

THE STATE AND THE SACRED: MEMORY, THEOLOGY,
AND IDENTITY IN KYRGYZSTAN

By

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Abstract

Since becoming independent in 1991, Kyrgyzstan has endured two revolutions, ethnic violence, and economic decay. Against this tumultuous background have been ongoing attempts to construct a viable Kyrgyz nationalism and the “resurgence” of religion in the public sphere. In many respects, however, these phenomena have been conceptualized as being largely independent of one another. Similarly, religion – and Islam in particular – has sometimes been depicted as an ideological “alternative” to a congenitally weak and fractured Kyrgyz national identity, and as an autonomous force to be confronted, tamed, and instrumentalized by the state.

This dissertation seeks to reassess the seemingly fraught nature of the relationship between religion, politics, and identity. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, it argues that religious and political geographies should not be viewed as fundamentally alienated from one another. Rather, the territorial logic of the nation-state inevitably exerts a powerful influence on the religious imaginary, while religion in turn constitutes a crucial site for the formation of national identity and the legitimation of state power. This dynamic points to the enduring centrality of the nation-state during an era of continuing globalization, as well as the need for further attention devoted to understanding and acknowledging the critical importance of religious discourses in the constructing political identities and geographies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Figures.....	ix
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Secularization and Its Discontents.....	1
1.1.1 Secularity and the State.....	4
1.2 The Setting.....	10
1.4 Collective and Cultural Memory.....	13
1.5 Grounded Theologies.....	19
1.6 Outline of Chapters.....	22
Chapter Two: Central Asia and the Kyrgyz.....	27
2.1. Bounding the Region.....	30
2.2 Physical Geography.....	31
2.3 The Silk Road.....	34
2.4 Farmers and Horsemen.....	36
2.5 Early Indo-Europeans.....	38
2.6 The Emergence of the Turkic Peoples.....	44
2.7 The Uyghur Khanate.....	47
2.8 The Yenisei Kyrgyz.....	50
2.9 The Arab Conquests.....	53
2.10 Samanids & Karakhanids.....	57
2.11 The Mongol Empire.....	61
2.11.1 The Kyrgyz during the Mongol Period.....	72
2.12 Chagataid Remnants in Moghulistan.....	74
2.12.1 The Oirots.....	76
2.13 Timurids and Shaybanids.....	78
2.13.1 The Timurids.....	78
2.13.2 The Shaybanids.....	83
2.14 The Russian Conquest.....	83
2.14.1 The Kyrgyz under the Russian Empire.....	88
2.15 Conclusion.....	95
Chapter Three: Constructing Ancient Nations.....	96
3.1 Nationalism in Tsarist Russia.....	98
3.2 Constructing Ancient Nations in the Soviet Union.....	108
3.2.1 National-Territorial Autonomy and Korenizatsiia.....	112
3.3 Nation-Building in Soviet Central Asia.....	122
3.4 National in Form, Soviet in Content?.....	129
3.5 The Epic of Manas and Kyrgyz Cultural Memory.....	136
3.6 Counter-Memory and Tradition in Soviet Kirghizia.....	145
3.7 Conclusion.....	151

Chapter Four: Nation and Memory.....	153
4.1 Akaev, Manas, and Kyrgyz Statehood.....	157
4.1.1 A Trip to Manas Village	163
4.1.2 The “Tulip Revolution”	168
4.2 Bakiev and the New Kyrgyz Nationalism	171
4.2.1 The Osh Pogroms of 2010 and Minority Fears.....	174
4.3 Ideological Production in Kyrgyzstan Since 2010.....	176
4.4 Memory and Ideology.....	182
4.4.1 Nurassyl eje’s Story	195
4.5 Places of Memory	205
4.5.1 Manas Ordo.....	211
4.6 Conclusion	222
Chapter Five: The State and the Sacred.....	227
5.1: Religious Revival.....	233
5.1.1: Fears of Terror	247
5.1.2: Regulation and “Extremism” in Kyrgyzstan	249
5.2: The Instrumentalization Hypothesis	251
5.3: The “National-Religious Symbiosis”.....	256
5.4: State Interventions and “Traditional Kyrgyz Islam”	260
5.4.1: The Muftiyat	264
5.5: A Merely “Cultural” Islam?.....	271
5.6: The Purists	281
5.7: Traditionalists	292
5.7.1: The Manas Epic	299
5.8: The “Religio-national Symbiosis” as a Grounded Theology?.....	304
Chapter Six: The Sacred Geographies of Kyrgyzstan	307
6.1 Identities and Territory	311
6.2 Palimpsest Geographies?	315
6.2.1 Sacred and Secular.....	319
6.2.2 Grounded Theologies and Coexistential Space	322
6.2.3 Urban Transformation, “Museumization,” and Sacred Geography.....	326
6.4 The Grave of the Fathers.....	354
6.4.1 The Sacred Significance of Ata Beyit.....	366
6.5 The Islamic Landscape	372
6.6 Conclusion: Grounding Memory and Theology	376
Chapter Seven: Conclusion.....	380
7.1 Articulating Kyrgyzstan.....	380
7.2 The Nation-State as Sacred Geography	382
7.3 Directions for Future Research	384
Bibliography	391
Appendix 1: Methods.....	422
Appendix 2: Glossary	436
Appendix 3: Map of Kyrgyzstan.....	440

