and the legitimacy of their claims to inform and shape interactions of power. Non-statist and non-national articulations of community are possible outside of the nation-state framework in the form of genealogical histories and narratives of time and place that tell how the local and the personal articulate with the national and the historical.

As I talked to more Kazakh repatriates from China and Mongolia, I recognized the rich descriptions used by *apa* in her genealogical narrative – the great open steppe (*keng dala*), the vast blue of the sky (*kok aspan*), the smell of *jusai*, as recurring narrative tropes and images also found in Kazakh poems, songs, and stories of homeland longing

from China to Turkey. In the twenty years of repatriation, the song *Elim-ai* that the grandmother sang to us has been taken up as the unofficial anthem of the Kazakh diaspora and their return. In its numerous variations, the song is part of a larger body of Kazakh oral history and literature that recounts the time known as "*aqtaban shubyryndy alkakol sulama*," which Tynyshpayev (1992:18) glossed as "the time when all the people, with the soles of their feet worn out [from running], lay exhausted by the lake of grief." It describes the time in the 18th century (1720's – 1730's) as one of bitter defeats and violent displacement of Kazakh nomads by the Mongol nomadic confederation of Jungar and Oirat tribes. Embedded in songs, poems, stories, and recitations of *shezhire* (genealogical histories), *Aqtaban Shubyryndy*, or as it is also called, "the time of great troubles," is a particular narrative of Kazakh history, shared among different groups in Kazakhstan, China, and Mongolia. In the 20th century, they have carried this narrative in waves of flights and migrations in the 1920's, '30s, and '40s to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and later all the way to Turkey and Europe.

"The Time of Great Troubles" is a narrative trope that characterizes the Kazakh diaspora in terms of exile, loss, and displacement. Such stories of shared suffering and resistance also appeal to those who want to rethink Kazakh history as a specifically national history, centered on the territory of Kazakhstan. For Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, "The Time of Great Troubles," both as a historical experience and as a metaphor of collective suffering, is recontextualized and reinterpreted through the narration of other times and events: the Bolshevik revolution and the coming of the Soviet government in the 1920's, the famine years of forced sedentarization and collectivization of Kazakh nomads and the Stalinist purges of the 1930's, the sacrifices of the WWII years, and the

"Zheltoqsan" events of 1986, when Kazakh youths marched on the streets of Alma-Ata, later hailed as the (re)awakening of Kazakh national consciousness. In the sometimes intertwining, but often divergent histories of Kazakhs in Mongolia and China, Elim-ai, as a song and a lament, also weaves through the stories of the Jungar invasions, the violent years of Chinese communist revolution in Xinjiang, and the stories of relatives who fled across the Hindu Kush into Kashmir in the 1940's. As Smith (2003: 27) argues for the processes of return migration in Western Europe: "history is implicated in the difficult incorporation of the "repatriates" into national communities. The problem of social memory – and, more specifically, of conflicting memories and identities – is a central theme." While the central government continued to officially encourage repatriation, local government officials commonly framed their work with repatriates in terms of efforts to "limit," "control," and "organize" what they interpreted as chaotic and overwhelming migration processes. In the process of their interactions with the returnees, Kazakh government officials often constructed their own parameters of inclusion and exclusion, reconfiguring not only the legal criteria of returnee status, but also the affective and moral dimensions of citizenship and national belonging.

"Poor Great Jambul"

In 2007, an unprecedented lawsuit made its way through the Kazakhstani courts and on the pages of Russian and Kazakh language media. The case involved three men who sued Russian-language newspaper *Svoboda Slova* (Rus. "Freedom of Speech") for the amount of 800 million KZ Tenge (about 6 million USD). The focus of the lawsuit was an article published by the newspaper in January 2007 and entitled 'Poor Great Jambul' (*Neshchastnyi velikii Jambul*). The three plaintiffs from the village of

Shamalghan claimed to have filed the lawsuit on behalf of their entire Shaprashty *ru*. They accused the newspaper of "defaming the names of their ancestors," "insulting the honor and dignity of the claimants," "slander," and "grievous moral injury" (*tyazhelyi moral'nyi ushcherb*).

The defendants published the article, for reasons clear only to them, acting against their people, against their homeland, on the instructions of morally corrupt people, who set the goal to sow discord and chaos, ceaselessly stirring up strife among the Kazakh Zhuzes, arousing strife and enmity among the clans. Their desire, insulting not only to us but to the entire people, is to increase social, ethnic, and spiritual strife, and to speak out against the security of the state.

What was the perceived danger of this slanderous article? Yerbol Kurmanbayev, the author of the polemic piece, personally named in the lawsuit, pulls no punches when criticizing the Kazakh habit of praising their lineage ancestors. He connects productions of these distinct and local genealogies to recent "nationalist" histories that absurdly exaggerate the global significance and "the dizzying depths" (*golovokruzhitel'nye glubiny*) of Kazakh history. Kurmanbayev states: "Nationalist versions of history are needed by a certain part of the population, in the same way that housewives need soap operas and children need fairy tales."

The claimants specifically objected to several jokes related by the author, which rely on phonetic coincidences to make fun of the exaggerated claims put out by some Kazakhs about their ancestors:

For example, there is a myth going around among jokers that the equator was discovered by two Kazakhs - "eki batyr" [two warriors]. There is another joke as well: One Shaprashty man sent his two sons out into the world to seek fortune. Their names were Parakhbai and Orakhbai. They discovered in South America two new countries -Paraguay and Uruguay...

The author sarcastically continues:

But, Uruguay and Paraguay are nothing. The Arghyns have a whole country outside of Kazakhstan – it is called Arghyntina [Argentina] and it is also in South America. But other Kazakhs, not just the Arghyns, also have something to boast about. Do you know where the famous orientalist scholar Konrad [?] as well as the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer are from? Correct! From the Kazakh clan [Khongrat]. And where did the name of the Baltics come from? It is simply that Kazakhs from Balta got there. Some people will talk nonsense to the point that Alexander the Great of Macedonia will turn out to be a Kazakh from the Zhalair clan. Basically, anywhere you spit, there are Kazakhs everywhere.

In a country with no shortage of identifiable ru, taipa (tribes) and illustrious ancestors and local saints vying for national honors, the reason the author of the article singles out the Shaprashty ru appears clear to the claimants: it is the lineage of President Nazarbayev himself who also comes from the same village as the three plaintiffs.

The main objective of the defendants is, through the newspaper, "Freedom of Speech," to lower in the eyes of the people and in the eyes of other states, the authority of the direct descendant of Karasai, our head of state, Nursultan Abishevich Nazarbayev, as well as cause chaos and enmity among people and lead to a civil war.

In Kazakhstan, most of the media, including print, radio, and television broadcasting, are sharply bifurcated along the Russian/Kazakh language divide. Kazakh and Russian language newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and local television networks not only use different languages, but they usually orient their programming to what they perceive to be different kinds of audiences, address different topics of interest, and are written and produced by different journalists. In fact, very few journalists that I know publish in both Kazakh and Russian languages. Debates concerning Kazakh

genealogies and ancestral histories, such as those brought up in the article, along with concerns about the fate of the Kazakh language and discussions about Kazakh repatriation, are largely seen as specifically Kazakh issues. They are usually relegated to the pages of Kazakh language newspapers, perceived to "specialize" in these topics, such as *Kazakh Adibiety* ("Kazakh Literature"), *Ana Tily* ("Mother Tongue"), or *Turkestan*.

However, as *Svoboda Slova* makes clear, this particular genealogical (and in a way intensely local) debate transcends the interests of just the Kazakhs in the country, because it concerns the lineage of the country's President: "...what lineage that is and its position in today's tribal [*rodovoplemennoi*] hierarchy is well known even to the Slavic population of our country."

To illustrate the central argument of the article that "the mythologizing of history" is perpetrated by those in power to legitimize their rule, the author focuses on two famous "historical figures" (*istoricheskie lichnosti*) of the Shaprashty lineage: the legendary *batyr* (Kaz. hero/warrior) Karasai, said to have fought the Jungar enemies in the 18th century, and the blind *aqyn* (poet-singer) Jambul (1845-1945), whose grave is one the major pilgrimage sites for Kazakhs in the Almaty region.

The author contends that, far from being a national hero who repelled the Jungar invaders from the Kazakh lands in the 1720's, Karasai Batyr was completely unknown to most Kazakhs until 1992, when President Nazarbayev publicly proclaimed him to be his 8th generation direct patrilineal ancestor. Nazarbayev described how when Karasai Batyr and his wife Sara's ancestor stood "back to back," "500 enemy Jungars could not defeat them." Kurmanbayev argues that this story turned out to be enough "to establish a factual base for the existence of the little-known Karasai from the Shaprashty clan" and "as the

result of a widescale PR campaign, literally out of nothing, there appeared an image of a powerful Karasai Batyr, the ancestor of President Nazarbayev." Former Kaskelen district, the birthplace of President Nazarbayev, was renamed Karasai in 1993 and a large monument of Karasai seated on a rearing horse and holding a spear was erected in the central square, in front of the local government administration (*akimat*)_building. Another mounted Karasai monument was erected on a hill near the President's home village of Shamalghan and lavish celebrations in honor of "the 350th anniversary of Karasai's birth" were held around the country in 2007.

In contrast to Karasai Batyr's dubious historicity, *aqyn* Jambul Zhumabaiuly, "the Kazakh Homer," who died in 1945, reportedly at the age of one hundred, was widely known, celebrated, and anthologized throughout the Soviet Union in the 1930's and 1940's. Jambul's large house, personally gifted to him by Stalin in 1936, is still preserved as a house museum, with displays of original furniture, the poet's personal objects, as well as various editions of his poetry in many languages and numerous awards and medals. The house is surrounded by extensive grounds, with gardens, flowerbeds, and shady mulberry trees around a small mausoleum containing Jambul's grave, all tended by the poet's two elderly great-granddaughters. Like many famed Kazakh *aqyn*, Jambul is known not only as a gifted poet-singer-orator, but is also considered a healer (*baqshy*) and a seer, known to have performed miraculous feats during his life. Now, busloads of pilgrims visit his grave year-round, to pray, read the Koran, circumambulate the saint's grave, and leave cuts of white cloth as an offering for prayers answered and wishes fulfilled.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See Dubuisson 2009 for a description of pilgrimages to Jambul's grave and house-museum.

However, Kurmanbayev argues in his article that the legend of Jambul as a great poet is another historical falsification: "Jambul was not a poet, his poems were created by Russian poets." His odes to Stalin and poems on the themes of Soviet life, supposedly translated by famous Russian poets, were actually written by teams of Russian ghostwriters: "there existed, so to speak, a copy but no original." According to Kurmanbayev, these poems were disseminated in Soviet school readers without any knowledge or involvement of the "poor great Jambul," an old, blind, illiterate man who did not speak a word of Russian. And the continual fame and official eulogizing of Jambul in monuments and places named after him, like that of Karasai Batyr, is due to his Shaprashty lineage.

Drawing a clear parallel between Soviet power, built on lies and falsifications, and "the new spiral of falsification of history" in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Kurmanbayev warns that "history is often distorted for the benefit of rulers." He finishes the article with an exhortation to his readers: "It is clear that we are used to falsifying elections, falsifying achievements, falsifying life. But we cannot permit anyone the opportunity to profit from the mythologizing of history." The anxieties underlying the final criticism in this article make clear that different versions of history are understood to serve as alternate sources of authority and legitimation. Genealogies and historical narratives that highlight connections to the Kazakh nation through ancestry are central to the legitimation and authority of Mongolian Kazakhs. Additionally, these claims add further complexities to the usual boundaries of belonging by cross-cutting the division among Kazakh-non/Kazakh-Russian.

It took eight months for the lawsuit to wind its way through the courts and various departments of the National Academy of Sciences, which was called on for the "expert opinion" by the presiding judge. The "scientific expert testimony" (*nauchnaya ekspertiza*), signed by two philologists from the Academy, fully rejected the claim of harm and moral suffering and found no fault with the newspaper. Nevertheless, the judge ended up rejecting the expert opinion she herself solicited and decided the lawsuit partially in favor of the claimants, ordering the payment of damages for "moral injury," although much smaller than they were originally seeking. She justified her decision by Article 8 of Kazakhstan's Civil Code (GPK RK), which states that the interested parties have a right to protection of honor and dignity, if they are able to prove, in accordance with the law, that they are included among the circle of descendants of the deceased relative. The judge concluded that the claimants did provide such proof, stating, with no further elaboration: "As proof of their kinship relationship, descendants of Karasai and Jambul presented a shezhire (Kazakh genealogies) certified by the local akim [mayor]." This response evidences the entanglement of state and genealogical forms of authority: one bolstered and legitimized by the other - like the monuments and state-sponsored celebrations of ancestors. Additionally, it makes explicit the perceived relationship between political and economic power and lineage: particularly as respects Shaprashty.

In response to the court verdict, the newspaper *Svoboda Slova* published an editorial which became an extended commentary on (the absence of) Kazakh history, acknowledging that "for Kazakhs history is always personal. And so is the perceived injury." They explain:

In contrast with settled populations, where only aristocrats were interested in genealogies, among nomads, the knowledge of shezhire was

population-wide [*obschenarodnyi*]. So, history is sensed by them much more acutely than by other people. Because, the historical works reflect the actions not of some abstract, but fully concrete ancestors of specific and currently alive Kazakhs.... Thanks to all the conditions described above, Kazakhs have no history as the science of events.

The editors concluded with stating the matter bluntly: "Warriors who in one district are considered heroes of a national scale, for the inhabitants of a neighboring district are nothing but horse thieves."

This lawsuit and the debates surrounding it, illustrate the entanglement of orally transmitted genealogies and histories with written forms. In the context of the lawsuit, *shezhire* is a written object, textual and graphic, recorded, and historically accurate. It is also certified by local government official, who lends the authority of the state and his stamp and signature to a written genealogy as a material object that can serve as evidence in the court of law.

These local and genealogical ways of demarcating who is Kazakh are intertwined with national and state ways of identifying who is Kazakh. How they are conceived at each scale allows one to legitimize or confront the other, as both the nation and the genealogies Kazakhs draw upon often refer to the Kazakh homeland as the point of reference for who counts as Kazakh—or not. The state often draws on genealogies of ancestors to territorialize the territory of the nation, which is in turn the territory of the state. In this way, state directed national building uses the *shezhire* and ancestors to claim territory and identification of the Kazakh nation with the current state. In fact, it is the genealogical conception of the Kazakh nation and history and sacralization of particular ancestors as generalized national Kazakh saints and heroes that underpins many claims to political legitimacy by President Nazarbayev and Kazakhstan as a nation-state. On the

other hand, this move also has the potential to undercut and cuts across these statist conceptions of belonging. Kazakhstani historian, Irina Erofeeva (2007: 155) called this an "unceremonious attempt at 'ethnic privatization' of the common historic-cultural heritage of all Turkic- speaking people of Eurasia."

While Mongolian Kazakhs have lived outside of the Kazakh nation-state's territory, and their relatively recent history and ancestry also places them outside of the state territory, their genealogies cross state boundaries. In Mongolia. Kerei Kazakh stands as the identification of Mongolian Kazakhs. Also, Islam separates them from their Mongolian neighbors. In Kazakhstan, their claims focus on being Kazakh - their claim being one of blood and genealogy, they are the children of Alash. In the following sections, I consider how such claims are made and interpreted.

Shezhire: "the genealogical tree of the Kazakh nation"

When editors of Svoboda Slova argue that "Kazakhs have no history," they do not claim that Kazakhs have no ways of narrating or remembering the past. It is rather that they do not consider Kazakh shezhire - its narrative forms, its sources of authority, and modes of transmission - to be "real history." It is something distinct from history as a science of events, something that does not allow history as science of events, rather shezhire allows to "feel" the past personally.

The Kazakh word shezhire is usually translated as "genealogy," but, depending on the context, could mean "history" or "chronicle," as in the title of Zardykhan Kinayatuly's book about the history of Kazakhs in Mongolia (1995), Zhylaghan Zhyldar Shezhiresi (Chronicle of the Crying Years). Shezhire is derived from the Arabic word meaning 'tree' (shajara) and the image of a tree with its root and branches has been the idiom of

genealogical reckoning for Kazakhs, including biological and spiritual notions of descent, reproduction, and transmission (see DeWeese 1999).



Figure 12: Baghylatuly Zarykkhan, Ulgii, Mongolia, August 2009.
Zarykhan-agma is displaying his book: "*Sherushi Suindiktin tor shezhiresi*".

In the narrowest sense, one's personal *shezhire* could be synonymous with *zheti ata*, literally "seven forefathers": the knowledge and ability to recite the names of the seven generations of one's patrilineal ancestors. The ability to recite *zheti ata* is a cultural ideal, a true mark of Kazakhness. As I described in the introduction to the dissertation, *Zhetisiz* for Kazakhs is synonymous with "orphan"

How does this understanding of Kazakh ancestry and belonging affect return migrants? According to Kazakhstani law and its practical understanding by government officials, receiving the official '*oralman*' (returnee) status depends on being ethnically Kazakh. When state-issued identity documents, like passports or birth certificates, are missing, do not include information about ethnicity, or are suspected of being fake, reciting one's *zheti ata* may provide the necessary final proof. Several migration officials I interviewed voiced to me their suspicions of people from China or Uzbekistan who claim to be Kazakh, but could in fact be Uyghurs or Uzbeks trying to pass in order to receive the benefits and expedited citizenship reserved for Kazakh returnees. In such cases, the officials demanded additional proof, such as the old "red" (Soviet) passports, considered more trustworthy and harder to fake than the post-Soviet documents issued by the newly independent states.⁴⁶ Kazakhstani media echoes and amplifies these suspicions by frequent articles about "fake oralman." For example in an article titled "Migration mimicry" (*Migratsionnaya mimikriia*), the author discussed the problem of fake Kazakhs in the context of trying to obtain the benefits of Kazakh repatriation.