List of Figures

Figure 1: Monument to the friendship of the peoples in Bishkek.....	120
Figure 2: Manas statue in front of the Bishkek Philharmonic	140
Figure 3: <i>Manas Aiyly</i>	165
Figure 4: Tower at <i>Manas Aiyly</i>	167
Figure 5: Promotional poster for <i>Kurmanjan Datka</i>	183
Figure 6: Nurassyl eje	198
Figure 7: Zulpukor <i>mazar</i>	200
Figure 8: <i>Manas Ordo</i>	211
Figure 9: The Mausoleum of Manas	218
Figure 10: <i>Namazkhana</i> in Osh Bazaar	234
Figure 11: Turkish-funded mosque near Bishkek city center	236
Figure 12: "Dungan Mosque" in Karakol	237
Figure 13: Bishkek Central Mosque	265
Figure 14: Islamic literature for sale at Osh Bazaar	269
Figure 15: "Oriental" motifs	329
Figure 16: A Qarakhanid stele near Burana Tower	337
Figure 17: Japanese tourists at Burana Tower	340
Figure 18: Map depicting the distribution of <i>mazars</i> in Kyrgyzstan	343
Figure 19: One of the "Springs of Kanikey"	350
Figure 20: The official tomb at <i>Ata Beyit</i>	354
Figure 21: Monument to the victims of Stalinist repressions	357
Figure 22: The structure surrounding the mass grave at <i>Ata Beyit</i>	358
Figure 23: Chingiz Aitmatov's headstone	360
Figure 24: Graveyard of the martyrs of 2010	364
Figure 25: <i>Manaschys</i> performing in front of Chingiz Aitmatov's headstone.....	367
Figure 26: <i>Batachy</i> with the <i>shaykh</i> of <i>Ata Beyit</i>	368
Figure 27: A typical village mosque in northern Kyrgyzstan.....	374
Figure 28: Political map of Kyrgyzstan.....	440

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Secularization and Its Discontents

Alexander Agadjanian once noted that “[a]ccording to a dominant epistemological paradigm, religion is associated with past-rooted forms of *Weltanschauung* and sociality that stand at odds with general historical trends” (Agadjanian, 2001, p. 473). The epistemological paradigm he refers to, of course, is the “secularization thesis,” which posits that religion, broadly defined, is a waning force in modern societies. It was Max Weber who first described the process of “secularization,” writing in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* of the “iron cage” of materialism and bureaucratic rationality (M. Weber, 2001) that had disenchanting the world. Despite these early beginnings, however, it was not until the 1970s that the concept of secularization became “the reigning dogma” in the field of sociology (Swatos & Christiano, 1999, p. 210).

Secularization has sometimes been described as the ongoing separation of church and state; however, according to one account, it amounts to much more than that:

The principle thrust in secularization theory has ... been stronger than simple church-state issues or the scope of religious authority. It has been a claim that, in the face of scientific rationality, religion’s influence on all aspects of life – from personal habits to social institutions – is in dramatic decline ... In this view, religion harked back to some prior level of human evolution and was now useless appended to the modern cultural repertoire. People today are awed by human achievements, not divine forces;

societies of the future would be constructed around these,
not antiquity's notion of the "sacred" (ibid., p. 214-15).

Quantitative data indicating steep declines in church attendance seemed to support the notion that, at least in industrialized Western democracies,¹ religion was a waning force. Consequently, "[t]he death of religion was the conventional wisdom in the social sciences during most of the twentieth century; indeed, it has been regarded as *the* master model of sociological inquiry" (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 3). Embedded in this account is the assumption that the religious worldview, if it survives at all, will live on merely as a matter of private values and belief, or perhaps as a mostly latent characteristic of ethnic or national identity. Meanwhile most people's primary loyalty and sense of identity will increasingly be derived from the imagined community of the nation and, by extension, the nation-state.

Developments in the final decades of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first, however, have called into question the certainties of the secularization thesis. As Mark Juergensmeyer has noted, "In many parts of the world the secular state has not lived up to its own promises of political freedom, economic prosperity, and social justice" (1993, p. 23). This circumstance has led to widespread disillusionment in the nation-state and a search for alternative vectors for the articulation of personal and communal identity and political existence. Critics of the secularization thesis point out that, driven by reasons ranging from political repression against minority populations, rampant corruption, poor economic conditions, or simply a general sense of disillusionment in the status quo, many people have turned to religion to fill the void left

¹ The United States, however, has often been cited as an exception (albeit a major one) to this tendency (Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

by the failures, real or perceived, of the secular nation-state. Thus, alongside the growth of different varieties of Christianity in many parts of the world, “[t]here have been similarly vigorous upsurges of conservative religion in all the other major religious communities – Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – as well as revival movements in smaller communities (such as Shinto in Japan and Sikhism in India)” (Berger, 1999, p. 6).

Consequently, by the end of the twentieth century, “the path to secularization did not appear as linear and irreversible as it had once it appeared” (Gelvin, 2002, pp. 115-116).