The other day, one of Almaty TV channels announced that in Kazakhstan there has been an increase in ... fake Kazakhs (*lzhekazakhov*). Apparently, some persons, mostly from Xinjiang-Yughur region of China, pretending to be Kazakhs, migrate to Kazakhstan, where they take advantage of all the benefits and privileges of oralman.

Here ideas of fake and authentic *oralman* are made explicit and sourced as critical sites for identifying the legitimacy of claims to Kazakhstan. Also, it is the potential for

⁴⁶ See Lemon 1998 for discussion of material qualities and surfaces and their connection to notions of "authenticity" of objects and people in Russia.

fake Kazakhs that required institutional bureaucracies to monitor the authenticity of such claims and the bestowal of Kazakh rights and privileges. If the documents or the people themselves looked suspicious, they were often sent to the World Association of Kazakhs (WAK) to certify their authenticity.⁴⁷ The person who most often dealt with oralman requests on an everyday basis was Botagoz-apa, the executive assistant to the director, who has been with WAK since its beginning. Botagoz-apa is herself an oralman from Mongolia and moved to Kazakhstan from Ulaanbaatar in 1992, during the early wave of migration.

She described to me how, even when the official documents seemed to be unambiguous, officials rather trusted the verification of kin, personal knowledge and genealogies.

Many people have it stated in their passports that they are Kazakh. But, they, our migration [police], don't look at that. They still accept them through us. Generally, we know our own very well. Well, the majority of Kazakhs know each other. Even if one came from China, some way we figure it out. If we have any doubts, then we can ask a few people, they will provide proof. If they know [him], we already know him too.

She continued:

But for the majority of people, you can already see they are Kazakh just by looking at the face, it is already clear by their appearance [*vneshnii vid*]. Well...there are some similarities with Uzbeks and with Yughurs. Nevertheless, we Kazakhs have *zheti ata*. We would ask that too. It is possible to find out about them. We have never made a mistake in this. We have been working for fifteen years already and have never received any

⁴⁷ WAK is a quasi-NGO, nominally headed by President Nazarbayev. Although, officially responsible for maintaining cultural ties with Kazakh diaspora abroad, the organization also helps returnees in Kazakhstan. They provide oralman with legal advice, translate and certify documents written in non-Cyrillic scripts (for those from Iran, Afghanistan, and China), and sometimes provide proof of Kazakh ethnicity.

complaints. 'You wrote Kazakh for another nationality,' this never happens. That means we know this process very well and can give confirmation.

It is easy to point out that Botagoz-apa cannot know if they have ever made a mistake, because those people would be unlikely to confess and, especially among Uzbeks/Karakalpak and mixed families, distinctions between ethnic groups are not so clear cut. However, her certainty lays in a trust in something other than official state identification and certification of nationality. Kin relations, membership in the community, and genealogical knowledge are what determine membership. The arbiters of membership are things that unlike pieces of paper and stamps cannot be faked, a triumph of oral transmission over written knowledge.

When state issued identity documents fail to authenticate one's membership in the national community, Kazakhs turn to genealogy as proof of what makes them Kazakh, as it also serves to separate from other neighboring people with similar cultures, languages and appearance but who have distinct genealogies, which are not part of the Kazakh *shezhire*. Many Kazakhs in Kazakhstan claim that Naiman and Kerei lineages, to which the majority of Altai Kazakhs belong, are actually turkified Mongols, which constituted a part of Chingiz Khans armies and were left behind with their subsequent retreat. Here genealogically based notions of descent and ancestry are part and parcel of ethnic identification and membership and neither can be examined separately (see also Edgar 2004; Shryock 1995, 1997). For Shaprashty locals in the Almaty region, the often heard assertion that they never ran away from their homeland but stayed and protected their ancestral land from enemy invasions, serves as a claim to ancestral names, places, and

histories that are also articulated as an integral part of Kazakh national history, unity and territory. As I discuss later in the chapter, Shaprashty Kazakhs in the Almaty region narrate their histories and their ancestry in ways that assert their belonging in this particular place, as it also makes them part of a unified Kazakh nation.

Many argue that to know one's *zheti ata* is a responsibility of every Kazakh and that Soviet repression of genealogical knowledge and practice caused the loss of an essential framework for Kazakh identification and belonging. However, in pre-Soviet time as well, knowledge of one's *zheti ata* seemed to be more of a cultural ideal than fact for the vast majority of Kazakhs who belonged to the *kara suiq* ("black bone") commoners' class (see Valikhanov 1904, Bacon 1958, Krader 1963). Even less common was the knowledge of other genealogies that involved people outside of one's immediate *aul* and lineage. Such knowledge of *shezhire* seems to have been a prerogative of experts – *aqyn* and *zhyrau* (poets and epic singers), whose intricate knowledge of genealogies and the relationships among different regions, lineages, and political dynasties was part of their craft and an important source of authority. Over the last two hundred years, this enormous collection of what became the corpus of Kazakh "oral folklore," including recitations of *zheti ata*, genealogical narratives, epics, songs, and poems, has been meticulously collected, written down, organized into kinship charts, and analyzed as an important source of ethnographic knowledge about people without written histories.⁴⁸ Russian and Soviet orientalist tradition of ethnography and history, including its Kazakh practitioners, relied on Kazakh oral sources and illiterate Kazakh informants. In the second part of the 19th century, a generation of Kazakh elites, incorporated into Russian

⁴⁸ For an overview of Russian and Soviet orientalist scholarship and the role of indigenous scholars, see Hirsch 2005, Znamenski 1995, Kemper and Conerman 2011, Campbell 2011.

Imperial aristocracy and educated in Russian schools and universities in Kazan and Saint Petersburg, actively participated in the creation of a new Kazakh historiography and ethnography. Like other scholars at the time, they were influenced by Russian historians and orientalists, Herder's theory of the *Volksgeist*, and Morgan's study of kinship.⁴⁹

Shoqan Valikhanov, the most famous Kazakh scholar who continues to be the authoritative source on Kazakh history, kinship, and oral art, exemplifies the influence of contemporary Orientalist tradition in his writings. Born Muhammad Qanafiya in 1835, Shoqan (nick-name which he always used and signed with) belonged to the cream of Kazakh *aq suik* (white bone) aristocracy: Chingizzid, direct descendant of Chingiz Khan, great-grandson of the last Kazakh Khan Abylai and son of Sultan. At the time, his native Kokshetau area was part of Russian Siberian governorship and all Sultans and Khans were appointed by the Russian Tsar. Chokan first studied at *mekteb*, where he learned Arabic, Persian, and Chagatai. His father recognized the value of cooperating with Russians, was on good terms with the colonial government, and sent his son to the Imperial military cadet academy in Omsk and later to the Imperial capital. Well educated, smart, witty, and charming as described by his contemporaries, Valikhanov shined at the capital and had close friendships with many Russians, most notably Dostoyevsky. However, he soon returned to the steppe as colonial officer and administrator, but also as heir to his fathers' properties, offices and responsibilities as Kazakh Chingizzid. He traveled extensively through Kashgar, Kulja, Zhetisu, and Issyk Kul and wrote travel accounts that remain the source of the most detailed information on the region. He devoted his life to writing about Kazakh history, language, and culture. Considered the

⁴⁹ For the importance of Morgan's work in Russian and later Soviet ethnography, see Znamenski 1995.

father of Kazakh historiography and ethnography, his writings and opinions influenced generations of Imperial and Soviet scholars and continue to be authoritative. Valikhanov read works in history and ethnography in Russian, English, and German and shared the views of the scholars at the time.

Truly, it is difficult to determine the origins of the people like the Kyrgyz [Kazakh], nomadic people, who do not have writing and, therefore, no monuments of the past. I do not deny that a subject such as the history and origin of nomadic peoples, which does not present any evidence or facts, can lead only to various obscure conjectures that prove nothing. Nevertheless, studying carefully the ethnography of the people, we may open, if not the truth, then at least a weak reflection of it, in some measure ripping apart the dense layer of darkness of the unknown. If the poetic legends of Homer and stories collected by Herodotus through rumors have any historical merit whatsoever, if any distorted, fabulous story has at its foundation an event and a truth, then there is no doubt that positive and coherent stories of the Kyrgyz, their way of life, traditions, and contemporary manners, which reflect the lifeway of their ancestors and upon comparison are concordant with historical records, may have historical significance.

For Valikhanov, the wealth of Kazakh history lay in their oral art of poetry in many forms: historical epics, lyrical poems, songs, didactic verses, philosophical reflections and religious meditations, virtuosic contests of poetic improvisation, memorized and passed down for generations. Other Kazakh scholars after him also focused on these as important historical sources. In colonial hierarchy, lacking writing, this was their claim to civilization and culture. As Valikhanov wrote: "Out of all the Tatar [Turkic] people, as concerning poetic abilities, the Kyrgyz [Kazakhs] take possibly the first place. The same could be said about them, as our respected Orientalist Senkovskiy noted about the Arabs: bedouin is an artist by nature and in essence a poet" (ibid.).

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, pastoral lifestyle among Kazakhs declined, becoming increasingly threatened by expropriation of nomads' land and Russian settlement. Kazakh intellectuals turned to language and history to support their newly developing notions of Kazakhs as a unified nation. The same period (1880s-1920s) was marked with the first compilations of the Unified Kazakh Shezhire, genealogically based historic accounts of all Kazakh tribes and lineages (Yessenova 2004; Erofeeva 2000). Kazakhstani historians, Yessenova (2004) and Kendirbaeva (1999) argue that as pastoral lifestyle declined and was threatened at the end of the 19th-century, Kazakh intellectuals looked to history and language as defining Kazakh identity. Three known versions of Unified Shezhire were compiled and published by Zhusyp Kopei-Uly (1873), Shakharam Kudaiberdy-Uly (1911), and Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev (1925). Each of the three Shezhire versions was a genealogical account of the Kazakh lineages, starting with the genealogical founder of all Kazakhs, the legendary Alash. They also included accounts of significant historical events, such as the Jungar wars in the 18th century, descriptions of prominent Kazakhs of the past, and biographies of distinguished citizens of the time when the Shezhire were written (Yessenova *ibid.*). Kendirbaeva (1999) argues:

Transformed into the unified written account, Shezhyre was, perhaps, the most effective way of demonstrating the cultural unity of territorially dispersed and politically disjoined pastoral communities and of building the grounds for nationalist claims... 'We are children of Alash ...' was the idiom through which Kazakhs increasingly made sense of their group identity. (29)

The Unified Shezhire allowed these Kazakh reformers to at once imagine the whole Kazakh nation and their specific place in it in relation to others. Its importance for

the conception of Kazakhs as a nation continued to influence subsequent generations of Soviet Kazakh scholars and writers who integrated the unified *shezhire* into scholarly analysis of Kazakh history and into Kazakh-Soviet literature as an indicator of cultural integrity of Kazakhs in the past (Kudaibergenova 2013).

As Yessenova (2000) describes, versions of unified Shezhire that were published by Shakarim Kudaiberdy-Uly and Mukhamedzhan Tynyshpaev in the 19th and early twentieth century became bestsellers in Almaty in 1990 when they were republished for the first time since the 1920's. They came out in both Kazakh and Russian languages and not long after that, multiple Shezhire charts of individual lineages drawn from these versions became available in bookstores and newspaper kiosks throughout Kazakhstan. "The Shezhyre, in one version or the other, quickly became a 'coffee table' book and a poster in the houses of many Kazakh urban families" (ibid: 672).

Turn of the century notions of nation, rediscovered in 1980-90's, form the basis of Kazakhs as members of a nation that perceives itself through genealogies. Many Kazakhs, including those who do not know their genealogies, scholars, and ordinary people turn to these books, as well other forms of genealogical reckoning, as authoritative sources on their history and their own place in the Kazakh genealogical tree. Rediscovered and reimagined again, these genealogies unite a Kazakh national community and its identification with the state.

Turkic petroglyphs and Kazakh ethnoarchaeology in Mongolia

I first saw Omirbek on TV, when Meiram-agma and Bijan-apa, my hosts in Ulgii, were watching the evening news on a Mongolian language channel from Ulaanbatar. This was the only television program they watched in Mongolian. Like other Kazakhs in

Bayan Ulgii, they watched mostly Kazakh language channels from Kazakhstan and China and the nights were usually devoted to Turkish soap operas, dubbed in Kazakh and subtitled in Russian, broadcast from Kazakhstan. As Meiram-agma was about to switch the channels, he exclaimed "Look, it's Omirbek on the news." He was a young man of about 30, dressed in sky blue shapan (long Kazakh overcoat), which was decorated with unusual symbols, embroidered in silver thread. I noticed that the decorations seemed unusual, not the familiar patterns of Kerei Kazakh decoration motifs. Meiram-agma explained that he was wearing his "Turkic shapan" and the pictures were depictions of Turkic petroglyphs found in Western Mongolia. Omirbek was an archaeologist who studied Turkic petroglyphs in Bayan Ulgii and the short news segment featuring him discussed publication of a photo album of Western Mongolian "rock art." It was a large coffee sized book with glossy colored photographs of petroglyphs and stone monuments (baba), displaying the same symbols and motifs that adorned Omirzhan's Turkic shapan.

A week later, when Omirbek returned from Ulaanbaator, my research assistant Zoya and I visited him in his house on the outskirts of Ulgii, where the town gradually dissolved into overgrazed pastures. Omirbek talked passionately about his work on Bronze Age Turkic rock art found in Bayan Ulgii and scattered all over Western Mongolia. These include dramatic stone babas, large structures that might be ritual complexes, small rock carvings, and petroglyphs, scattered on the sides of rock outcrops around Ulgii.



Figure 13: Petroglyphs near Ulgii. Photograph by the author.

Omirbek told me he was an ethnoarchaeologist (and when I said 'archaeologist' later, he corrected me) and saw his work as discovering Kazakh ancestral past in Mongolia. After showing me the photo album published in Ulaanbaatar, he modestly explained that his own scholarship is nothing compared to his late father's, Magauiya Sultaniyaulu, an ethnographer who devoted his whole life to the study of Kerei Kazakh culture, customs, and traditions. He hauled out a battered suitcase held together with ropes and when he opened it, it was filled with books, print outs of articles, Xeroxed copies of newspaper and magazine articles in Kazakh and Mongolian. Carefully taking the books out of the suitcase and spreading them out on the floor, Omirbek said that his

father published 26 books about Mongolian Kazakh culture and he solemnly offered me one of the books as a gift. Most of the books in the suitcase were slim paperbacks printed in Ulaanbaatar and Bayan Ulgi on rough grayish paper that bled the ink through and carried titles about Kerei Kazakh customs and traditions (*salt-destur*). Several of them were about eagle hunting, as Omirbek said, his father's life passion and the most noble of all Kazakh traditions. Inside, the books were filled with short descriptions of various "Kazakh customs," long lists of names and genealogies of Kerei Kazakhs, and many pages of epic-style poetry.

The book that Omirbek presented to me as a gift, presented on the front cover a photograph of eight men on horseback, each holding an eagle in the right hand. Dramatic formation of rock outcrops is in the back, towering over the line of men. The first two pages of the book have several dedications and epigraphs. First, on the left, is a quote attributed to the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev: "Our ancestry is Turkic, our religion is Islam and we must never forget that." Next to it, on the right side of the passage is a long excerpt from the famous *Kudat Bilig* (the mirror of the princes) book by Zhusyp Balasagun, an 11th century Uyghur poet from the city of Balasaghun, the capital of the Karakhanid Empire in modern day Kyrgyzstan.

The juxtaposition of the two quotes is interesting: in anachronistic territorial logic of post-Soviet ethnonational claims, Zhusyp Balasagyn is "Kyrgyz." The likeness of him is on a 100 som Kyrgyz bank note, just like the famous Al-Farabi, possibly born on the territory of modern Kazakhstan, adorns the Kazakh *tenge*. However, the author, scholar of Turkic culture and history, must have known that Kutadgu Bilig is considered one of the earliest known examples of Turko-Islamic literature (Levi and Sela 2010), fitting into

the Turkic-Islamic heritage highlighted by the Nazarbayev quote. The next page has a quote attributed to Chokhan Valikhanov: "Kerei are the strongest of the Kazakh *ru*." And beneath it is a dedication by the author: "To our Kerei forefathers and our Abaq mothers, we bow!" (*taghzym* - to bow with respect to elders). Among the Kerei Kazakh customs described in the book, besides description of eagle hunting and Kazakh traditions commonly discussed in other ethnographic accounts (feasts, celebrations, rites of passage), Sultanayatulý also lists reading Namaz, smoking, and drinking vodka.

Many archaeologists and other scholars of Turkic history in Mongolia, argue that the stone monuments and petroglyphs found around Bayan Ulgii have no direct connection to the current Kazakh population that lives there. As I mention above, most consider Kazakhs to be recent arrivals in Mongolia and their connection to the Turkic artifacts as historically tenuous as that of any other Turkic peoples, from China to Anatolia. However, as Omirbek's dedication to his ethnoarchaeological research testifies, such constructions of historical links among imagined ancestors, current populations, and the land they continue to occupy, provide strong claims for Kazakh belonging in Mongolia and counter-pose the homeland conceptions of Kazakhs in Mongolia to those in Kazakhstan (Diener 2009:197). However, as the epigraphs framing his father's book testify, Mongolian Kazakhs also see themselves as connected to larger Turkic and Islamic heritage and to Kazakhstan.

In Kazakh homes, both in Kazakhstan and Mongolia, photos of ancestors are hung in the most sacred place: high up near the ceiling, on the central wall of the house or the yurt. They are always hung at *tore*, the head place, opposite the entrance, where the master of the house sleeps and where the most honored guests are seated. They are often

displayed next to Islamic wall hangings, like depictions of Kabbha and embroidered wall hangings of Shahada and other verses from the Koran.



Figure 14: Photographs of family ancestors in a winter house. Bayan Ulgii. Photograph by the author.

While I was in Ulgii, making photographs was the main way I was able to repay the hospitality of many households I visited out on the *jailau* (summer pastures). Developing photographs is expensive in Ulgii and for many people getting to town from the outlying summer pastures is also expensive and difficult. One of the biggest sources of income for the Ulgii photo studio (besides wedding photographs) was restoration of old photographs of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, which people treasured and displayed. Several people gave me such old photographs and asked me to take them to the studio for them.



Figure 15: Restored photograph, late 1940s.

As I examined the original old photographs, I realized that all the family photos taken outside had the backdrop of Altai Mountains behind them. The ones that were shot indoors, in a photo studio, had a painted backdrop, also featuring the mountains, blue sky, and green grass, like the photograph above. When people had the photographs digitally restored at the studio, they commonly requested to add color to black and white photographs and also to add naturalistic backgrounds in the photographs that lacked them. For example, the studio would routinely photoshop a background of snow-capped mountains, green grass, and yurts into a portrait of a couple seated indoors. These photographs were not so much "restored" as they were "altered" and "enhanced" through digital technologies, then, framed and displayed on the wall. The ways in which these

photographs are altered and displayed, brings the sacrality of landscape, ancestors, and Islam together, as significant dimensions of Mongolian Kazakh identification and belonging.

Digital shezhire and "molecular genealogy"

At the end of the 20th century, a new medium for the creation and circulation of Unified Shezhire, such as computer software and the World Wide Web, bring thousands of people together to compile their genealogies on the internet. One of the most popular online portals for Kazakh genealogies is the website titled Shezhire: Genealogy of Kazakhs (*Shezhire. Genealogiya Kazahov*) at domain name elim.kz.

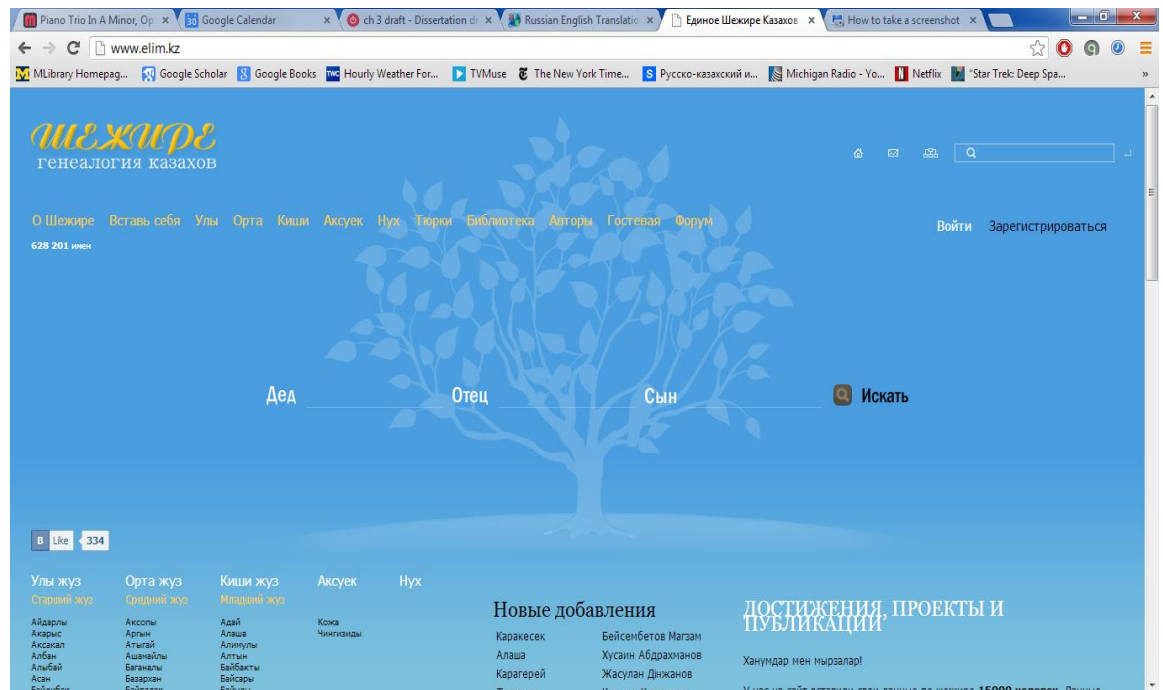


Figure 16: Screen shot of homepage. Accessed 7.30.13

The website was started in 2000, as a way to put online the genealogy of one specific Kazakh lineage, the Naiman. The story of the website's original creator, Oleg

Khalidullin, echoes many similar stories of Kazakhs who have become interested in their zheti ata and shezhire in the 1980s and '90s. In his recollections, published on the website, Khalidullin describes how a personal interest in family history became a "patriotic project of the whole Kazakh people" :

Twenty years ago, Sangispayev Nabish Halidullovich, my uncle, my father's older brother, entrusted me to systematize the numerous writings of relatives, which he has been collecting all of his life, regularly visiting the elders (*aksakaly*) of Semipalatinsk district. These were fragments of shezhire of the Nayman clan, represented in a form of ordered lists of names, or in a form of charts with many rectangles with names. I began to get interested and to collect different booklets and books that had Naimans in them. Especially many entries appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

By the year 2000, when my uncle died, quiet many books were collected, which turned out to have a great deal of material about many other clans. At the memorial feast, I promised to create for my uncle an unusual kind of monument. It was to create a site, shezhire of all Kazakhs. In this way, an insignificant goal, of a private, family nature, transformed into a product of a social-patriotic plan of the whole Kazakh people. The site, Unified Shezhire, was created.

Currently, the site claims about 15000 active users, who have contributed almost 800,000 individual names to the compilation of Unified Shezhire. It has grown beyond its initial virtual creation into a live forum and an online library of books and articles about Kazakh history and genealogy in Kazakh and Russian languages. Lively forum discussions receive over 1000 hits a day and include topics such as DNA analysis, Turkic history, detailed accounts of specific lineages, and many personal enquiries about finding relatives. The Unified Kazakh Shezhire (*Edinnoe Shezhire Kazahov*) consists of genealogical tables and lists of names for each of the known Kazakh *ru* (currently 164), although these vary widely in the amount of information and names provided. These

charts are available for download in Microsoft Excel format and are also distributed as printed booklets, widely available for sale at newspaper stands and bookstores around Almaty.

In the early 20th century, publication of Unified Shezhire helped the Kazakh reformers to articulate their ideas of national consolidation and historical continuity by transforming disparate tribal genealogies into a unified and permanent historical record. Now, digital technologies open up new ways to engage with the Unified Shezhire by allowing those who can access the website to change and update the genealogical charts. All visitors to the website are encouraged to contribute their own names, dates, and stories:

Using modern informational technologies, we can extend an ancient tradition for centuries into the distant future. So that our as yet nonexistent descendants could open their page on the internet and see us in photos, find out what we were like. That is why we need to fill in the tables not only with lists of names, but also biographies and descriptions of ourselves and our fathers, mothers, our children. To show our life, our time.

The website offers instructions on how to read the tables in Excel format and to upload one's own information. However, it also instructs the contributors on what are to be considered authoritative and authentic sources on Kazakh genealogies. "The authentic basis" of Unified Shezhire," states the website's creator, is Mukhamedjan Tynyshpayev's 1925 edition: "To Tynyshpayev's version we only add, but we do not correct anything that is being published or offered in the manuscript."

All the historical literature and social science literature, such as textbooks of history, literature, historical works, everything that has been published from the moment the Russian colonial policy was born until the gaining of

sovereignty after the collapse of the soviet system, all these ideologically manufactured means of mass influence, demand a fundamental revision and possibly a total refusal of reception. Only primary sources, which might have been preserved in private archives, or records made before "the voluntary joining of Kazakhstan to the Russian Empire," can be entered into the appropriate chronological space of the given table. Comparison and painstaking analysis of such data can provide new views on the history of the Kazakh people.

Here genealogical charts are expanded and authoritative sources are established; they put forward "a total refusal of reception" of Soviet sources of Kazakh history. Instead they move to a reexamination of Kazakh history that turns to what are understood as its authentic roots - oral transmissions of genealogical records through "elders". The site provides an alternative means of envisioning the Kazakh nation. Not in terms of the state territory, instead this is a vision of the Kazakh nation as a genealogical tree, branching out of its roots - Alash.

Oral and written sources support each other and draw on different sources of authority. On the one hand the words of ancestors and their mode of transmission, which attest to their "authenticity." On the other hand written words in the form of published books, genealogical charts, as well as academic and popular works of history and even fiction become part of narrating history. Along with the written word other forms of material proof such as archaeological finds and more currently DNA are drawn upon to constitute the genealogical tree of the Kazakh nation. People draw on these sources in ways that reinforce their claims and construct new texts. As Shryock argues, "In a war of (spoken) words, textuality is a new source of power." (Shryock 1997:110)

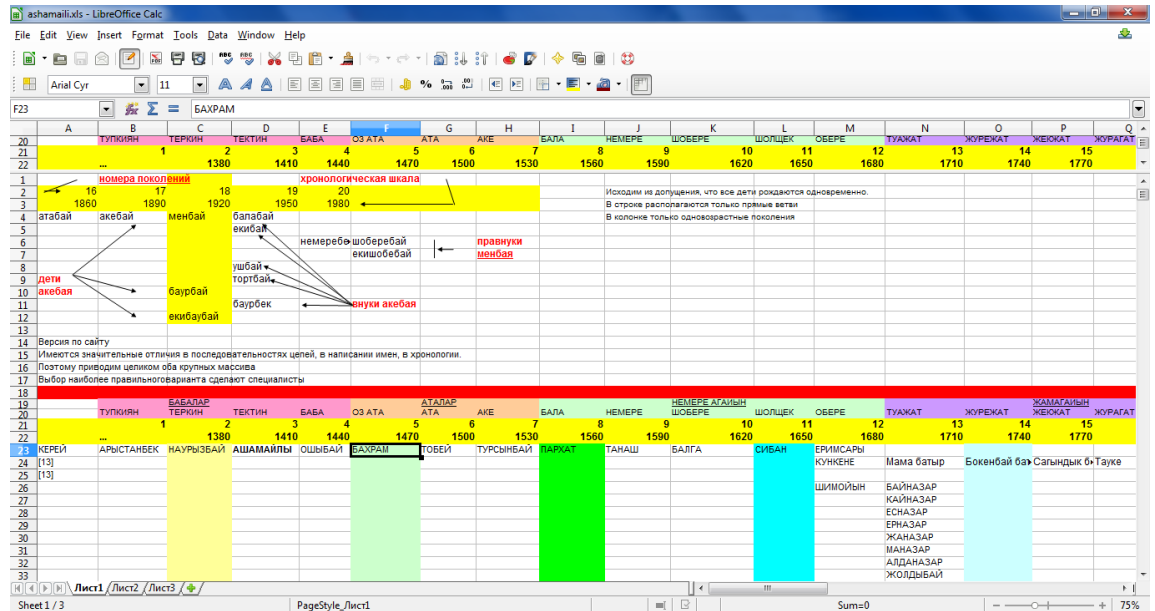


Figure 17: Genealogical table.

In addition to oral and written accounts, those who wish to discover their genealogical roots can now turn to genetic analysis, which promises to uncover the genealogies coded literally in one's DNA. This is advertised on the United Shezhire website as "molecular genealogy" (*molekulyarnaya genealogiya*), offering DNA test kits, claimed to be able to provide information about one's genealogical lineage.

Now any Kazakh that wishes can receive a scientific confirmation of his belonging to one or another clan [*rod*]. Scientists have proved that sets of 'X' and 'Y' chromosomes remain constant from generation to generation. Currently, descendants of only 4 clans have been identified: naiman, kerei, isti, and tama. However, the results of these DNA studies should not be considered final.

This "DNA Project" is advertised on the website by USA company Family Tree DNA ("History Unearthed Daily") which offer customers various "test kits" to test Y-DNA and MtDNA, ranging between \$50 and upwards of \$500 for "Comprehensive Genome package" (see www.familytreedna.com).

The signature and stamp of a state official may grant authority and legitimation to a locally produced genealogy. At the same time, such genealogically understood forms of community may undermine territorial claims, statist historical narratives, and, as DeWeese (1999: 528) argues, "borders between pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet projections of communal history and their political implications."

Karasai and Jambul districts: 'Land of poets and warriors'

I cannot talk about the place where I conducted most of my fieldwork in 2008-09 without mentioning that it is the birthplace of President Nazarbayev, strongly identified with his family and his Shaprashty *ru*. The birthplace (Kaz. *tughan zher*) of the Shaprashty is considered to be the Karasai and Jambul districts, south of Almaty, in the foothills of the Alatau Mountains. I have often taken one of the many minibuses and shared taxis that ferried people and goods between the city and the neighboring district centers, villages, and settlements that supplied much of the city's food, inexpensive goods, and its cheapest labor. Buses and taxis left from the edge of the city, on the main highway going south, first passing the former dacha suburbs and small collective farms that have been gradually swallowed up by the expansion of the city and the influx of migrants from further away. In 2006-2007, the narrow streets of these growing neighborhoods were packed with delivery trucks, cement mixers, and piled up building materials, as construction was booming, the bubble soon to burst in the global recession of 2008.

Next, the packed minibuses stopped at the large wholesale market, "*Altyn Orda*" (The Golden Horde), selling everything from children's toys and home appliances to livestock. Many Mongolian Kazakhs worked there, selling homemade furniture, felt

products, and other "traditional" crafts, the specialty of Mongolian-Kazakh women. Finally, as the bus left the traffic and bustle of the city and the market, it followed the road south, abutted on both sides by stretches of land strewn with garbage and overgrown with weeds and tangled trees. When traveling with local friends, they repeatedly told me that the land used to belong to collective farms and twenty years ago was covered by fields and fruit orchards. The bus drivers called out stops along the road, evoking the past that simultaneously pointed out the current absences: "the canning factory" (*konservnaya fabrika*), now defunct; "the fruit-berry collective farm" (*plodoyagodnoe*), now the village of Zhandosov, inhabited mostly by oralman; and finally, before reaching the town of Kaskelen, simply "the stop" (*ostanovka*), marked by a broken bench and a few remains of a bus shelter sticking out of the ground. As the bus entered Kaskelen, the administrative center of Karasai district, the road opened onto a hill, topped by a monument of Nauryzbai Batyr, the most celebrated Shaprashty ancestral hero, seated on a horse and overlooking the entire town, framed by the spectacular Zailiskii Alatau mountains.



Figure 18: Monument of Karasai Batyr. Photograph by the author.

The entrance to Kaskelen followed along a seemingly endless stretch of open car lots, packed with used and new Japanese, Korean, American, and European models. "This is Barys, the biggest automobile market in Central Asia," I was told every time we passed the bazaar. Another fact my friends liked to mention upon passing the autobazaar, was that it belonged to Bolat Nazarbayev, the President's younger brother. Bolat Nazarbayev himself lives in Shamalghan, "the Presidential aul," as Shaprashty locals proudly call it, on a street named after his mother. On the main square near the renovated House of Culture and the district government (*akimat*) building, is a monument of Karasai Batyr, also seated on a rearing horse, distinguishable from the Nauryzbai Batyr's statue only by its plaque. In fact, when they bothered to notice or comment on the monuments at all, the locals often confused the two batyrs.

Other monuments and memorials to Shaprashty lineage dot the landscape of Shaprashty land. As one leaves Kaskelen and crosses into the neighboring Jambul district, a large sign, decorated with two shields and a huge *dombra*, proudly proclaims: "land of poets and warriors" (*akyndar men batyrlar eli*). The town of Uzynaghash, the district center, also features a Karasai monument as well as a statue of the poet Jambul, holding a *qobyz* and gazing into the distance.

As Bruce Grant (2001) describes for state sponsored monument project in Moscow "To view monuments such as these simply for their "artlessness" misses the very artful ways by which these state-sponsored public works manage to assert themselves as outside the political realm, at the same time as they create it." State nation-building rhetoric appropriates these ancestors as generalized Kazakh ancestors. Gullette

(2010) describes very similar processes of ancestral veneration as part of state-building in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

In Kyrgyzstan, I suggest that discussion about genealogies has achieved such wide recognition not only because it contributes to people's understanding of relatedness, but also because it complements the government's nation-building project, which has created a genealogy of ancestors through the commemoration of historical figures who were regarded as contributing to the development of the Kyrgyz state (particularly in 2003 during the 'Year of Kyrgyz Statehood') and through the erection of statues of these figures throughout the country. The manipulation of history that ultimately informs memory and the way people understand their patrilineal ancestors is profoundly political.

The Presidential theme in Kaskelen continued with the regional history museum (*istoriko-kraevedcheskij muzej*), usually called the President's museum, or, depending on how much sarcasm one chose to put in the reference, "The First Museum of the First President of Kazakhstan." As the director of the museum explained, after carefully copying the information on my business card, my passport, and my Kazakhstani visa, and then personally taking me on the tour of the rooms, it opened in 1999 with an exposition dedicated to President Nazarbayev. The rest of the museum housed various exhibits associated with the President: photographs of him greeting various foreign luminaries, photographs of his parents and family, and numerous gifts presented to the president by foreign state officials, such as commemorative medals, engraved pens, and even a tea set. Prominently displayed on the central wall of the main exhibit room, framed behind glass, is a large print of Shaprashty shezhire, culminating with the name of Nursultan Nazarbayev himself. Similar copies of the shezhire are displayed in many offices of local government officials.