This dissertation is not concerned with tracing the entire history of the so-called “desecularization of the world” (Berger, 1999, p. 1). Indeed, it is sufficient to note that the certainties of the secularization thesis have been challenged by events as disparate as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the rise of Liberation Theology in Latin America, the political fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, and the often religiously-inflected “culture wars” in the United States. In a similar fashion, the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated the resurgence of religion across much of Eurasia. Often linked with nationalist ideologies, these discourses have, in some places, filled the vacuum left behind by the collapse of Soviet power and the concomitant discrediting of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Despite these trends, many scholars still regard religion as little more than a residual from an bygone era, a regressive force that variously works to maintain the boundaries between competing ethnic or national communities (Coakley, 2002, p. 212; Hastings, 1997, p. 190), supply convenient myths that can be coopted by nationalists (Davies, 2008), or even impede the emergence of genuine nation-states (Hastings, 1997, pp. 200-202). Nevertheless, recognizing the cracks in the edifice of the secularization

thesis, Jürgen Habermas has argued that “the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernisation is losing ground” (2008, p. 21). Taking note of the apparent “resurgence of religion” (ibid., p. 18), which he views as being embodied by the “vibrancy” of orthodox, or at least conservative, groups within “the established religious organizations and churches,” the growth of what he labels “fundamentalism,” particularly among evangelical Protestants and Muslims, and “a political unleashing of the potential for violence innate in religion,” as exemplified, in his view, by Islamic terrorists and “the mullah regime in Iran” (ibid., pp. 18-19), Habermas argues that we have now entered a “post-secular” era characterized by a growing recognition that religion may not be disappearing as fast as was once thought.

1.1.1 Secularity and the State

As Barbato and Kratochwil (2009) note, Habermas’s notion that we have entered a post-secular age has proven to be quite influential, playing into or inspiring a number of related debates. These include the ongoing discussion among scholars regarding the “clash of civilizations” thesis (Huntington, 1993, 1997; Said, 2001), the distinction between the public and private spheres (Casanova, 1994; Eder & Bosetti, 2005; Mendieta & VanAntwerpen, 2011b; Charles Taylor, 2007), and a broader critical interrogation of the concept of modernity itself, particularly the dimensions of its relationship with religion (Asad, 1999; Kiong & Kong, 2000; Salvatore, 2009; van der Veer, 2001).

Others, like Justin Wilford, (2010), have responded by suggesting that the very idea of post-secularity in some respects misses the point. As Wilford argues:

But “religion” is not simply “resurgent.” Specific religious groups are growing in specific socio-spatial environments. Therefore, what is at stake in studying contemporary

religion in America is not the relative growth or relevance of religion as such, but rather how specific religious communities are changing and adapting in ways that allow for their growth and relevance (ibid., p. 22).

Wilford concludes that the networks – the “sacred archipelagos” – of Evangelical Protestant churches that he studied were not simply isolated islands of faith within a secular society. Rather, he suggests:

The centralized, communal performances [of faith] work insofar as they recast the spatial scales of evangelicalism in the image of the disparate spaces of postsuburbia – the office cubicle, the living room, the freeway, the backyard... By mobilizing the elements of one’s mundane domestic life – the unruly teenage child, a loveless marriage, even mortgage debt – for religious action, one is performing and thereby underwriting the irreducible relevance of evangelical Christianity (ibid., p. 163-164).

Ultimately, then, Wilford is arguing for an understanding of the processes of both secularization and desecularization that recognize their inherently synthetic, interpenetrating nature.

This insight is useful in another area of inquiry that has been energized and enriched by the renewed attention to the importance of religion: the study of nationalism and national identity. Traditionally, much of the literature has viewed nationalism as effectively superseding other sources of legitimacy and knowledge, including religion. As Geneviève Zybrzycki explains:

Historically, in this view, politics replaced religion as the ultimate reference, a process referred to as the “disenchantment of the world.” In view of this historical

fact, some scholars have concluded that religion's demise is responsible for the extent of nationalism's success ... Once the way was cleared [by the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution], rationalism, politics, and eventually nationalism would become the new sacred principles of the modern era. Historical arguments of the *longue durée* identify these secularizing processes as turning points for the creation of a world of nation-states, with nationalism – along with... capitalism – as the new secular orthodoxies (Zybrzycki, 2010, p. 607).

Others have gone so far as to argue that de-privatized religion and nationalist ideologies are fundamentally incompatible, since “both serve the ethical function of providing an overarching framework of moral order, a framework that commands ultimate loyalty from those who subscribe to it” (Juergensmeyer, 1993, p. 15).

From these perspectives, the increasingly vocal political claims on the part of religious groups inevitably pose a threat to the secular and democratic character of the modern nation-state. As John Madeley notes:

In this context, the political mobilization of fundamentalist forms of many of the world religions, including Christianity, has made the issue of state-religion relations increasingly one of practical concern... What the French call the “integralism” of fundamentalist movements stands witness to the continuing possibility that trends of secularization (whether as decline, differentiation, or privatization) can under certain circumstances be stopped dead in their tracks and reversed by projects of radical de-differentiation, even on occasion under the literal “presidency” of religious figures and institutions, as in Iran (Madeley, 2009, p. 177).

In secular societies, the solution to this problem has been to insist that religious discourses remain cloistered within the private sphere, making no claims on politics, ethics, knowledge, or truth beyond the boundaries of a particular community of believers. Only in this way, the argument goes, can competing claims from members of many different religions, and, crucially, non-religious people as well, be mediated and conflicts (mostly) avoided.

Talal Asad, however, pointed out a fundamental contradiction in this conceptualization of secularism – namely that religion is only included through its exclusion and relegation to the private sphere:

From the point of view of secularism, religion has the option either of confining itself to private belief and worship or engaging in public talk that makes no demands on life. In either case such religion is seen by secularism to take the form it should properly have. Each is equally the condition of its legitimacy (Asad, 1999, p. 191).

Religion, from this point of view, is not only constructed as a phenomenon that is originally (and appropriately) alien and external to the political dimensions of nationalism² and the secular nation-state, but also as something fundamentally inimical and menacing to democracy and the logic and institutions of the modern state system. Consequently, as Mark Juergensmeyer has argued, “there is ultimately no satisfactory compromise on an ideological level between religious and secular nationalism” (Juergensmeyer, 1993, p. 201).

The political and cultural anxieties provoked by the “resurgence” of religion has given rise to a vast and wide-ranging body of literature. Academics, analysts, and

² Even if, as we will see, religion is typically counted among the “building blocks” of national identity.

journalists have devoted attention to the growing influence of conservative Hindu and Buddhist nationalists (Berkwitz, 2008; Bhatt, 2001; Hansen, 1999; Jerryson, 2011), the mobilization of the Orthodox Church in support of Russian neo-imperialism (Laruelle, 2016; Schreck, 2014; Verkhovsky, 2002), and the importance of evangelical Protestant movements in American culture and the domestic and foreign policy arenas (Carpenter, 1997; Cimino, 2005; Marsden, 2006; S. Spector, 2009). Arguably, however, no topic has provoked more anxieties than the putative “challenge” posed by what is variously referred to as “radical,” “extremist,” “fundamentalist,” or “political” Islam (see for example: Al-Azm, 1993, 1994; Antoun, 2001; Ayoob, 2008; Euben, 1999; Fuller, 2003; Fuller & Lesser, 1995; Jansen & Kemper, 2011; Karagiannis, 2010, 2012; Karsh, 2007; Keddie, 1968; Lewis, 2002, 2004; Malashenko, 2000; Marranci, 2009; Moaddel, 2005; Muminov, 2007; Olcott, 1995, 2007, 2012; Roy, 2001; Sagdeev, 2000).

A large proportion of this literature, moreover, has been devoted to the complex and thorny issue of terrorism (see for example: Cutter, Richardson, & Wilbanks, 2003; Esposito, 2002; Lewis, 2004; Mamdani, 2005; Marranci, 2006; Omelicheva, 2010, 2011b; Russell, 2009; Watts, 2007; Yemelianova, 2010). The end result has been a body of literature that has, to a significant extent (though by no means entirely), worked to reinforce the perception that religion – and Islam in particular – is a force that is largely antagonistic to modernity and the nation-state. Efraim Karsh, for example, has traced the history of “Islamic imperialism” from the days of the “warrior Prophet” until Osama bin Laden, ultimately concluding that

the fuel of Islamic imperialism remains as volatile as ever, and is very far from having burned itself out. Only when the political elites of the Middle East and Muslim world

reconcile themselves to the reality of state nationalism, foreswear pan-Arab and pan-Islamic imperialist dreams, and make Islam a matter of private faith rather than a tool of political ambition will the inhabitants of these regions be at last able to look forward to a better future free of would-be Saladins (2007, pp. 240-241).

Nevertheless, there are indications that the supposed opposition between religion and the secular nation-state may not be as deep as is sometimes envisioned. Graham Fuller, for example, has predicted the progressive integration of political Islamist parties into mainstream national political discourses (Fuller, 2003, pp. 193-213). In a similar vein, Olivier Roy has noted:

From Casablanca to Tashkent, the Islamists have molded themselves into the framework of existing states, adopting their modes of exercising power, their strategic demands, and their nationalism. All the states that appeal to the Muslim *umma* nonetheless maintain the concept of nationality and passports; in terms of supranationality, they are far less advanced than the European Union (Roy, 2001, p. 194).

Far from being inimical and external to the nation-state, then, it clear that many religious movements, both within the Islamic world and beyond, are finding ways of reconciling both their beliefs and their programs to the reality of the modern state system.

It is not enough, therefore, to simply concede *that* the state and the religious do, after all, intersect and comingle; rather, following Wilford and others, we must also seek out *how* these dynamics play out in practice. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore this fundamental question by examining the ways in which religion and the nation-state are bound together in a particular context: the Kyrgyz Republic. Throughout this study

we will observe how these connections are manifested in cultural memory, in state ideology, in theological debates, and even in the ways in which the territory of the nation-state itself is conceptualized. As we will see, the state and the sacred come together in each of these arenas in often surprising ways, suggesting that the modern and secular geographies of the nation-state and sacred and religious geographies are both coexistential³ and mutually constitutive.