At the time of my visit, the director of the regional history museum acknowledged that she did not know much about local history and sent me to Usenbai-ata, who studied and collected materials about local history for many decades. He knows anything there is to know about Kaskelen history, she assured me, and then phoned ahead to make sure I did not miss the meeting. Usenbai-ata, a man in his seventies, lived alone (unusual for an elderly Kazakh man), in a small apartment in a 5-story Soviet-era building. He served me tea in a kitchen, lit up at the sight of my recorder, and quickly got down to what was clearly his passion: talking about local history. As my recorded conversation with him was over two hours long, I am only presenting certain excerpts. Usenbai-ata begins the conversation:

Is the recording going?

[pause]

Now, scientists have found historical documents from all around the world and have established that the history of Kazakhs, of Kazakh people, is more than four thousand years old. More than four thousand years old. This is documented. Now, anthropological research and archeological research also support these documents.

Right after he checks that the recorder is on, Usenbai-ata begins with the claim that Kazakh history is 4000 years old, which is about 3400 years older than the date accepted by most academic historians, who usually date the beginning of Kazakh people no earlier than the establishment of the Kazakh Kaghanate in the 1450's. This is the date that the word "Kazakh" begins to appear in the written sources. Usenbai-ata's claim is precisely the kind of argument about "the dizzying depth" of Kazakh history that was mocked in the newspaper article discussed above and is frequently scorned by "expert"

(meaning academically trained and institutionally affiliated) historians in Kazakhstan. At the same time, Usenbai-ata relies on similar kinds of authoritative "documentary" sources to support his argument ("this is all documented"): written documents, anthropological and archaeological data, such as human remains and artifacts, such as ancient coins excavated in Almaty.

In a similar way, Kazakhs in Mongolia, most of whom belong to Kerei and Naiman *ru*, bring up "The Secret History of the Mongols" and runic and Turkic stone inscriptions to claim their belonging in Mongolia, along with reciting shezhire, place names, songs, stories, and poems, considered to be the usual sources of Kazakh "oral historical traditions." Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolia have also been almost universally literate (many in more than one language) and have all gone through the same compulsory public education system since at least the 1940's. Kazakh students in both countries used the same textbooks, imported to Mongolia from the Soviet Union and their teachers trained in many of the same places. More recently, Kazakhstan has been spreading its particular narrative of Kazakh history through television, radio, and print media in Bayan Ulgii. Much of what people in Kazakhstan and Mongolia know and tell of their history has been learned in classrooms, read in popular history books and historical works of literature, and portrayed on film. It is in these contexts that, like Usenbai-ata, they also learned to privilege specific kinds of sources and methodologies: as *Svoboda Slova* editorial put it, "history as the science of events" and material (permanent) objects that can be dated and claimed as evidence: written text, rock marks, human remains, coins, and other artifacts.

Usenbai-ata followed his more general historical introduction with the longest, most richly detailed part of his narrative, describing the 18th century Jungar wars and the Kazakh resistance against them. As he focuses on famous Shaprashty ancestors, he also weaves in the theme of territorial and national unity of all Kazakhs tribes.

...But one very interesting side of this question is this: from Uralsk to Altai, meaning from west to east, and from Omsk to Almaty, or even to the Issyk Kul [lake], (Issyk Kul used to be Kazakhstani land, the Kyrgyz moved there later as the Kyrgyz were given this place by the Kazakhs.) And, so all of this place, even though they [the Kazakhs] were migrating, they preserved this territory, because they gathered armies. As soon as they needed to fight against an enemy, they always became united. And the last battle took place in 1780. This was Abylai Khan who went against the Jungars and the Jungars were thrown out of here, across these Jungar mountains. They also won because, while the Jungars were involved in capturing our territory, their lands were captured by the Chinese. So when they came back, they had no land, no homes, no cities left at all. And so the Jungar state disappeared completely. There is no Jungar state at all anymore.

In her analysis of Kazakh historiography, Yerofeeva (2007) argues that, from the end of the 17th century, the long struggle between the three Kazakh zhuzes (tribal confederations) and Jungaria "has become one of the main themes of Kazakh popular folklore (historic and genealogical legends, songs, poems, sayings and proverbs), and later, of Kazakh national written literature (fiction, dramaturgy, popular history, academic and popular science publications), as well as visual art, cinema, and theater" (138). These are also the events recounted in the song *Elim-ai*, which the *apa* from China sang to us in *Duman*.

Usenbai-ata recounted the stories of famous Shaprashty batyrs and their battles with the Jungar enemy in vivid detail.

And Jungars, when they captured this place, they permitted themselves to be complacent, careless. They were, we could say, like the Hitler's occupiers; "We captured everything, the land is ours, the people are ours, everything is ours." But, meanwhile, the Kazakhs are gathering in the steppes, far away in the steppes, and preparing their armies. First, Nauryzbai killed Kaskelen here in hand to hand combat [Kaz. zhelpe-zhek, form of wrestling]. In the book of Kazybek Bek, it is written that Nauryzbai pierced him. Kaskelen had a hole, right here, in his stomach. And Nauryzbai found this hole and stuck his spear through it, and raised him on his spear, because he was a strong man. His height was two meters and he had great strength. And he threw him down, stone dead. So then, Khooren cried: "Botamai Botamai" ["Oh my baby camel" affectionate, meaning my child or my my baby], meaning my son. Then, the Kazakhs berated him. "What were you thinking when he marched against the Kazakhs? You should have said something then. What are you crying for now?" And so that is how Kaskelen was killed by Nauryzbai.

Stories of Kazakh batyrs, like that of Nauryzbai, narrated by Usenbai-ata, including the narrative scenes of hand-to-hand combat and their words in the field of battle, are deeply embedded in Kazakh oral histories, poetry, and genealogies. Since the late 18th century, these were also compiled, written down, analyzed, and turned into works of national Kazakh literature and art. They are also part of national history in textbooks and popular non-fiction works of history aimed at non-academic public (*publitsistika*).

Attention to sources and narrative themes that Usenabai-ata weaves into his narrative shows how histories of specific lineages connect with nationally framed historical narratives and ancestors of specific tribes and lineages become articulated as generalized Kazakh ancestors. Later in the conversation, he tells the story of the three

Kazakh judges (*bii*) who united the disparate Kazakh tribes in the face of the Jungar enemy.

...And at that time, Kazakhs gathered together and many migrated away east and many migrated over the mountains and many perished. And this is called, how is this called... Alkakol Sulama...Aq...how to say this.

[Me: "bedstviya" (Rus. Troubles)]

Yes, troubles... terrible troubles. But Kazakhs saw this and the Kazakh *biis*, Tole Bii, Aiteke bii, Kazbek bii, the three *biis* of the 3 clans (*rodov*) - the Eldest zhuz, the Middle zhuz and the Youngest zhuz; these *biis* pressured their khans to unite. ToleBii, he took a straw and gave it to one person: "Break it!" He took it and broke it. Then, he took a whole handful of straws: "Now try and break them." He cannot break them. "So," he says, "now, if we go one by one, we will be killed. If we unite, we will not be conquered." And that is why they united: here Nauryzbai Batyr, there Kabanbai Batyr, over there Bogenbai Batyr, the three heroes gathered all the armies. This one 10,000, that one 10,000, that one 10,000 more, and basically they gathered 100,000.

The story of Tole Bii and his handful of twigs, and the 3 *biis* (judges) that brought the Kazakh Khans together in time of war, are also well known axiomatic stories, retold again and again in Kazakh poems, songs, and novels of Soviet Kazakh writers. Themes of division and unity among Kazakhs are reoccurring thematic and political tropes and these stories are often referenced on the pages of Kazakh newspapers. When talking about Kazakh history or commenting on current political situation in Kazakhstan, people often cited a saying attributed to Tole Bii, concerning Kazakh historical division into three distinct *zhuz*.

Uly Zhuz [eldest Zhuz] - give them a [shepherd] staff and let them raise livestock.

Orta Zhuz [Middle Zhuz] - give them a pen and let them be judges.

Kishi Zhuz [Youngest Zhuz] - give them a spear and let them fight enemies.

As Yessenova (2005:671) argues: "defining the talents of Kazakhs from different *zhuzes*, this idiomatic expression neatly supplements the genealogical construct of the Kazakh ethnicity." It is used to illustrate differences among Kazakhs, sometimes explained by historical and geographic circumstances: Kazakhs of Orta Zhuz are the most educated and are inclined to scholarly and intellectual pursuits, because they were the first to come in contact with the Russians. Kishi Zhuz, such as Adai, are warlike, stubborn, and aggressive, and Adai women have a particularly fierce reputation. This is because they lived near Turkmen tribes and had to fight a lot and protect other Kazakhs from Turkmen raids. Orta Zhuz, mostly associated with the fertile regions in the south and east, are described as always having been pastoralists.

The story of the three *bii* serves as a powerful metaphor for nation building, used by the Kazakhstani government, which erected a statue to them in the capital Astana (see Deiner 2002). However, for Kazakhs familiar with these idiomatic stories, their meaning could be also be interpreted in a way that criticizes the Nazarbayev family and what many perceive as privileged position of his Shaprashty *ru* in the country. So people would say that Shaprashty are from the Orta Zhuz, they have always been shepherds and, therefore, they should not be running the country. The Shaprashty, and by extension President Nazarbayev, are unfit to run the country, as the Shaprashty were never known to lead in affairs of state among Kazakhs.

Kazybek bek and the buried book

In his description of the Jungar wars, Usenbai ata mentioned a book by Kazybek bek, which he cited as an authoritative historical source. However, the story of the book's

existence itself, as well the histories described in it, are quite controversial. In 1993, a man brought a manuscript to the editorial office of Almaty newspaper *Zhalyn* (Kaz. Flame). Balghabek Kydyrbekuly was a journalist and writer, chief editor of *Sotsyalystyq* Kazakhstan and head of Kazakhstan Union of Writers in 1983-1989. He had a long and prolific writing career and published many articles, as well as fiction novels and short stories. This time, however, the book he brought to the publisher was not his own. Balghabek-aga presented the editor with a handwritten manuscript, which he claimed has been written by a 17th century Shaprashty Kazybek Bek, of whom Balghabek was a direct descendant. He explained that the original manuscript was written by Kazybek bek sometime in the 1730s and was entitled "*Tup-tukiyannan ozime shejin*" ("From distant ancestors to myself"). According to Balghabek, the book has been preserved by Kazybek's descendants by being copied by hand every forty or fifty years. According to him, in 1937, the manuscript was given to Uraz Jandosov, well known Kazakh activist, commissar of education (Rus. *narkom prosveschenniya*), and head of Almaty regional executive committee. However, Zhandosov, like many other members of Kazakh elite, did not survive the year in party purges. Balghabek's mother, who lived next to Zhandosov, saw their neighbor being arrested and "old books with Arabic writing" confiscated and burned in the yard. She became afraid, took the manuscript from the house and buried it in an empty field. Balghabek said that the book has been reburied several times after that, and only now he felt safe to bring it to light.

The book and especially the stories of how it was preserved by Kazybek Bek's Shaprashty descendants became a media sensation and created lively debate in the press that published excerpts from the books, discussions, interviews with historians and

philosophers and arguments pro and con whether the book was indeed authentic or a fake written by Balghabek himself. Scholars consulted on the subject, historians, linguists, archaeologists, and ethnographers, almost universally proclaimed the book a fake, given its contents, vocabulary, and its many anachronisms. Some have criticized the book for inventing genealogies and focusing exclusively on Shaprashty lineage and glorification of Shaprashty ancestors (see Masanov 2007).

Nevertheless, the book was published in hard cover edition of 300,000 copies, and was followed by many public festivities organized by members of Shaprashty lineage and local government. There was a feast in 1993, celebrating 350 years of Orbulaq Battle, when, as the author of the book describes, 600 Kazakh warriors defeated a Jungar army of 10,000. Later, in 2010, Shamalghan station, where Balghybek was born, was renamed Kazybek bek. In 2011, a memorial was opened there, featuring four seating figures of Shaprashty ancestors described in the book, Tausar-ata, Kazybek bek, Kaskary, and Moldabaj, surrounded by flowerbeds and asphalt paths. As I lived in Kaskelen and Jambul districts, considered the home of Shparashty, I also lived with and visited many local Shaprashty. The book was on the shelves of many local homes and, like Usenbai did in his interview, people quoted from and referenced the book as an authentic historical source and documentary evidence. It was compelling to them not only because it described their own Shaprashty history, but also because of the way it was written and preserved, passed down through generations as material evidence that could not be ignored. The book also represented an authoritative source through which moral judgments of contemporary forms of government and community can be evoked. As historians at the Academy of Sciences picked over the historical inaccuracies and

fantastical claims in the book, it is the prophecies of Maiky bii, a judge, poet, and sage, quoted in the book, that gained the most attention and discussion among locals and in popular media that disseminated the story outside of academic journals.

People will live in big houses. Every month there will be meetings around the land, from which people will see no use. Rule will change often. To you [sing.], Kazakh, there will be born envious people – your sons. And your daughters will be disobedient. And your daughters-in-law will not step out of the way for their elders. People will drink water which even dogs do not drink. However, the people will develop a liking for it. Medicines will be round like small buttons. There will be among you elders whose advice and admonitions noone will listen to. And you will have younger brothers who will argue against you. And your language will be motley, made of mixture of many languages. And your faith will be made of faiths of different gods. There will appear people who will suck blood from other people. And your kin will not help you in time of trouble. And husbands will live with their wives like cats with dogs. You will have worthless money made out of paper, which you will throw around and which will have no value. And when you will finally pass through all these trials of life, you will die.

As Keane (YEAR) argues, in this case the mode of transmission is more important than its content, highlighting the importance of the chains of authority involved. Nation-building rhetoric and political legitimation of the Kazakhstani state rests not only on the model of common territory, language, and culture ("modular nationalism"), but also on genealogies, the celebration of particular ancestors, the restoration and building of shrines, mausoleums, monuments, and memorials to generalized Kazakh ancestors.

I was reminded of the line from Kazybek bek' prophecy "Every months there will be meetings around the land, from which people will see no use" when in April 2007, my research assistant Zhake and I drove from Almaty to the town of Kaskelen to meet with

an official at the district land committee (*zemel'nij kommitet*)⁵⁰. As we drove past the large new administration (*akimat*) building, a renovated House of Culture, and, by then, our third monument of another Shaprashty batyr seated on a horse, Zhake noticed the colorful banners announcing the new "Presidential Address to the people of Kazakhstan" festooned on building walls and billboards around the main square. "They are probably having a meeting (*sobranie*) all day today. Probably for discussing this Presidential Address," Zhake waved his hand at the rows of parked cars and groups of men in suits smoking on the steps of the akimat. Then he sighed, "We are now like in Soviet times" ("*u nas teper kak v sovetskoe vremya*"). As it turned out, Zhake was right. The official we were looking for was not at her desk at the land committee, but in the meeting about the Presidential address, in the akimat building we just passed on the way.

Comparisons to "the Soviet time" came up again a few days later, in a conversation with Omirzhan-agma. I asked him why he wanted to drive his wife Nara to the district hospital in Kaskelen to see a doctor, when a brand new hospital building was right across the street from us. I just moved to Shamalghan and was impressed by the seeming prosperity of the "Presidential" village, compared with other places I've seen, like a large Friday mosque next to the mausoleum where Nazarbayev's parents were buried, two new schools, and a state-run kindergarten. In response, Omirzhan laughed out loud. That hospital, he said, was built about one year ago, when they first moved to Shamalghan. There was a grand opening, a *shynouik* (government official/bureaucrat, from Russia *chinovnik*) came, cut the blue ribbon, and people threw shashu⁵¹. As soon as

⁵⁰ Government department in charge of all local land transactions, such as sales, deeds, leases, legalization of land titles, and allocation of land plots to oralman and other newcomers who register as permanent residents in the district.

⁵¹ Kazakh custom of throwing candy and other sweets into the crowd of guests attending a celebration.

the official left, they just locked the building back up again and it's been closed ever since. It's just a fancy outside, with nothing inside, completely empty.

Besides, Omirzhan added, Nara wanted to see a specific doctor at the Kaskelen hospital, because the doctor's sister is married to a man from Germany, so they know each other. (Nara and Omirzhan lived in Germany for 10 years before moving to Kazakhstan and Nara really enjoyed speaking German when she got the chance.) It's useless to see another doctor anyway, Nara agreed with him. Although, theoretically, the state provides free health care for citizens and returnees, connections, acquaintances, or bribes are often necessary to insure decent care, to get necessary tests done quickly, or to obtain medicine. Like schoolteachers and other state employees, doctors and nurses routinely relied on payments and "gifts," in cash and kind, to supplement their miniscule state salaries (about \$90-120/month in 2007-2008 in rural areas).

This conversation led into Omirzhan's and many Mongolian Kazakhs' favorite topic of discussion with me: criticism of government inefficiency and corruption in Kazakhstan. "Everywhere here, things only get done when Nazarbayev says so. Whatever Nazarbayev says should be done, they do it. But if he doesn't say anything, then they don't do anything. The Kazakhs here have sultan destur...[he paused and offered an explanation] ... this means like in Russian "mentality" (mentalnost). Like these 'Presidential Addresses' every year. It's so funny, how the President just says something and people rush to do it. If he doesn't say anything, no one ever bothers doing anything about it. It's like in the Soviet time."

While Zhake has lived his whole life in Kazakhstan, Omirzhan and Nara were from Mongolia and only moved to Kazakhstan two years earlier. Yet they both noted the

similarities and continuities with Soviet time in current government institutions and forms of power. In interactions with the state, people interpret their experiences as familiar continuities (institutional, cultural, habitual behavior) through personal interactions with local state officials and the physical spaces of government buildings they occupy, bureaucratic practices, and their material artefacts (Hull 2003). Aretxaga (2003: 400) described the state as "a certain genre of representation" and such continuities are at once symbolic and material, like the monuments of national heroes and banners, and ubiquitous portraits of Nursultan Nazarbayev himself, who has been at the head of Kazakhstan's government since 1986.