1.2 The Setting

The Kyrgyz Republic, commonly called Kyrgyzstan or, in Russian sources, *Kirgiziia*, is a mountainous country in the very heart of the Eurasian continent. Kyrgyzstan is not a large state: at only 199,951 square miles, it is somewhat smaller than the U.S. state of South Dakota (CIA World Factbook, 2016). The country's population is likewise modest: in November 2015 Kyrgyzstan erupted in celebration over the birth of its six millionth citizen (Lelik, 2015a). Much of the country is covered in high, rugged mountain ranges, notably the Ala Too, which belongs to the larger Tien Shan mountain range, and the Pamir-Alai and Pamir ranges.

The country's rough topography, which includes numerous valleys and alpine pastures, has exerted a profound effect on the Kyrgyz way of life. There is not an abundance of arable land, and large-scale agriculture is only prevalent in the Chui and Talas Valleys in the north, and in the Ferghana Valley in the south, which is split among Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In any case, the Kyrgyz were historically a nomadic people, and made use of the land in other ways. Unlike other Central Asian nomads, the Kyrgyz mostly practiced transhumance, moving their herds of livestock

³ This term is explained more fully in Chapter Six. In short, I define coexistentiality as connoting a kind of simultaneity, wherein we can observe seemingly disparate geographies and discourses not only existing side-by-side, but also interacting with one another.

vertically up and down the mountains, rather than horizontally across the steppes. Today, many Kyrgyz continue to engage in transhumance, and the traditional practice of retreating into high mountain pastures, called *jailoo* in Kyrgyz, continues to be a popular form of summer recreation, even among urban dwellers.

Another aspect of Kyrgyzstan's physical geography that cannot be overlooked is its hydrology. The country's mountains are home to a number of glaciers, which serve as the source of numerous rivers, and there are thousands of small lakes, and several larger ones, scattered throughout the country. Thus, unlike neighboring Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, or Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan has ample supplies of water.⁴ However, it is Lake Issyk Kul, whose name means "warm lake,"⁵ that holds a particularly special place in the Kyrgyz popular imagination. Called "a magnificent pearl" by former President Askar Akaev (2003, p. 8), Issyk Kul is one of the premier vacation destinations in all of Central Asia. More importantly, the lake is also viewed by many as the cradle of Kyrgyz culture and remains an important focus of Kyrgyz spiritual traditions.

Historically speaking, the existence of a Kyrgyz state is a relatively recent phenomenon, and not only in the sense that it became independent of the Soviet Union in 1991. As we will see in Chapter Three, both the emergence of the Kyrgyz as a "nation," in the modern sense of the word, and the creation of something resembling a bounded Kyrgyz nation-state, only occurred in the 1930s as a result of the application of Soviet ethnographic theory. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan joined the

⁴ The dependence of downstream users like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on water originating in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has, unfortunately, proven to be a sensitive political issue. Uzbekistan in particular has at times engaged in saber-rattling over any signs that its militarily weaker neighbors might decrease the flow of water, upon which the Uzbek cotton industry depends, through increased usage or the construction of hydroelectric dams (Kasym, 2014; Lillis, 2012).

⁵ Issyk Kul is replenished in part by hot springs, and so does not freeze over during the cold Kyrgyz winters.

community of independent nation-states, and, as described in Chapter Four, has enjoyed a tumultuous independence, marked by corruption, two political revolutions, inter-ethnic violence, and a faltering economy. However, Kyrgyzstan has also been the site of a remarkable experiment in post-Soviet democracy (particularly in comparison to any one of its neighbors) and the ongoing articulation of national identity outside of the Soviet socialist context in which it was originally elaborated and developed.

So what makes Kyrgyzstan a good context in which to study the broader questions with which this dissertation is concerned – namely, the suffusion of the religious in the very fabric of national identity and the secular nation-state? First, Kyrgyzstan is an officially secular state, and one that emerged out of the context of 70 years of Soviet atheism. At the same time, however, many aspects of what are recognized as Kyrgyz “national traditions” are thoroughly suffused with spirituality. This is particularly evident in the case of the *Manas* epic, which not only serves as one of the pillars of nationalist ideology in Kyrgyzstan, but is also frequently referred to by Kyrgyz as the “encyclopedia of the Kyrgyz people” that describes Kyrgyz history and national traditions, spiritual life, social and political organization, and artistic sensibilities (indeed, the epic itself is rightly considered a work of art, and those who are skilled in its retelling – called *manaschys* – are revered among Kyrgyz). As a result, Kyrgyzstan provides a wealth of fascinating cases upon which to draw in our investigations of the connections between sacred and secular.

From the standpoint of academic geography, Kyrgyzstan is also attractive because its indigenous religious customs, which have also been thoroughly adapted into Islam, are strikingly spatial in its orientation. Much of Kyrgyz religious life focuses around the

phenomenon of *mazars*, or “sacred spaces,” which take the form of the graves of saints, military leaders, or revered ancestors, springs, stones, or other natural places, or in some cases, places associated with legendary figures like the prophet Solomon or various characters from the *Manas* epic. *Mazars*, however, intersect with politics in sometimes surprising ways: some have become monumental spaces devoted to valorizing the Kyrgyz nation, while others are directly managed by the state itself, blurring the distinction between sacred and secular.

Kyrgyzstan is also interesting because its religious dynamics are closely linked with discourses surrounding national identity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asians have been free to more openly explore and express their Islamic faith, and Kyrgyzstan is no exception. As we will see in Chapter Six, however, traditional Kyrgyz Islam, which was deeply influenced by nomadic traditions and pre-Islamic customs, differs in many ways from the more textualist interpretations of Islam that have gained adherents in recent years. Crucially, however, these ongoing debates over proper belief and practice have political repercussions: the synthesis of Islam and what are thought of as “Kyrgyz national traditions” is not accepted by all Kyrgyz Muslims, leading to consequential debates about what it means to be both a Kyrgyz and a Muslim.

1.4 Collective and Cultural Memory

One of the most important trends in historical and social science literature over the past three decades has been the increased attention paid to the question of how to understand the phenomenon known as “collective memory” (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Levy, 2011, p. 3). One of the foundational thinkers in memory studies in this field was Maurice Halbwachs, who published his work *On Collective Memory* as early as 1925.

Grounded in the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, Halbwachs attempted to account for the persistence and reproduction of memories in groups across time. One of Halbwachs's key contributions is the insight that the collective memory of groups is both socially conditioned by the dynamics within those groups and is subject to revision and modification through social conditioning. As Olick et al. explain:

Memory, for Halbwachs, is first of all a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are not simply mediated by social arrangements, but are in fact structured by them ... Moreover, for Halbwachs memory is framed in the present as much as in the past, variable, rather than constant (ibid., p. 18).

Halbwachs also drew a distinction between what he called "autobiographical memory" and "historical memory." The former, not unexpectedly, refers to the things a person remembers because she or he actually experienced them. "Historical memory," by contrast, is more diffuse. Historical memory, moreover, plays an important role in coalescing group cohesion and solidarity, since it includes

residues of events by virtue of which groups claim a continuous identity through time. "Historical memory" of the U.S. Civil War, for instance, is part of what it means to be an American and is part of the collective narrative of the United States. But nobody still has "autobiographical memory" of the event (ibid., p. 19).

The function of "historical memory," according to Jan Assmann, one of the leading contemporary thinkers in memory studies, is therefore "above all ... to transmit a collective identity" (Assmann, 2006, p. 7). Consequently, as Halbwachs himself argues:

[T]he traditions of older groups become the natural supports of a new community's memories, which affirm and support such traditions as if they were its guardians. These memories slowly gain authority and a kind of consecration ... A new community transforms and appropriates these traditions; at the same time, it rewrites them by changing their position in time and space (Halbwachs, 1992b, p. 219).

Collective memory is thus dynamic – knowledge is not simply “handed down” from older to younger generations, but it is received, interpreted, and mobilized in the present. Consequently, as Assmann points out, “collective memory operates simultaneously in two directions: backward and forward. It not only reconstructs the past but also organizes the experience of the present and the future” (Assmann, 2011b, p. 28). It is for this reason that collective memory is “particularly susceptible to politicized forms of remembering” (Assmann, 2006, p. 7), and can be shaped by the ways in which certain events are narrated and commemorated:

These are the irreconcilable mutually opposed memories of the winners and losers, the victims and the perpetrators. Memorials, days of remembrance with the corresponding ceremonies and rituals (such as wreath-laying), flags, songs, and slogans are the typical media of this form of commemoration (ibid.)

Nevertheless, as we will see in Chapters Three and Four, the collective memory is never univocal, and the same event – or its significance – may indeed be understood in radically different ways by different people or segments of society. James Young, for example, has demonstrated the different meanings that have become invested in the

Warsaw Ghetto Monument, which commemorates the 1943 Jewish uprising against the Nazi occupation:

As its maker's hand initially animated cold, amnesiac clay, the monument has since been revitalized by the parade of public figures marching past it and by the ceremonies conducted at its base. With the [Polish Communist] state's blessings, it is now as much a gathering place for Polish war veterans as for Jews; to the government's consternation, the Ghetto Monument's square is also a gathering place for Solidarity and other dissident groups, who have turned it into a performance space for protests. The monument has been extravagantly visited by touring presidents, prime ministers, and even the pope. Everyone memorializes something different here, of course; each creates different meaning in the monument (Young, 1989, p. 69).

The divergent meanings invested in particular moments or events are often a function of politics. Thus, the American Civil War is remembered by some as "The War of Northern Aggression," while the more radical aspects of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, such as his vocal anti-imperialism, are often airbrushed out of popular accounts. This polyvocal character of memory, moreover, is particularly important vis-à-vis the construction of personal and communal identities, insofar as it creates spaces of resistance in the form of alternative discourses and narratives. As we will see in Chapter Four, for example, the ways in which the Kyrgyz state has mobilized certain aspects of the *Manas* epic that emphasize themes of unity and sovereignty are implicitly challenged by those whose relationship with the epic is more concerned with spirituality and the esoteric.

Another important feature in the literature on collective memory is the concept of what Jan Assman has referred to as “cultural memory.” Assmann distinguishes cultural memory from what he calls “communicative memory” on a primarily temporal basis. Whereas communicative memory is “characterized by its proximity to the everyday” and therefore has a “limited temporal horizon,” cultural memory “is characterized by its distance from the every day ... [and] has its fixed point. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice observance)” (Assmann, 2011a, p. 213).⁶ In this way, Assmann argues, “[c]ultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity,” and thus forming the basis for the construction of personal and communal identity (ibid.). Assmann’s notion of cultural memory is thus closely related to the idea of the “myth-symbol complex” that has been developed by scholars of nationalism, most notably Anthony D. Smith. The connections between cultural memory and the myth-symbol complex will be explored more fully in Chapter Three.