The idea of "sultan dastur" or "khan mentality" is often brought up to explain people who by their history and mentality or "culture" are not ready for Western-style liberal democracy as in descriptions of "post-socialist" people who are stuck in the past, as apathetic passive populace, applied to everyone from Russia to Kazakhstan (see Liu 2003, Lemon 2009). These are not only stereotypes employed by outsiders. Within Kazakhstan itself, such criticism has long history, from famous Kazakh poets of the nineteenth century who blamed the passivity, selfishness, and tribal divisions of Kazakhs for their demise in the face of Russian colonialism to "zombified public" criticism of post-Soviet intellectuals (Abai 1995; Masanov 2007).

Nazarbayev himself has offered elaborations on this view in his description of Kazakhs as a "consensus-hierarchical society." In his "Strategy 'Kazakhstan 2030': The Strategy for Development" (a kind of Presidential state of the nation address), he stated:

We are a Eurasian country, possessing our own history and our own future. Therefore our model will not be similar to anyone else's. It will absorb into itself the achievements of different civilizations...Our strategic objective is the unity of numerous groups of the population, a reasonable

combination of personal and communal fundamentals, which supplements the consensus-hierarchical traditions of our society.

Nazarbayev further explained what he might mean by "consensus-hierarchical traditions" of Kazakh society in his interview on the Russian news program "News on Saturday." He was asked about the title *Elbasy*, commonly used for him in Kazakhstan, which literally means "head of the people" or, as it is rendered in Russian, "leader of the nation" (*lider natsii*).

We are an Eastern society. In Asia, there has been its own order and its own relationship toward a chief, a leader, an emir, a ruler. And there is nothing that can be done about it. Since the first days of independence and my presidency, I have been struggling with adorations addressed toward me. Attempts to name some street, some school where I studied, or something else, after me are constant. But, at the same time, one should not take offense. Sometimes, you see that it is being done very sincerely, from the heart. I know for sure that more than ten thousand letters were written to me and the parliament, in order to confirm such title, "Leader of the nation."

He continued by drawing on Kazakh cultural notions of tor and dastarkhan as symbols of traditional social hierarchies of age, gender, and status:

'El' means people and 'basy' means head. Kazakhs have 'dastarkhan'; it is a table covered with tablecloth in a yurt, and the most honored person is seated at the head of the table [*tor*]. So he is the one called "torbasy," from which the word 'elbasy' came from. The new for us Latin word "President" originally meant "the eldest at the table," the head of a gathering, whether big or small...For Kazakhs, the term "President" is not fitting to talk about the head of state."

As *Elbasy*, President Nazarbayev benefits from substantial legal protection. In May 2010, during the OSCE chairmanship, the parliament gave Nazarbayev the

constitutional title of Elbasy, and granted him unprecedented legal privileges. The law guarantees his lifelong immunity from prosecution for acts committed during the presidency and protection of his and his family's property; it also prohibits public insults against him and defacing his image (Kazakhstan: Waiting for Change 2013).

President Nazarbayev legitimizes his power by drawing his own continuities, not with the Soviet past, as Omirzhan and Zhake did, but with the "traditional" ancestral values of Kazakh "nomadic" society that serve as a cultural and moral ideal. However, I argue that his conflation of ideas about kinship and hospitality with political power is challenged by many people in Kazakhstan who perceive it rather as a mode of governmental corruption and legacy of Soviet times and not the sacred way of the Kazakh ancestors.

This came across in my conversation with one government official at a district akimat. He shared an office with another woman official in charge of oralman issues and, when he heard that I was studying return migration, he told me that he himself was an oralman. He moved to Kazakhstan from Uzbekistan (Karakalpakistan region) in the late 1980s and, although, strictly speaking, not officially an oralman, because the policy of repatriation did not then exist and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were the same country, he nevertheless identified with them. After meeting me, he talked to me outside the office and he urged me to write about the position of Shaprashty *ru* in his district. He said: "You should write about what I tell you. Maybe you can't talk about it too sharply, but, maybe, you can mention about it in your dissertation."

I was a head of professional union (*profsoyuz*) in Noukos, I know how to run things, but when they were going to appoint a new head of the financial department, they would not appoint me, because I am not Shaprashty, because I am an oralman. The head guy said no.

[Did he say that himself directly to you like that? I asked.]

No [he waived his hand.] The little people (*malenkie ludi*) told me that it is because I am not shaprashty. Instead, they put some young kid, 25 years old. Should it be done like that? I want to say, Nazarbayev is OK, he is an alright guy. He did a lot of good things. Among all the countries, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyziya, Ukraine, Belarus, Pribaltika, we live well. There is enough bread, we live ok. There are some people who struggle to get bread for their families, but in general we live alright. From Uzbekistan, from Kyrgyziya, people graze here [*pasutsya u nas*]. Because here it is better. Nazarbayev molodets, but he makes mistakes too. Bolat [his younger brother], Dariga [his daughter], they have so much money, they are millionaires. This is not right. And he knows about it too. If he told them: "Stop this. I forbid you," this would be right, but he doesn't do anything about it. If he was doing that, if anyone said anything bad about him, I would say, stop criticizing him. But this Bolat Nazarbayev. Who is he? A plumber [*slesar'*] with no education. But his word is the law in our district. Should things like that be allowed? Whatever he says, everybody runs to do it. Plumber, what does he understand about anything?! (*Slesar, razve on chto to ponimaet?*) But the shaprashty always get the green light.

Later I mentioned this conversation to a local Kazakh friend and mentioned the word "tribalism" (*traibalizm*) which I recently saw in a newspaper. He responded:

Yes, well strictly speaking the word tribalism is not applicable to Kazaks and our divisions into zhuzes. Strictly speaking what we have is not tribalism, like among the Arabs. But, this tribalism, if we can call it that, this "zhuzism" ("zhuzovstvo"), this began in Soviet time, during the time of Kunaev⁵². When [A] was the secretary of Almaty oblast committee, he was from the Elder Zhuz, and he only accepted people from his zhuz to work for him. People said that you could not get a job anywhere if you were from the other zhuzes. This was all unofficial, quite, people whispered about it. And those who were from other zhuzes did not like it. I, for example, I am from the Youngest zhuz, but I grew up among the Middle zhuz, in Kostanai region. Although I am from the Youngest zhuz, I grew up there. So, when I came to Almaty to work here, the director of the institute who hired me was also from the Youngest zhuz. And his wife was from the same town where I was from, so she was like a relative to us.

⁵² Kunaev was the longest lasting Kazakh Soviet leader as the Head of Kazakh SSR in 1942-1952 and 1964-1986.

And then there were people who wrote complaints about him, that he hired relatives, people from his zhuz. So, he said to me: 'If I hire you, they are going to say, he is hiring his wife's relatives.' So this "zhuzovstvo", "kumovstvo," it happened, but it wasn't common. And Nazarbayev, he inherited [*unasledoval*] all of this. He stayed in power, after Kunaev and Kolbin, and when he became president he had all of the people around him from Kaskelen, Shamalghan, like this guy E [someone we knew] and many others, all from the Eldest zhuz. And now, how is it called, "the team"[*kommanda*], right? When a new akim comes, he can fire all of the older akimat people and gather his own kommanda around him. They say, this is because he has to know people working for him, have people he can rely on. But I think this is wrong, this "kumovstvo." It is necessary to look not based on people's nationality or clan (rod), but their knowledge and what they can do, right?

This assertion that "zhuzovstvo" was a Soviet and not specifically Kazakh phenomenon was common and people connected it to nepotism as a Soviet phenomenon, not something intrinsic to Kazakhness (see also Schatz 2004). As Gullette (2010:97) also argues, as a local concept, 'tribalism' is "an allegation of corruption; it is not primarily an identification of kinship." As Shryock (1995) argues for Bedouin tribal histories in Jordan, "there can be no doubt that nationalist discourse is the medium in which the tribes are textually historicizing themselves." Nation-building rhetoric and political legitimization of Kazakhstani state rests not only on the model of common territory, language, and culture ("modular nationalism"), but also on genealogies, celebration of particular ancestors, restoration and building of shrines, mausoleums, monuments, and memorials to generalized Kazakh ancestors. At the same time, Shryock's argument that, in the Middle East, genealogical forms of thought and tribalism are two completely distinct concepts is also apt for describing the way people in Kazakhstan think about the relationship:

Authentic forms of human community, and certainly the most reliable forms of human knowledge, are reproduced genealogically, whether in biological pedigrees or intellectual chains of transmission. Arab identity itself is often defined, like family or clan affiliation, in an idiom of descent; most Arab states are ruled by family cliques or hereditary dynasts; even Islamic learning, which transcends the world of biological ties, has traditionally been depicted as an inheritance whose authenticity is safeguarded by the accurate, lineal, face-to face transmission of sacred Arabic utterances and authoritative texts: in other words, by legitimate "genealogical" succession. At the same time, however, the idea that tribes are (and should be) peripheral to the concerns of the high culture-to Law, Religion, and Government-has been the moral bias of urban intellectuals in the Middle East since ancient times.

Local government officials and return migrants

It is crucial to remember that local government officials who work with returnees are themselves local residents of the villages and districts where they work. They are a part of the local community, embedded in the dense social networks of kin, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Many of them have been involved in local government administration for many decades, often seamlessly transitioning from positions in village or district soviets to fulfilling the same or similar functions in the post-Soviet government administration now known as *akimat*. Thus, like all of us, they speak and act from multiple social positionings, as government officials, concerned citizens, and local residents who themselves have witnessed and participated in the tremendous changes of the post-Soviet decades. The government officials at the district *akimat* level are the ones most immediately involved in dealing with questions and issues that concern the returnees specifically. These include keeping information about returnee families, answering their questions, dealing with residency registrations and permits, and assisting with applications for financial help, housing, and citizenship. In the Almaty region, the officials that are responsible for "oralman affairs" are usually at the lowest level of the

bureaucratic hierarchy and they are invariably women, "volunteered" for these duties by the head of the district administration, the *akim*. They fulfill these responsibilities in addition to what is considered their "regular work" and they are not paid extra to do it. They are all part of the "culture, sports, and recreation department" of the *akimat*, still routinely referred to by everyone there as the "ideological department" (*ideologicheskij otdel*), as it was known in Soviet times. Thus, work with the returnees was officially seen as part of the government administration that involved general community outreach work, assistance to needy families, and cultural work of organizing district-wide events and celebrations. Many of these officials did not consider their work with returnees to be a priority in their often extremely busy schedules. In one district *akimat* in the spring of 2007, the official who I spent considerable time with, talking to her and observing her work, spent all of her time in dealing with the immediate problem of a highly controversial land dispute involving a community of Hare Krishnas and planning a large public Nauryz (New Year) celebration. In the fall, she was again busy with collecting and distributing clothes, toys, school supplies and food to needy families, as well as many other regular duties.

Government policies concerning repatriation and settlement are often ambiguous, vague, and sometimes contradictory. Thus, they leave considerable space for variable interpretations and implementations on the ground. Significantly, there are no clear, centrally established criteria for allocating quotas to the returnee families. Only those who are included in the annual repatriation quota are eligible to receive government assistance, such as money, land allocation, and housing. While the central government decides on the number of quotas allocated annually for each region, it is the regional

migration committees who receive the applications and decide who would get it and in what order. A government official at the regional Migration Department acknowledged to me that there are no established standard criteria by which the quotas were allocated. Some, she said, favored allocating quotas based on need, such as to families with many children, elderly, and disabled. Others, allocated quotas based on the level of education or specific occupations. As in the official conceptions and policies circulated by the central government, the tension between different understandings of repatriation directly affected their practical implementations.

Even before the applications went to the regional Migration Committee, the local *akimat* workers, although not themselves responsible for allocating quotas, played an important role in this process, weeding out the applicants and often deciding who should apply and who should not. As they were usually the ones that the returnees went to for information and help, I routinely observed government officials discourage certain people from applying, telling them that they were not eligible for or had no chance to receive the benefits. In some cases, a monetary bribe was a decisive factor in who got the assistance or was pushed toward the front of the line. In other cases, the officials explained that their decisions were based on the individuals' previous occupation, level of education, ethnicity of their spouses, or their perceived "moral character".

Far from using centrally established, objective, or universal criteria, the local officials rely on their own understanding and interpretation of the laws, constructing their own parameters of inclusion and exclusion, membership and belonging. In the course of their interactions with the returnees, the officials are creating and articulating social and

moral norms of personhood, general behavior, even gender roles, and family life. As one local government official explained to me:

We write nationality by the father. If the father is Kazakh, then the children are Kazakh. So, if her husband is Kazakh, this woman, she is giving birth to Kazakhs (*rozhaet Kazahov*). Then the children and the wife, they all get quota. If the wife is Kazakh, but the husband is for example Uzbek, she is giving birth to Uzbeks (*rozhaet Uzbekov*). Then she can receive oralman status, but the husband does not. When the children go to receive their passport [at age 16], they can decide what nationality they want to choose, the mother's or the father's. So, it goes by the husband.

Although Kazakhstan law states that returnee status is reserved for the "persons of the titular nationality", who exactly qualified as Kazakh is far from obvious or universally shared. The local officials evoked multiple criteria, including their personal understandings of kinship and ethnicity, based on their interpretations of shared Kazakh norms of genealogical descent, Soviet-based criteria of ethno-national membership, and central government directives. This involved not only interpretations of kin and ethnic belonging but also ideas of what constituted "normal" or "ideal" families and gender roles. Frequently, the unstated assumption is that "the head of the household" (an official designation) is a man, even when many households are in fact headed by women.

Labyrinths of institutions

In conversations with me, Mongolian Kazakhs often expressed their frustrations with Kazakhstani government bureaucracy and corruption. As Tamara stated: "In Mongolia, it was better, more democracy, but here they only talk about it. Here, it is 'Kaghazstan' not 'Kazakhstan' (literally "paperstan," as kaghaz means paper in Kazakh.)

Even the physical spaces of government office buildings are labyrinthine. One needs inside knowledge, reason and permission to be there to navigate the internal hierarchies successfully. Unlike in the US, where one might have to go through a metal detector to be able to enter the government building, at the Kaskelen district *akimat* one must pass the guard who asks each visitor where they are going and the reason for coming. The guard wears a uniform, he is a figure of authority, and he may bar one from entering, but he could also be asked for help, swayed to sympathize with one's situation, or might turn out to be a source of useful information.

Immediately inside the building is a waiting area with a few chairs out of which lead long narrow hallway with anonymous doors, all painted white and displaying only room numbers. In order to see a government official, one first has to know who specifically to see for issue or problem and then have to figure out where and when they might find that person. One could ask the guard, often having to explain the issues and problems, which is the path I took trying to figure out where to find anyone in charge of oralman migration and settlement. I unsuccessfully tried to figure it out from an office directory hanging at the entrance, which listed the office of the Presidential party Nur Otan and the state-published newspaper "Kazakhstanskaya Pravda" among a long list of names and titles but nothing about oralman, migration, or anyone who might have been helpful. The guard informed me that there is indeed an official specifically responsible for oralman issues, in room #3 and that she is a part of the *akimat* "ideological department." Once you know which official you need to see, you could try and catch the official by waiting around, catch them as they exit the office, in the building cafeteria, or on a way to the bathroom.

For most people, including oralman, the majority of their encounters with the state are with local officials on the very bottom of the bureaucratic pyramid. The structure of government institutions is highly structured and hierarchical, with villages, cities, districts, and regions having their own administration offices, and moving from one to the other is seen as moving up the professional ladder. Within each government administration office, whether local *akimat*, land bureau, or migration police, rank and spatial hierarchy are reinforced by an office with a door, leather furniture, and a large desk for the top government officials, like the head *akim* and his deputies. Akim's (almost always men) assistants (always women) would sit in the atrium outside the office, and so on down the hierarchy, with lower level officials stuck in small rooms, often shared with several others, with each official having no more than a small desk and file cabinet. Most people would never see the *akim* or even any of his deputies, except at public celebrations, where they sit on a podium and give speeches or have their own *dastarkhan* in a separate yurt.

Many of the difficulties that the migrants face are the result of their lack of knowledge of specific local nuances of social interactions, as well as the absence of personal contacts and networks of social reciprocity, which structure much of the way Kazakhstanis interact with their local government. As one returnee from China expressed his distress: "We are used to giving bribes to government officials. It is also common in China. But here, we know we have to give a bribe to get things done, but we are afraid. Because we don't know how much to give or who to give it to. We are scared: what if we give a wrong amount or give it to the wrong person and then we would get in trouble, so we are afraid to give money." Apparently, as I've also been told by many people, both

returnees and *akimat* workers, some officials make it easier by providing, literally, a standard pricelist for various services. In fact, most of the time, the migrants referred to such basically required payments as a "price", required for particular services or favors.

Not only were citizens/petitioners running around from one government office to another, collecting documents and acquiring signatures and stamps, often having to travel to different towns and even regions, but lower level officials were rarely in their offices. They spent much of their day going from office to office, delivering papers for signatures to various higher up officials, running various errand for the *akim*, or attending local meetings that were not deemed important enough for their superiors to attend, like local farmers asking for loans or return migrants trying to organize Russian literacy classes for women.

In 2007, because of problems with proliferation of different departments and jurisdictions, administrative changes began to be implemented on the local level by introducing TsON (Center for the Service of the Population) to be established in every district. These centers were described as "working by the principle of a "single window" (*odno okno*): one place where citizens and oralman can go to receive information, register, and receive necessary documents. The centers are run by Ministry of Justice rather than local *akimat* (another fragmentation through attempts to combat it) and they are discussed in terms of increased "modernization," transparency, and efficiency of government:

TsONs for the service of the population through the principle of "one window" is an institution where every citizen would be able to solve their legal problems in a civilized and efficient way. Great importance is given to the solution of social problems and blocking corruption. Service through the principle of "one window" is the main step against

bureaucracy and bribe taking through direct contact between clients and officials.