The field of memory studies is vast, and numerous other terms for different concepts have been advanced – Assmann, for example, has also written about “bonding memory” (Assmann, 2006, pp. 21-24), while Olick et al. have proposed to use the term “social memory” in recognition that “for Halbwachs collective memory sometimes seems

⁶ According to Assmann: “As all oral history studies suggest, this [temporal] horizon does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generations or the Latin *saeculum*. This horizon shifts in direct relation to the passing of time. The communicative memory offers no fixed point which would bind it to the ever expanding past in the passing of time” (2011a, p. 213). Elsewhere, he elaborates: “Communicative memory is a generational memory that changes as the generations change” (Assmann, 2006, p. 24). Assmann’s remarks on this point in many respects agree with those of Jan Vansina, who has noted that “oral traditions are documents *of the present* because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message from the past, since they are expressions *of the past* at the same time” (Vansina, 1985, p. xii, emphasis in original).

to include socially framed individual memory, and sometimes seems to refer only to the common memory of groups” (Olick et al., 2011, pp. 40-41). However, the sake of simplicity, this dissertation will use the term *collective memory* to refer to what Assmann calls “communicative memory”: namely the memory of events that have transpired over the (relatively) short term of about three generations. Thus, in the context of Kyrgyzstan, the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and perhaps even certain events of the very late tsarist era, would be considered part of the “collective memory.” Meanwhile, the *Manas* epic, various religious and artistic traditions, as well as aspects of the nomadic way of life, are here placed in the realm of *cultural memory*, which extends over the *longue durée*.

One final point regarding memory must be mentioned here, and that is the idea of what Pierre Nora has called *lieux de mémoire*, or “memory spaces” (1989):

These *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it. They make their appearance by virtue of the deritualization of our world – producing, manifesting establishing, constructing, and maintaining by artifice and by will a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past. Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders – these are the boundary stones of another age, illusions of eternity (Nora, 1989, p. 10).

According to Nora, *lieux de mémoire* are the “bastions” with which we “buttress” our communal identities (ibid., p. 12). Like the Warsaw Ghetto Monument mentioned above,

they are repositories for symbolic discourses: they are, he says, “forever open to the full range of [their] possible significations” (ibid., p. 24).

Thus, while *lieux de mémoire* are frequently mobilized by states as a means of legitimating official narratives and ideologies, they remain susceptible, like collective memory itself, to alternative meanings and counter-narratives. Indeed, as we will see in Chapter Four, the ideological purposes to which the Kyrgyz government has devoted the *Manas Ordo* complex in Talas is in some respects challenged by transcendental understandings of the *Manas* epic. Thus, despite the fact that the two discourses are rooted in the same textual source – the *Manas* epic – each constructs the significance of *Manas Ordo* as a *lieu de mémoire* in strikingly different terms.

1.5 Grounded Theologies

Along with the idea of collective memory, another important concept employed in this dissertation is the notion that the categories of sacred and secular are not only difficult to disentangle, but that they in fact are essentially comingled. As we will see in Chapters Five and Six, the nature of this relationship can be observed in the realm of discourse as well as on the landscape (at *lieux de mémoire*, for example). One potentially fruitful way of understanding how the interconnections between the sacred and the secular are manifested on the landscape is the metaphor of the palimpsest, which has enjoyed some currency among cultural geographers.⁷ According to Ivan Mitin:

A palimpsest is a conceptual model of a place as a multilayered structure that emphasizes the coexistence of multiple visions and impacts of different cultures on the

⁷ It is also worth noting that some physical geographers and other geoscientists have also employed the palimpsest metaphor, particularly in the study of the impact of glaciation on environments. See for example: Kleman (1992).

landscape. Originally the term referred to a type of medieval manuscript in which new text was written over previous text that had been partly erased, palimpsest has become a widespread metaphor for cultural landscapes (Mitin, 2010, p. 2111).

In many respects, the palimpsest metaphor is attractive, since it provides an evocative framework for conceptualizing the lasting impact that successive societies and cultures have on the landscapes they inhabit. The central premise that undergirds the palimpsest metaphor is that more recent “inscriptions” never completely overwrite those that were written earlier: traces of the past, whether on the page or on the landscape, are always, to some extent, “legible.” As Mike Crang has pointed out:

Just as each era forms a landscape according to its own artefacts and uses, so each succeeding era takes that landscape and overwrites it, and is in turn overwritten. As each era is overtaken by the next, so it leaves traces and redundancies, obsolescences and irrationalities – things that remain as a mark: the burden of the past or an inheritance, depending on your point of view (Crang, 1996, p. 430).

In many instances, the kinds of “obsolescences and irrationalities” Crang cites are those things that are seemingly out of step with the present. For example, Stonehenge or the Great Pyramid of Giza stand out not only because of their monumentality, but also because of their striking incongruence with the logic of secular modernity. In many respects, the palimpsest metaphor brackets these “traces of the past” and treats them as inert remnants of past societies – signposts, perhaps, to history or cultural memory, but ultimately discrete from more recent socio-cultural “layers.”