I witnessed how these changes were being implemented in Uzynaghash in the summer of 2008. One afternoon, Svetlana took me along in the *akimat* car, as she was rushing to get a stack of papers signed for the deputy *akim*. On the way there, she told me that we are going to the new TsON, where oralman can now take care of everything they need in one place, instead of running around from *akimat* to passport office to Migration Police in order to get their oralman registration, residency permit, or SIK number (similar to the US Social Security number).

This is "the principle of one window" she told me, repeating the phrase that was reiterated in government publications and circulated in the media. She added that the idea for such centers is based directly on the US practice. "Only, you'll see, it is not civilized yet," Svetlana warned me, laughing, as we pulled up to what looked like a school building with a courtyard surrounded by a fence. This is where the new Service Center, along with the Department of Justice and the Migration Police, was set up during the summer, while the school was closed. According to Svetlana, the directive to open the centers immediately came "from the very top," but none bothered to allocate any money that would be needed for such major administrative changes.

As we got out of the car and approached the school yard, we could see a thick crowd, almost all of them women, spilling outside the fence onto the sidewalk. There were no seats or benches, so most people just stood shoulder to shoulder in a thick crowd, looking grimly determined to not yield an inch, and a long line of women sat on the raised edge of the pavement surrounding the courtyard. Svetlana, a woman of formidable

physical proportions, fought her way through the crowd, one hand firmly gripping my arm, pulling me behind her, the other raised high above her head, clutching a folder of documents. The crowd got thicker and palpably angrier the closer we got to the entrance and the low background of murmurs turned to shouts- 'And who are you?' "Where do you think you are going?" By the door, the crowd was so thick, I got separated from Svetlana. When I got right to the door, I was ambushed by a tiny old woman, wrapped completely in shawls and scarves. "Where are you going?" she demanded shrilly from me in Kazakh, as her surprisingly strong yank on my purse sent me sprawling back into the crowd. "I am with her, with her" I answered desperately as I struggled to make my way back to Svetlana at the entrance. She herself got bogged down by the entrance by a harassed looking woman with a nametag pinned to her blouse, who held up a piece of paper and shouted names into the crowd. "And where are you going?" she also demanded. "I am from the akimat", Svetlana answered, retrieving me from the steps and pushing her way past the woman inside the building. "You only think about yourselves, you don't think about people at all. You should be ashamed!" the woman yelled into her back.

The principle of one window, while seemingly designed to make life easier for people and more efficient for administration, created huge crowds. Everybody who before waited in scattered lines at different government buildings, were now trying to get the same amount of bureaucratic paperwork processed in one place. As Ferguson describes what he calls "bureaucratic state power": The explanation of bureaucratic state power, then, does not necessarily mean that "the masses" can be centrally coordinated or ordered around any more efficiently; it only means that the power relations are referred

through state channels - most immediately, that more people must stand in line and await rubber stamps to get what they want. What is expanded is not the magnitude of the capabilities of "the state," but the extent and reach of a particular kind of exercise of power."

When I came back the following year, 2008, the new service center was functional and everyone hated them. Unlike the old offices, where visitors and officials were separated perhaps by a table, a literal wall of glass with a small opening now separated them. Employees of the center could not be caught in the hallways, walking to the bathroom, or going down to the *ashana* (the canteen) to eat.

Conclusion

In this chapter I show the interconnectedness of things that are often dichotomized and separated into different analytical scales: (1) oral folklore and genealogies versus written history and material artifacts, including human DNA; (2) clan versus local versus national and ethnic identities; (3) pre-Soviet and post-Soviet understandings of identity and belonging; (4) sedentary versus nomadic notions of place and group; (5) modern state and liberal society's understanding of traditional clan-based identities; dichotomies that seem to presuppose and split from each other in an infinity of analytical fractals. I analyze these concepts as a series of relationships, that may be somewhat determined by national and global factors, but also as malleable. These relationships may be reinterpreted in discourse and practice by people, literally on the ground, as they interact with these objects and institutions. Legitimation has to be continuously fought over and contested with different kinds of authorities and sources. These different sources of authority and legitimation could come together to produce the kind of verdict in the

lawsuit I discussed in the beginning of the chapter, where local genealogies, national politics and the authority of the state (symbolized by *akim*) came together. In other cases, tools of political legitimation and forms of authority can be questioned, turned against the state as kinship relationships, genealogies can be used to question the legitimacy of those in power. Continuities and differences, similarities and breaks with the past are experienced and articulated in varied contexts, in order to resort to traditional authority or "cultural mentality," or to comment on the present as in "we are now like in Soviet time." Like the Unified Shezhire, oral narratives, written documents, and genealogies enshrined in tables came together as a project of Kazakh new national identity and as a response to Russian colonial pressures, as an articulation of Kazakh national identity and history that has been "unearthed" (literally in case of the book) again in post-Soviet time and put on the internet. As these genealogies have changed their forms and purposes they have carried with them traces of their authority (Keane).

Ultimately, genealogies and histories are profoundly political, intertwining state power, territorial and national belonging along with local and intimate connections. The "imagined communities" that emerge and the narratives they draw upon include ancestors. In the next chapter, I examine how the notions of kinship and hospitality couched in these genealogies are not just idioms or metaphors for relationships to and within the nation, but also profoundly affect people's understanding of relatedness and belonging. Such understandings, in turn, affect people's notions of social hierarchy, political authority and power, democracy, and morality.

Chapter Five

Kazakhshylykh: ancestors, kinship, and hospitality

**What is to be considered a misfortune in life?
Grasslands with not enough space for pasture is a misfortune.**

**A kind word which we
had no time to say is a misfortune.**

**Elders who lost their kin
and the care of their relatives is a misfortune**

**A mother in-law who does not value her kin,
for a daughter in-law is a misfortune.**

**Valleys where no animals are pastured
and the grass dies in waste is a misfortune.**

**Murids who do not teach respect
for worthy people are a misfortune**

**A ruler who does not know how to lead his posterity,
his people, into prosperity,**

**However good he is otherwise,
for those he rules is a misfortune.**
(Asan Khaighy, or “Asan the Sorrowful”)

The excerpt above is attributed to the poet Asan Khaighy, or “Asan the Sorrowful,” who has been identified with the 15th century Hassan, a legendary poet-philosopher-saint figure. In this poem, Asan mentions various situations and circumstances that are “misfortunes”: not being good stewards of the grassland and

animals, not taking advantage of opportunities to display acts of kindness to others, not taking proper care of relatives after a death in the family, not valuing kinship ties, not showing respect to teachers and venerable elders, and not leading society to success. These misfortunes arise when something is “absent” or “lacking,” causing bad things to happen to the people. As I show in this chapter, several of the themes Asan considers in the poem are also echoed by people I spoke with in Kazakhstan in the present day, as they consider questions of moral behavior, good leadership, and just economic and political systems. In the previous chapter, I focused on the importance of genealogies and local histories for understanding politics in Kazakhstan and how it affects Mongolian Kazakh returnees. In this last chapter, I highlight some important conceptions of Kazakh culture that are significant for Kazakhs in Mongolia and in Kazakhstan. They converge on a particular understanding of *Kazakhshylykh* as a deeply meaningful quality of “Kazakhness.” Certainly there are important differences and sometimes heated debates within and among the different groups of Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolia about the right and responsibility to belong. Between these groups there are different conceptions of homeland, ancestry, and belonging. While Mongolian Kazakhs are creating connections among ancestry, landscape, and movement to highlight a specific and distinct identity encompassed within a larger Kazakh world, Kazakhs in Kazakhstan are using the same cultural tropes to illuminate a shared history, one generalized to all Kazakhs.

However, what also emerges are clear points of commonality in the fundamental terms of the debate, namely what “belonging” entails as a complex set of culturally embedded ideas and practices. A shared primary aspect of this worldview is a non-linear

conception of history, a worldview in which ancestors and contemporary populations are co-present and in which Kazakhs inhabit the land cyclically (as in the seasonal migration of nomadic herders). The acclamation of a Kazakh world is one way in which Kazakhs are actively seeking authority and meaning outside the nationalizing promises of the Kazakhstani state and the often contradictory and disappointing pragmatic consequences of those promises. In this chapter, I consider a possibility of an alternate view of history and community - an “imagined community” that is neither ethnicity nor nation. Rather, they are anchored in understandings of a “good life,” economic and spiritual prosperity, and a just system of governance.

First, I examine practices of ancestral veneration and the power of dreams to open lines of communications with other worlds and other than living beings. That the ancestors are alive is a fundamental tenet of Kazakh belief (see Privratsky 2000). Ancestral veneration, expressed in household rituals and frequent pilgrimages, is the focus of religious life and practice in Inner Asia and Kazakh practices of Islam can be described as a religion of ancestors and sacred places connected with them. Communal and religious identities are inextricably linked through ancestors and through practices of hospitality that encompass living and nonliving, as well as human and nonhuman entities (some Kazakh ancestors are also sacred animals). I also examine the significance of kinship and hospitality, which are seen as the defining characteristics of “Kazakhness” and as an essential part of Kazakh “nomadic heritage.” I argue that, more than serving simply as cultural idioms or political metaphors, ideas and practices of kinship and hospitality significantly shape the negotiations of political and cultural authority, legitimacy, and claims to belonging across political borders. In conclusion, I explore

these practices of kinship and hospitality in relation to notions of *iman* (morality), justice, authority, and leadership. Ultimately, I contend that conception of “just authority” based in these communal values challenge prevailing economic and political paradigms of socialism vs. capitalism and Western liberal democracy vs. “illiberal Islam.”

Ancestral veneration, nomadic hospitality, and open doors

My first encounter with the importance of *aruakh* (ancestral spirit; from Arabic '*arwah*') and the significance of dreams in communicating with the ancestral world happened only two weeks into my first trip to Kazakhstan in the summer 2004. On a Friday morning I was woken up by sounds of cooking and a strong smell of frying oil coming from the kitchen of my friend Zaire's tiny Soviet-era Almaty apartment. Zaire was a busy professional woman with a full time job and, in her own words, not particularly domestic, at least by Kazakh woman standards, and she would usually grab her meals on the fly. So I was surprised to see her hovering over the stove where a huge pot of cooking oil was filling up the kitchen with smoke.

As Zaire was dropping round pieces of dough into the oil for a few seconds, snatching the round thin *shelpek* (flat round bread deep fried in oil) and stacking them on a plate next to her, she told me that last night she has seen her deceased father in a dream. When she woke up, the image of her father still vivid in her mind, she realized that it was not a meaningless dream but an actual appearance of her father's *aruakh*: the night before Friday is when the dead are unbound from their graves and can visit their living descendants in dreams. Zaire was convinced that the appearance of the *aruakh*, dressed in all white and silent, was an admonition, to remind her of her failure to remember her father properly. This made Zaire feel very guilty and she immediately decided to fry the

shelpek. She explained that the smoke rising from the heated oil is to feed her father's aruakh and warned me against eating the seven shelpek stacked on a plate and covered with a cloth napkin, as these were supposed to be given away to neighbors.

Later that night, after she returned from work, Zaire knocked on the doors of three different apartments in her five-story Kruschev-era building and gave the shelpek to whoever happened to open the door, telling them that it was in her father's memory. She later mentioned to me that almost all of her neighbors were Russian and, except for an elderly Tatar lady who lived upstairs, she did not really know any of them, even though she lived in that building for almost a decade. That did not matter, Zaire explained, as it was the act of feeding the aruakh with the smell of the cooking oil and then sharing the bread with others that was important.

As Privratsky (2000) describes in his study of religious belief and practice in Southern Kazakhstan, through distributing the loaves among neighborhood families, “the commemoration of the family’s ancestors thus becomes a community event, even when they do not invite anyone into the home to share the meal with them” (132). In Zaire's case, the distribution of *zheti shelpek* (seven loaves) to her neighbors might not have formed any lasting bonds of community, as she continued to have minimal contact with them. However, as she argued, this was not as important as the acts of offering, receiving, and acknowledging the commemoration.

During my fieldwork, I came to recognize the act of frying *zheti shelpek*, also called *kudaii nan* ('sacred' or 'sacrificial' bread), as one of the most common household practices through which Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Mongolia reconnect with their ancestors and fulfil their obligations as Kazakhs and Muslims. It is more often women

who are the dreamers and who fry the bread and distribute it in the memory of the deceased, but men are visited by aruakh as well, and both men and women often evoke the power of the aruakh and their blessings in many aspects of their lives.

In Kazakh, the word *kudai* (from Pers. “holy”) and the adjective form *kudaii* invokes notions of “holy,” “sacred,” and “sacrificial” in a variety of contexts. *Kudai* is the word Kazakhs most commonly use to indicate God or Supreme Being in everyday conversations and in prayers and blessings (*bata*) invoked in Kazakh. For example, the term is used in a Kazakh version of the *shahada* (Muslim declaration of faith): “*kudai bir, kuran shyn, Muhammed paighambar ras*” - “God is one, Koran is the truth, Muhammad is the true prophet.” *Kudaii* is also used to designate a sacrifice of an animal at the mosque or a donation of money in lieu of charity (similar to Arabic *qurban*). While Kazakhs do not “sacrifice” to ancestors, both *kudaii nan* and these other kinds of “holy” sacrifices could be seen as forms of offering, connecting the realm of the divine and the ancestors with the world of the living, through acts of communal commemoration and distribution of bread, meat, or money.

Kudaii tamakh (literally “sacred meal”) is another ritual occurrence, which along with baking *kudaii nan*, visiting family graves, and pilgrimages to holy sites, is the most common (in a sense of most frequent and also most habitual) ways to be Kazakh and Muslim. Generally, as Privratsky explains, *kudaii tamaq* is “food associated with Islam and distributed to others in acts of hospitality” (ibid: 134-135). As with the distribution of the seven loaves, both the dedication of the ritual meal to the ancestors and sharing the food as part of communal event are necessary. In Kazakhstan and Mongolia, such relatively small *kudaii tamaq* gatherings, which usually included extended family,

perhaps some close friends and neighbors, and a local mullah (Kaz. *molda*), were the most frequent kinds of ritual meals I have attended.¹² Kudaii tamaq is always held for a specific purpose, to celebrate a happy occasion or to secure blessings for future endeavors. I have attended kudaii tamaq that were given to celebrate a job promotion of the head of the household, a successful return of a wife from a trip abroad, a son's acceptance to a university, and after a daughter survived a car crash uninjured. (On that occasion, the men of the family also attended mosque on the day of kudaii tamaq and sacrificed a sheep.) It is also common to hold kudaii tamaq when one is about to depart on a long or risky trip, leaving for military service, or start a new business venture. On such occasions, it is said that the ritual is held "to open a way" (*jol ashu*).

The language of "opening a way" or "opening a door" is also used when talking about interactions with ancestral spirits and Muslim saints. One has to open a door to communicate with *aruakh* and have their *khasiet* (spiritual power, divine grace) flow into the person. Dreams and visions provide such doorways into the ancestral world and allow ancestors and their living descendants to interact. Sacred places, such as a shrines, or graves of local saints, are also doorways into the spiritual ancestral world which allow for communication to happen and blessings to flow. Some people on pilgrimages spend the night at the shrine or sacred place in the hope of seeing a dream vision. Such "initiation dreams" are also common experiences among people who become healers (*emshi/bakhshi*) or those who begin to urge people to go on a spiritual path. The gift of healing, either spiritual or physical, or seeing the future, is bestowed by one's *aruakh*, and

¹² Although, this does vary quite widely, depending on the occasion, the status, and available resources of the family or kin group organizing the event.

is said to be passed along genealogical lines of descent (both male and female). Rejecting such a calling, seen as a gift and a responsibility given directly by one's aruakh, can lead to sickness and even death. The relationship between the ancestors and descendants is active and mutual: if the descendants offer respect, commemoration, and proper care, the aruakh reciprocate with flow of material and spiritual blessings (*bata*). The same kind of language of respect and reciprocal care is used for explaining proper conduct toward elders in the community: if proper respect and care is offered to the elders (who by virtue of their age are closer to aruakh and to the realm of the divine), their *bata* will benefit their kin and others around them.

The image of an "open door" is also central to the idea of hospitality as a core value of *kazakhshylykh* (Kazakhness). In Kazakhstan, references to hospitality are so widespread as to be ubiquitous, a national brand, closely connected to Kazakhs' unique nomadic past and the traditions of the ancestors (see also Shryock 2004). For Kazakhs, hospitality is the hallmark of their nomadic heritage and it is through the rhetoric, rituals, and practices of hospitality that *kazakhshylykh* is objectified and embodied (Michaels 2007). Kazakhs themselves clearly articulate the connections between ancestral veneration and hospitality, proper relations among kin and between hosts and guests. Drawing on the notion of the sacred, as in "kudaii nan" and "kudaii tamaq," Kazakhs also call an unexpected guest "*kudaii konakh*," or "sacred guest."

Besides kudaii tamaq, Kazakhs hold many other kinds of *toi* (feasts/celebrations), where meals are consumed, blessings are pronounced by the elders, and gifts are distributed from the host to the guests. One of the main reasons I was invited to so many *toi* and kudaii tamaq was because I was a guest from far away and this on many

occasions overrode my relatively low status as an unmarried and fairly young woman. I was often seated at an honored place, sometimes even above respected elders and male relatives, close to the *tore* which is the most honored seat at the head of the table, usually occupied by the eldest male or the head of the household (although when a mullah was present, he was always seated at the *tore*). As I was once told by a host, who seated me near the head of the table, the status of guests among Kazakhs depends on how far away they came from and, given that I was from America, no one else present was going to beat me on that score. Importantly, having such a guest brought honor and increased the status of the host and, if I was invited by another guest, of the people who brought me with them.

Describing similar practices of hosting and feasting in Uzbekistan, Rasanayagam (2010) states that “events like the ...toy [toi] take place within a mesh of mutual obligation and reciprocity wherein economic, affective, and kinship ties, the social and the sacred, cannot be untangled” (117). He argues that, in this context, sociality itself is a moral source (in Charles Taylor’s sense) and the social can be invested with significance of the sacred. At the same time, in examining notions of hospitality tied to food in Uzbekistan, Zanca (2007) shows how they can serve to highlight a kind of “us-not us” awareness, tied to notions of community self-awareness, morality, cultural notions of value, and religious piety. For example, I often heard from Kazakhs that Russians are cold and unfriendly, they lock their doors and live behind tall fences. Americans, as one Mongolian Kazakh acquaintance who lived in the US for a year put it, “are always looking at their watch and never have time for their friends.” Kazakhs say that Uzbeks

are cheap and stingy in feeding their guests and they pinch two fingers together to indicate the meagre amount of meat that Uzbeks put on top of their plov (palau).

Mongolian Kazakhs also often highlight the differences between them and the “Russified” Kazakhstani Kazakhs through describing the latter’s lack of hospitality. The image of the “open door” becomes a symbol of Kazakhness tied to the nomadic lifestyle of the ancestors, preserved by Kazakhs in Mongolia but lost in Kazakhstan. As Shankhar-
agha who returned to Bayan Ulgii after five years in Northern Kazakhstan described:

Kazakhs in Kazakhstan are *shala Orys-shala Kazakh* [half-Russian – half-Kazakh], they do not even speak their own language. There, when you come to visit people, you have to knock on a door. Here, you can see, our door is always open [points toward the open door of the yurt]. They have not kept their *salt-destur* [customs-traditions], they do not know how to serve tea properly. They don’t live in *kiiz ui* [yurt], no one knows how to make them anymore. They just put sticks together.

This highlights the “tension between hospitality as a kind of politics, and hospitality as a morality that transcends and governs the political” (Shryock: 524). It is the “scalar elasticity of hospitality” (ibid.) that allows it to be a powerful concept, moving between levels of “family”, “state” and transborder national community. The inherent hospitality of the Kazakh people is frequently cited as the reason for the harmonious interethnic relations in Kazakhstan, as it also serves to reiterate the position of all non-Kazakhs who live in Kazakhstan as “guests” and Kazakhs as “hosts.” The following passage, appearing in a third-grade history textbook highlights this “guest” and “host” relationship in the context of Kazakhstan’s Soviet history:

The earth of Kazakhstan has been copiously watered by the sweat, blood, and tears of forcibly deported peoples. People were brought to our country by sorrow, misery, and injustice. They were coming here most often by

force, suffering various deprivations: hunger, cold, humiliation. But not a single person who came to Kazakhstan as a special settler, a deportee, or an evacuee was left alone with his sorrow, because the Kazakh people are distinguished by exceptional hospitality and responsiveness both in sorrow and in happiness. Hospitality is an intrinsic and most prominent characteristic of the steppe dwellers. The Kazakhs strive to carry out the five basic precepts of the ancestors, one of which is to welcome a visitor as an emissary of god. This is confirmed by a saying: ‘One out of forty visitors is Khidr; one out of a thousand is [a] Wali.’¹³

For Mongolian Kazakhs, discourse of hospitality as a moral source can also be a potent form of critique of the Kazakhstani state and the failures of its repatriation policies. Thus, unlike many government officials and other locals, who often talk about quotas as an undeserved government handout, Mongolian Kazakhs see government assistance in terms of a practice of hospitality that affirms the bonds of kinship and maintains traditional relations of reciprocity among neighbors and kin. For example, pointing out the relatively small amount of money given through the government migration quota, Mongolian Kazakhs argued that the quotas were significant largely for “moral and psychological rather than material reasons, to show that Kazakhstan helps us.” One Mongolian Kazakh man explained that “our Kazakhs understand the quota as *erulik*. It means a meal or a feast organized in honor of the neighbors who arrived late to

¹³ Khidr is a mystical figure mentioned in the Quran who encounters and journeys with Prophet Moses. For Sufi Muslims in particular, Khidr is considered an “immortal guide possessing wisdom and powers beyond human understanding” (Bowker 1997: 545). There are numerous accounts of pious figures meeting Khidr in real life; as one 15th century Sufi Shaykh, Ubayd Allah al-Ahrar mentions, “I have learned that one must give respect to every person one meets: he may be Khidr. . .” (qtd. in Kabbani 2004: 234). Here, the term *wali* (plural, *awliya*) refers to a “friend of God” and is “the title of one particularly devoted to God” (Bowker 1997: 1032). The term is often translated into English as “saint.” Hence, Khidr and “friends of God” are figures that demand respect and hospitality.

the *jailau* (summer pasture). When everyone has already setup their yurts (*ui*) the people who get there late get *erulik*.”

Dreams, wolves, and ancestor spirits

In the spring of 2007, just a few weeks after I moved in with Omirzhan-
agha and Nara-apa’s family in Shamalghan, Nurlan, an old school friend from Mongolia
who was in Almaty on business, drove out to visit them and to spend the night. As the
children were sent away to finish their homework and prepare for bed, the men cracked
open a couple of bottles of beer, Nara and I drank tea, and the conversation soon turned
to comparisons between Mongolia and Kazakhstan. Nurlan, it turned out, was a great
Mongolian patriot. According to him, everything was better in Mongolia because, unlike
in Kazakhstan, there was real democracy in Mongolia. At one point, he addressed me
directly:

Here, in Kazakhstan there is no democracy. But in Mongolia we have
democracy. In twenty years, Mongolia, not America, will be the center of
democracy in the world. We have two million people and twenty eight
political parties, every party putting up their candidates, and there are
independent candidates too. Every old woman knows everything that goes
on, talks about politics. First, after communism fell, people voted
communists back into office. Then they didn’t like what they were doing,
so they voted them out and put in someone else. Then they didn’t like
what they were doing and voted them out and put communists in power
again, then voted them out again. Now people will vote for new young
people, they do not want old leaders anymore. And if they do not like the
government they all go out onto the main square in Ulaanbaatar and throw
eggs. Every old man and woman is out throwing eggs. Also people are on
the internet. Every person in the country is on the internet, reading the
news, expressing their opinions.

Nurlan explained that he grew up in Khovd province, where Kazakhs were only 25% of the population. So, unlike the Kazakhs in neighboring Bayan Ulgii, he grew up in the midst of Mongolian people, went to school with Mongolians, and considered Mongolian and Kazakh “our two languages.” Then he confided that he himself planned to run for parliament in the upcoming general elections: “There are 25,000 Kazakhs in Khovd, and every Kazakh has one good Mongolian friend, and he will tell his friend to vote for me too.” “What if that good Mongolian friend will persuade the Kazakh to vote for his Mongolian candidate instead?” - I asked. “No!” Nurlan was emphatic: “Kazakhs know their strength. They would never give their vote to anyone else. And when I get elected I will stop Kazakhs from moving to Kazakhstan. There is no reason for them to move. They should stay in Mongolia. I will stop this migration.” “And what about democracy? You were just talking about that,” I said. “How can you stop people from doing what they want?” He responded, “People elect me because they respect me. And I work for the people, so I do what is best for them.”

Then he continued (somewhat elliptically, I thought at the time): “We Kazakhs believe in aruakh. And that is why Kazakhs are strong and Kazakhstan has become an independent country, because we respect our aruakh.” About a year previously, he had a dream, in which a face of an elderly woman appeared to him, “like a grandmother” in a white *kimeshek* (traditional head covering of a married Kazakh woman). She just looked silently at him and then disappeared. As he woke up in a morning, he recalled his dream in vivid detail and knew that it was his “great-grandmother” that visited him. Throughout the telling of the story, Omirzhan seemed somewhat skeptical of his friend’s account, and, at the end, asked: “How do you know

this was your great-grandmother? Do you even know what she looked like?" In response, Nurlan simply shrugged: "Who else could it be?"

He turned to me again: "Kazakhs never say that a dream is a bad one," he told me, "all dreams are good." He then told another story, which at the time I heard for the first time, but later saw again in several different collections of Kazakh stories and folklore. The versions vary slightly, but there is one basic narrative. (As I was not recording at the time, I am recollecting from the fieldnotes I took later).

A recently married daughter misses her parents and decides to ride out to her parents' yurt for a visit. The mother is home and welcomes her gladly, while the father is out with the animals. As the night is getting closer, the young woman gets restless and decides to return home to her husband. "Stay for the night," begs her mother. "You can see your father tonight and go home in the morning. Don't leave now. It is getting dark and the wolves will be out on the steppe." But the daughter does not want to stay. Finally, the mother confides the real reason for her fears: last night, in a dream, she saw two wolf cubs nursing at her daughter's breasts. She is afraid the dream means that the daughter is going to be eaten by the wolves. The daughter laughs, promises to be careful, and rides off home before she can be stopped. At dusk, the father returns with the sheep. "Our daughter was here but she has already left," the mother tells him and shares her fear about the dream and the wolves. "You foolish woman! You should have never told her that!" exclaims the father, as he leaps on his horse and gallops after the daughter. But, alas! It is too late. Eaten by the wolves, all he finds are her remains. When he returns home, the father tells his wife: "You said the wrong thing and that is why the wolves ate her. The dream did not mean that she would be eaten. It meant that our daughter was pregnant. It was a lucky dream, a happy one, but you ruined it all!"

I was puzzled by the stories and the connections between them. What does democracy and independence have to do with ancestor spirits and dreams of wolves? These connections became clearer when I noticed ways in which moral judgments and values were elaborated through notions of kinship, hospitality, and ancestral veneration. I

saw how important it was for people to maintain connections and “to be present” for the communal rituals that brought together the living and the dead. It is both the living and the dead they left behind in Mongolia that call to them and help maintain the ties of transborder community. As Amira Mittermaier argues in her discussion of the power of dreams in Egypt,

the seeing, telling, interpreting, and enacting of dreams is an unfamiliar form of ethical-political engagement...The kinds of imagined communities that figure in my interlocutors' stories exceed the secular imagined community of the nation-state. They draw on a very different understanding of the imagination, and they enable much broader communities. It is through dreams that such larger communities become imaginable and inhabitable. (2011: 4-5).

Kazakhs with excellent job prospects abroad often returned to Bayan-Ulgii for reasons that were not related to their professional development but because they were expected to care for their parents in old age, because their parents had found suitable (local) marriage partners for them, and because they were expected and wanted to contribute to the social and economic lives of their relatives. It is incumbent on family members to be present at weddings. Additionally, being present and supportive is particularly important at funerals. If a close relative is absent at the time of a funeral, they must attempt to attend the 40th-day “wake,” and if that is not possible, then the one-year “memorial.” People belong to extensive networks of kin and are expected to contribute, not necessarily with money, but practically and morally, by being present.

Cash remittances do not comprise a significant portion of reciprocal exchanges between kin living in Mongolia and Kazakhstan (Werner and Barcus 2012). However, other forms of support operate within what Michaels describes as Kazakh “economy of

hospitality.” Those who now live in Kazakhstan continue to go back every summer for weddings, funerals, and commemorative feasts. They rely on their relatives in Mongolia to host them, provide them with housing (usually a yurt) to stay in, and slaughter sheep to welcome them. When I was in Bayan Ulgii in the summer of 2009, my Kazakh hosts and their friends frequently joked and grumbled about the many sheep they have to slaughter every summer for their relatives from Kazakhstan.

All the inside furnishings of *kiiz ui* (“felt house,” yurt) are made by women and are considered their property. These include carpets for the floor, wall hangings, decorations, beddings, pillows for sitting, blankets, and all other felt house furnishings. Knowledge of making these objects and traditional Kerei Kazakhs motifs used for their decoration are passed down in the family, through mothers and grandmothers. These are objects that are highly visible when visitors enter the *kiiz ui* and are considered an embodiment of a woman's craft, her virtues, and household skills. In Bayan Ulgii, most Kazakh women never buy or sell such familial objects as every woman is expected to know how to make them. There are some wall hangings and carpets now imported from Xinjiang made by Chinese Kazakhs. They can be occasionally seen in large *kiiz ui* intended for community events, like annual festivals, but I have never seen them in family *kiiz ui*, where people actually live. Several women mentioned to me that it would be a “shame” (*uiat*) for any woman to buy carpets and wall coverings, especially factory made ones, for her home. Sometimes carpets, wall hangings, or pillow covers circulate as gifts, but usually only among related women, such as daughters, sisters, or sisters-in-law. Thus such objects are highly valued within the economy of hospitality, but are being deliberately kept separate from market-type exchanges of commodities. However, over

the last twenty years, many women in Bayan Ulgii have begun to make these house objects for the tourist market, along with Kazakh-themed jewelry, purses, and accessories. These are made by women in two small cooperatives and sold at the shop in Ulgii. This is providing an additional, albeit small, income for rural women who otherwise have no sources of earning cash in a largely subsistence economy. Similarly, in Kazakhstan, such crafts constitute a large portion of family income for Mongolian Kazakh oralman. As one woman who sold carpets and blankets at the local bazaar told me: “Now, we count how much things cost by how many *korpe* (blankets) they are worth. Recently, I sold two korpe and we bought this satellite dish. So, we just say, ‘yes, that costs two korpe.’” Mongolian Kazakh women discovered that there is significant demand for such “traditionally authentic” handicrafts, as knowledge of making these items has been largely lost. Thus, while these objects are valued as family heirlooms in Mongolia, in Kazakhstan, on the other hand, they have become an ultimate commodity.

Iman, democracy, and patriotism

‘He who is without shame is also without faith.’ [Hadith]¹⁴ Similarly, our folk saying declares: He who has shame also has iman...Shame is an integral part of iman. ...Shame is a feeling of human dignity that compels a man to admit his guilt to himself and mete out his own punishment. ...The people I see around me nowadays are ashamed of nothing and incapable of blushing...Now, have such people iman or have they not? (Abai 171-73).

¹⁴ There is another hadith (found in the authoritative hadith collection known as *Sahih al-Bukhari*) in which the Prophet Muhammad said, “Faith (Belief) consists of more than sixty branches. And Haya [modesty] is a part of faith” (See: <http://sunnah.com/bukhari/2/2>).

The word *iman* in its original Arabic has multiple meanings: religious faith, belief, and religious conviction (the words *iman* and *mumin*, or believer, have the same root). In one hadith found in the collection *Sunan Ibn Majah*, *iman* is defined as: “Faith (*iman*) is knowledge in the heart, words on the tongue and action with the physical faculties (limbs of the body).” (See <http://sunnah.com/urn/1250650>). Kazakhs also use the term *iman* for the declaration of Muslim faith, or *shahada* (“There is no God but God and Muhammad is His Messenger.”) Therefore, the concept of *iman* encompasses belief and action, declaration of faith, conviction, righteous deeds, urging others to do good, and (as in Abai’s words above) shame, for oneself and others. As I discuss below, for Kazakhs, the term *iman* also refers to notions of morality, ethics, or moral behavior.

In the rest of the chapter, I discuss a conversation I recorded with Makhum-agma, a Mongolian Kazakh man in his early sixties. My research assistant Zhake was also present and I focus on the part of the interview when the two of them became involved in a discussion of morality, power, justice, and democracy. Like Nurlan who I quoted earlier in the chapter, Makhum-agma also connected notions of moral community, patriotism, and democracy to Kazakh values of care, respect, and responsibility that includes the living and the dead.

Makhum: For example, it is not permitted to eat the meat of pig.

Zhake : That came from the Arabs though! [emph]

M. : Alright, but why is it said that it is haram [forbidden]? Right now in religion? Like, for example, there are people of “easy” behavior [promiscuous]. And with “easy” behavior, there is a spiritual end. I don't even want to talk about that. For example, AIDS, different illnesses, are from promiscuous behavior, but God told us how to protect from that. But why is the pig talked about as an example? It is said that we cannot eat pig

meat, why is it so? Because a person who has eaten the meat of pig has no patriotic feelings. Why? A pig is the only one among all the animals that will stand silently by if one of them bothers another. Among people, and even among dogs, if one of them bites, the male protects his female. But the pig never does so. Alright, so the Creator himself said that people who eat that meat will not have patriotic feelings, there will be no patriotism among them. And the second problem is vodka [alcohol] problems. Vodka is the foundation of everything bad. I don't even want to talk about that.

Makhum-agma begins his conversation about morality with an example of a pig and explains that the reason this animal is considered *haram* (forbidden) to eat is because it does not take care of others; it has no “patriotic feelings.” Eating pork, along with drinking vodka, engaging in “promiscuous behavior,” and eating carrion are practices and substances that affect both physical and spiritual health. As he continues:

And, next, why can't we also eat the meat of dead animals? The meat of dead animals is a bacteriological weapon. All the different parasites that are in it grow in geometrical progression and become bacteriological weapons. So, the Creator sees it all and forbids it. This is so in Muslim religion, but other religions say differently. In Hindu religion, they burn their dead. And in Buddhism, there are five or six different ways to do it. For example in Mongolia and in China, there is a custom where they do such terrible things. After death, people cannot be buried. If their meat and bones are eaten by the dogs, then it is said that the person was good.

Zh: So, they just leave them out [lit.in the steppe]?

M: Yes, just leave them outside....

By talking about how we treat others, both dead and alive, he includes them as a part of a moral community of belonging, constituted through iman. He links these discussions of consuming alcohol and other haram substances with larger considerations of both personal morality and just governance:

M: Myself, I am just a simple Kazakh old man. But these Kazakhs now, their morality [iman] is rotten. Our ancestors were strong, but these new Kazakhs are rotten. They forget, that is said: do not kill, do not lie, do not be promiscuous, do not drink vodka. If you look, this is all done among Kazakhs, there is not one Russian among them.

And also, I want to say, there are people who are like jackals. Why is the government like this; why are citizens like this? Why are some people willing to kill their father for power, to kill their child? But some people, even when dying from hunger, will not take what is someone else's? It is from immorality [*imansyzdyk*, "absence of iman].

Zh: Yes, exactly, immorality like you said. The difference between people and animals is not in reason [*aqyl*], but

M: In iman.

Zh: Yes, you are right.

Here, Makhum-agma ties notions of personal immorality to ideas of corrupt governance:

"Why is the government like this; why are citizens like this?" Zhake returns to the discussion of just forms of power and authority at the end of their conversation:

Zh: Yes, there needs to be authority [*bilik*], but what kind should it be? Could our authority be called just (*adil*) authority?

M: They say that there has never been democracy among our Kazakh people. Our Kazakh people are democrats from birth; democracy is rooted among the people. Our ancestors have all been democrats. Among us, it is not allowed to steal from others, not allowed to hurt others. Because, from the beginning, good order has been kept among people. It is not labor that made humans human; human was made human by one thing – iman.

Although born in different countries, the two interlocutors in this conversation, Makhum-agma and Zhake, shared much in common: they belonged to the same age cohort (referred to as *kurdas* in Kazakh) and both had similar educational experience having gone to university in Soviet Russia. While there, both had lessons in Marxist

ideology and the “theory of Leninism,” which they laughed about together at the beginning of the interview. Makhum-agma said: “It did not matter if you were an engineer or whoever, you had to study it all, scientific this and that, scientific atheism.” “Yes, that was a pseudoscience,” Zhake interjected laughing. He continued on the theme of socialist ideology later in the conversation, switching at that moment to Russian:

Capitalism is the most perfect (*sovershennaya*) system of making wealth and money. When I worked at the sovkhov (collective farm), no one wanted to work; everyone stole and no one worked. But, when the sovkhov fell apart and the land was divided up and given to the people, then everyone worked hard on their own plot. So, capitalism is a very good system for making money, but not how to distribute it justly among people. And when there is no just distribution, this is what happens when we have people who are very rich and very poor. But in itself, socialism was a good idea. It was not a new socialist idea, it is very old, wanting a just society for everyone. It is only the incarnation (*voploschenie*) of this idea that was bad. But there are countries now that live by socialist idea. In Europe, like Denmark, they have implemented socialist ideas in their society and they live well.

Makhum-agma is an observant Muslim who prays five times a day, abstains from alcohol and attends prayers at the mosque. Zhake, from what I knew of him, was indifferent at best to explicitly religious worldview and practice. However, in this conversation, they seemed to find common ground in their understanding of iman, just society, and the organization of power.

The idea of human nature as malleable and improvable was at the center of Soviet attempts to create a socialist society. For Marx (via Fromm), a “productive life” involves the relationship between man and nature and man and man. As Soviet Marxism, studied by Makhum-agma and Zhake, proclaimed: “Man creates his own destiny.” Friedrich Engels states this defining role of labor in distinguishing humans from animals:

Labour is the source of all wealth, the political economists assert. And it really is the source – next to nature, which supplies it with the material that it converts into wealth. But it is even infinitely more than this. It is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself. In short, the animal merely uses its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction.

Zhake asserts that neither labor nor reason is what makes a person human.

Although, not religious, for him as for Makhum-agma, it is iman or morality. In his discussion of western views of Islam as “illiberal,” Faisal Devji contrasts Islamic-based morality with Kantian view that ethics begins with reason and is objectified through language. In this Kantian framework, liberalism and democracy become “fundamental categories of interest, representation, and contract, the whole legitimated and guaranteed by a nation-state.” (22) What Makhum-agma and Zhake mean when they talk about democracy seems to be something quite different from that. Describing Kazakhs ancestors as “democrats” he defines democracy as rather an ethical framework: “Among us, it is not allowed to steal from others, not allowed to hurt others. Because, from the beginning, good order has been kept among people.”

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, for Mongolian Kazakhs, notions of community and nation include ancestors and are predicated upon a reciprocal relationship between ancestors and their descendants. As I Nurlan-agma stated, “that is why Kazakhs are strong, and Kazakhstan has become an independent country, because we respect our aruakh.” The communal ties that stretch across the borders are maintained through practices of ancestral veneration, return visitations, and pilgrimages to sacred sites. These ties are also maintained through reciprocal relationships of hospitality among kin – a

hospitality that transgresses borders as it also reinforces practices of inclusion and exclusion.

In contrast to President Nazerbayev's assertion of Kazakh culture as supporting a form of authoritarian rule, the Kazakhs with whom I spoke describe their culture as intrinsically democratic, including their ancestors within that legacy of democracy. As Makhum-agja and Zhake discuss above, the Kazakh tradition of democracy is based on moral values of help, reciprocity and care among the dead and the living. Such a view of democracy presents an alternative framework for imagining a just and democratic society based on Islamic understandings of iman as both an internal faith as well as a social practice.

Conclusion

When I began my fieldwork in Kazakhstan in 2006, my initial research questions were guided by the kinds of discussions that were prominent in scholarly literature about Central Asia and post-Soviet states that I was familiar with at the time. Therefore, as I went to the field, I framed my questions about processes of Mongolian Kazakh migration in terms of notions of citizenship, state-relations, and nation building. After a few months in Kazakhstan, I began to realize that how I was asking these questions did not resonate in any meaningful way for individuals with whom I spoke. For the Mongolian Kazakhs I interacted with, ideas of homeland, place, belonging, and national community were articulated not in terms of political membership or territorial belonging, but rather in ways that spoke to notions of hospitality, moral obligations to kin and ancestors, and genealogical ties. However, after my time in Mongolia in the summer of 2009, I also realized the significance of issues of labor and ecology and the kinds of mobility that they allow or preclude for Mongolian Kazakhs, many of whom are still engaged in a pastoral semi-nomadic way of life.

The government of Kazakhstan decided to terminate the repatriation program in 2012, which did not lead to the cessation of movement of people across borders. On one hand, the repatriation policies of the Kazakhstani state between 1991 and 2011 made it possible for many returnees to imagine and act upon the conflation of the recently emerged political entity called Kazakhstan with the ancestral homeland. As in other cases of ethnic-based migration policies, by identifying the migrants as “repatriates,” the government claims them as unquestioned members

of the nation, constructing the political, social, and moral parameters and interpretations of their “return” (see Darieva 2005; Lubkemann 2003). On the other hand for Mongolian Kazakhs, what it means to be Kazakh is not reducible simply to their relation to the state. Mongolian Kazakh notions of community and belonging are anchored in alternative ways of thinking about peoplehood: through practices of commemoration, pilgrimages, funerals, and other occasions when ancients are called on to bless the living, as I described in chapter four. As people engage in these practices, they create viable communities, bridging the past and present, the deceased and the living. This allows them to move back and forth across the boundaries between the physical world and the spiritual world of the ancestors, and migrate across state boundaries without losing the essential links to their histories, genealogies, and sacred places. The state’s attempt to curtail such cross-border mobility has been failing in the face of human activities that have endured to maintain communal structures and relationships and continue to defy governmental policies and international boundaries.

Although Kazakhstan’s policy of ethnic repatriation has usually been interpreted through the lens of nation-building, one of the arguments I make in my dissertation is that the repatriation program began with labor issues. In Chapter one, I described how Mongolian Kazakhs made decisions to migrate to Kazakhstan in the early 1990s because of economic hardships, unemployment, as well as patriotic feelings toward the new Kazakhstani state. At the same time, Kazakhstan was experiencing acute labor shortages due to the emigration of two million Russians, Poles, Germans and others who had left the country for their own ethnic homelands. The conversion of labor needs and nation building projects in Kazakhstan, and economic problems in Mongolia, made Mongolian Kazakh migration to Kazakhstan at that time both possible and desirable. However, the political and economic considerations on both sides of the

border changed considerably over the two decades of this migration. By the end of the 1990s, emigration of non-Kazakhs and the immigration of approximately one million Kazakh return migrants, tipped the demographic balance in favor of ethnic Kazakhs for the first time in at least a hundred years.

What was described as the “demographic crisis” of the 1990s therefore became less urgent just as labor needs also became less acute. Rather than being an industrial and mining powerhouse, requiring a large labor force, by the beginning of the 2000s, Kazakhstan’s economy was relying largely on oil revenue: an industry that does not require a large labor force of unskilled workers. In this way, return migrants, already marginalized socially, economically, and politically in Kazakhstan, turned from desired bodies, to expendable and internal strangers.

This shift in attitude toward the oralmandar was clearly articulated by President Nazarbayev himself in 2010 during his visit to the village of Kyzylaghash, in the Almaty region. Five months earlier, the village had been completely destroyed by a flood that also left forty-four people dead. At the memorial speech, the President said the following:

As far as I know, almost half of the people left underwater are our compatriots who came from abroad. Kazakhstan is the only state that is engaged in the repatriation of its compatriots. I do a lot - allocate the money of the state in order to invite, to gather together the Kazakhs, who are scattered worldwide. Certainly, these citizens have not yet made their contributions to Kazakhstan. In today's prosperity and development of Kazakhstan, there is none of their merit...

I heard about this speech from my Kazakh friends after I had already completed the fieldwork for this dissertation, and was living in the United States. My friends were outraged by the words and sentiments pronounced in the context of a memorial speech for many “compatriots from abroad.” President Nazarbayev’s words point to a way of understanding the value of people

as part of the national community in economic terms: their contribution to the “prosperity and development of Kazakhstan.” As I argue in chapter four, Mongolian Kazakhs understand their migration to Kazakhstan as an invitation: they are guests in Kazakhstan. In relationships between hosts and guests, the expectations of social reciprocity oblige hosts to be generous, and to always leave their doors open for visitors. These social obligations do not end at the threshold of the house, but also extend to other fields of social interaction, informing the ways Kazakhs relate to other ethnic groups in their country and understand their relationship to the state.

President Nazarbayev’s speech illustrates a shift in the attitudes toward return migration since the 1990s, which privileges “quality over quantity.” While prior to 2005, return migrants were officially provided money and housing by the government, starting in 2006, the government instead offered bank loans, mortgages, and credits. This new program, known as Nurly kosh (Blessed migration),¹⁵ promoted self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit instead of reliance on “charity.” The language of blood, history, and patriotism that initially informed the diasporic migration thus turned into a neoliberal discourse of “qualitative migration” based on “economic potential.”

At the same time, governmental rhetoric couched the Nurly kosh program in the language of essential values, such as the practice of “asar,” which I discussed in Chapter 2. For Kazakhs, the practice of asar reinforces the values of cooperation, and reciprocity among kin and neighbors, specifically in the construction of houses and settlements. Yet, the practice of asar, a kinship practice of obligation and cooperation, was reinterpreted through the neoliberal lens the government was promoting. For example, in an article in the newspaper Liter, the writer

¹⁵ See: Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva Respubliki Kazakhstan ot 2 Dekabria 2008 goda #1126 "Ob Utverzhdenii Programy 'Nurly kosh' na 2009-2011 gody (The Law of Republic of Kazakhstan from December 2, 2008 #1126 “Concerning the founding of the Program Nurly kosh for 2009-2011”).

describes an oralman settlement called Asar, built through Nurly kosh program, by saying, "The building of the microdistrict "Asar" for oralman is a symbol of initiative and independence, a symbol of how much the people themselves can do, without waiting for someone else's charity." (Liter, June 27, 2012).

The new governmental attitude toward oralman came to a head in 2011 during a series of labor protests of strikes by oil workers in the western Mangistau region. Labor unrest and intermittent strikes had been going on in Mangistau since at least 2009, culminating in a general strike of approximately ten thousand workers employed by the government subsidiary company, KazMunaiGas. The workers demanded fair wages and working conditions, but were ignored by the company and the government until they began a series of hunger strikes and around the clock protests in the regional center town of Zhanaozen (Human Rights Watch 2012).

On September 29, 2011, during a public meeting attended by journalists and policy experts, Timur Kulibayev,¹⁶ President of the National Fund "Samruk-Kazyna" (which controls KazMunaiGas) made the following statement: "Leaders of the oil workers striking in Zhanaozen are repatriates... They have their own informal leaders that came together from Karakalpakia [Karakalpakistan Autonomous Region, Uzbekistan]. A long time ago, we should have limited migration of people there [Zhanaozen]. Because the social infrastructure of this city is not ready to take on such a number of people" (Tengrinews, 29 September 2011). He finished his speech by stating that the labor strikes in Zhanaozen are, "the result of an ill-considered migration policy."

Such language is a direct contrast to the celebratory rhetoric of the Kazakhstani government in support of return migration throughout the 1990s. It foreshadows the final

¹⁶ Timur Kulibayev is also the son-in-law of President Nazarbayev.

suspension of the repatriation program following the tragic events in Zhanaozen on December 16, 2011, to which I now turn.

The Mangistau region, and the town of Zhanaozen specifically, are known as the “informal capital of oralman.” According to official Kazakhstani statistics, out of almost one million return migrants in the last twenty years, one out of every ten, or close to one hundred thousand people, eventually ended up in the Mangistau region and the population of Zhanaozen doubled from 60,000 in 1989 to 120,000-130,000 by 2011 (Kubeev 2011).

Though the Mangistau region along the Caspian Sea holds Kazakhstan’s largest deposits of oil and natural gas, in 2010, the region’s poverty rate was the highest in Kazakhstan, reaching 21.2 percent (Human Rights Watch 2012). Because over ninety percent of the regional economy relies on the oil industry, single-industry towns, such as Zhanaozen have a very high cost of living and very high rates of unemployment.

The oil corporations are the largest employer as well as the largest contributor to local taxes. The oil companies include KazMunaiGas, as well as Chevron, and other foreign (e.g. Chinese, Russian) corporations. There are conflicting accounts of what happened on December 16, 2011, but it seems that the striking workers became angered when celebrations for the twentieth anniversary of Kazakhstan’s independence were being set up in the square where they held their protests. Violence escalated quickly when the police was called in to deal with the protesters and opened live fire at the crowd, killing eighteen people and injuring hundreds in three subsequent days of violence. While many people in Kazakhstan and abroad accused the government and the police of brutality and deadly violence against innocent people, when

President Nazarbayev visited Zhanaozen three days later, he declared that the “riots” were instigated by “hooligans and drunks” (Kubeev 2011). At the same time, Presidential Advisor Ermuhamet Ertisbayev stated to the regional newspaper, Lada, that 26% of striking workers were oralman (December 21, 2011). In the subsequent trials of oil workers accused of instigating what became known as the “Zhanaozen affair,” it was revealed that out of thirty seven people on trial, twenty were return migrants.

In the same newspaper paper, Ermuhamet Ertisbayev stated:

What is going on in Zhanaozen is absolutely not characteristic of Kazakh mentality. Kazakhs never protested against the central authority, never. The main organizers in Zhanaozen were people who recently received Kazakhstani citizenship. They came from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and they have not yet integrated fully into the Kazakhstani mentality.

In addition, government officials also publicly accused oralmandar as a group of being responsible for fomenting political turmoil, compromising the security of the state, and engaging in "religious extremism" and "terrorist acts," all claimed to be on the rise in Kazakhstan since 2010, in what I would argue is an atmosphere of rising authoritarianism and further curtailing of political and religious freedoms in the country. The situation in Zhanaozen made starkly visible the rifts and problems that return migrants faced in Kazakhstan. These events and the association of return migrants with anti-government activity and violence, led to the official suspension of the return program.

Though the program existed for two decades, and had begun with celebration and wide government support, its suspension came and went without much fanfare. A parliamentary decree in January 2012 officially ended the repatriation program, though this was not made public until months later.

During the eight months after the program ended, thirty thousand Kazakh moved to Kazakhstan, continuing trans-border migration practices outside the official boundaries of state quotas and the return migration program (Tengrinews, April 23, 2012). Even before the suspension of the program, most Kazakhs from abroad were establishing themselves in Kazakhstan by relying on kin networks for housing and support, and did not form part of the government quotas that aimed to regulate the program and provide migrants financial assistance. Just as there were economic factors that played a role in migration in the 1990s, economic factors still continue to influence migration patterns more than any government policy. For example, a recent mining boom in Mongolia presents many new opportunities for Mongolian Kazakhs to find employment outside of their already declining pastoral lifestyle (High 2008; Bulag 2009). Such employment opportunities in Mongolia as well as additional educational opportunities in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, offer Kazakhs alternative migration prospects.

This dissertation is merely an opening for considering the ways in which people create community through movement and the circulation across borders. Alaina Lemon (2000) argues that the crossing of a threshold is a “moment far from the liminal or the inchoate; often precisely such moments demand the most strict declarations of identity. At some thresholds – doorways just as state borders – identity must be verified, whether engraved in a passport, on the face, or in bodily demeanor. All is not in flux – there are recognized ways to cross” (205). For Kazakhs, the return program was an official invitation to be a guest and have their ethnicity recognized and declared in Kazakhstan. Though Kazakhs are no longer official guests of the state, the trans-border community that was established will not disappear anytime soon. For Kazaks, it is not the citizenship they hold or the passports they have that keep their attachments to place, but their live

relatives on both sides of the border, and their obligations to attain life-cycle ceremonies, and religious ceremonies for ancestral spirits. As Ryzbek-agma told me in Bayan Ulgii in 2009: “We are living in our own land, we are moving around in our own land. We are moving around in our land, just as we always used to: winter, summer, autumn. It’s just now we are crossing borders.”

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