This approach, however, can be problematic when engaging with the question of sacred geographies. As discussed previously, the secularization thesis assumes that religion has been effectively “superseded” by modernity. While Habermas’s notion of post-secularism represents, in some respects, an attempt to reconsider the putative sureties of the secularization thesis, its concern with pluralism and “the integration of religious ways of being within a public sphere shared by others” (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2015, p. 21) arguably does not go far enough. As Mendieta and VanAntwerpen remind us,

Many of our dominant stories about religion and public life are myths that bear little relation to either our political life or our everyday experience. Religion is neither merely private, for instance, nor purely irrational. And the public sphere is neither a realm of straightforward rational deliberation nor a smooth space of unforced assent” (Mendieta & VanAntwerpen, 2011a, p. 1)

Justin Tse, moreover, has argued persuasively that the very notion of secularity itself is a kind of theological discourse, albeit one “that focus[es] on this-worldly concerns, whether by attempting to create consensus among different positions through dialogue, by privatizing transcendent experiences as irrelevant to the immanent, or by imposing a political regime to eradicate ‘religion’ altogether” (Tse, 2014, p. 202). Thus, Tse argues even “a secular theology that has little patience for transcendence – indeed, even an interpretation that regards transcendence as false consciousness – is itself a position on the transcendent” (ibid., p. 208).

Calling “illusory” the “line between matters of faith and secular spaces of the purely social and political” (ibid., p. 214), Tse has instead elaborated on what he has called a “grounded theologies” approach. As Tse defines them, grounded theologies are

performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent. They remain *theologies* because they involve some view of the transcendent, including some that take a negative view toward its very existence or relevance to spatial practices; they are *grounded* insofar as they inform immanent processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formations of political boundaries, including in geographies where theological analyses do not seem relevant (ibid., p. 202).

A grounded theologies approach, importantly, calls upon scholars to use religion “as an analytical key to show that the spatial subjectivities studied in geography are in fact theologically constituted, an ontology that often entails contestation among theologies” (ibid., p. 214). This perspective is useful in the context of the topic of this dissertation insofar as it helps us to conceptualize the ways in which various theological perspectives – including secularism itself – are vying for influence in the public sphere; it does so, moreover, without insisting that the secular has somehow supplanted the sacred or that they constitute discrete socio-cultural layers. As we will see in Chapter Five, for example, battle lines in debates over Kyrgyz national identity are often drawn on explicitly theological grounds in which the state itself has staged important interventions.

1.6 Outline of Chapters

The arguments being made in this dissertation, that the categories of sacred and secular are tightly interconnected, and that the contestations and negotiations associated

with them can be observed in a variety of ideological, theological, geographical and social discourses, will proceed over the course of the next six chapters. Chapter Two has a twofold purpose: first, it aims to familiarize the reader with the general history of Central Asia from prehistory until the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917; along the way, it will also introduce the Kyrgyz people and trace what is known of their history, much of which is still shrouded in obscurity. Although this may seem like a somewhat esoteric endeavor, it is important insofar as the Kyrgyz cultural memory still includes events and personages (many of them legendary) that date as far back as the ninth century (or even earlier). More prosaically, given that the Kyrgyz people – and indeed Central Asia more generally – are obscure topics at best, Chapter Two will provide useful context for the rest of the dissertation.

Chapter Three picks up where Chapter Two leaves off: with the collapse of tsarist authority in Central Asia and the onset of the Russian Revolution in 1917, which brought the Bolsheviks to power in the region. More importantly, however, it also describes the effects of Soviet nationalities policy in reshaping the socio-political landscape of Central Asia. This process was crucial, because it had the effect of creating what were essentially nations and nation-states where none had previously existed. As we will see, moreover, in spite of (or, perhaps, because of) the ideological milieu in which they were created, the new nations of Central Asia necessarily drew upon pre-existing myth-symbol complexes rooted in cultural memory. In both the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic and, later, in independent Kyrgyzstan, for example, the *Manas* epic has consistently served as one of the primary pillars of Kyrgyz national identity. However, even during the Soviet era, the

meanings imbued in the epic have always been subject to contestation and negotiation, demonstrating the oftentimes unstable and mercurial character of cultural memory.

Chapter Four examines the history of ideological production in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, beginning with former President Askar Akaev's early attempts to construct an official ideology around the *Manas* epic. While these efforts largely failed, they were never really repudiated by the ideologically barren Bakiev government. Moreover, they set the stage for a new, and arguably more nuanced, *Manas*-centric ideology under President Almazbek Atambaev. Currently, the epic is a key component of a broader ideological agenda intended to mobilize cultural and cultural memory in the service of the Kyrgyz state. This project has also included the allocation of government funds for a major motion picture based on the nineteenth century Kyrgyz heroine, Kurmanjan Datka as well as plans to officially commemorate the *Urkun* "genocide" of 1916, when rebellious Kyrgyz tribes fled over the mountains to China after being targeted in vicious reprisal attacks by Russian colonials. However, as we will see in the case of the *Manas* epic, statist narratives of national unity and state sovereignty are sometimes undermined by alternative narratives about the meaning and significance of the *Manas* epic.

This concern with contestation and negotiation is picked up in Chapter Five, which examines the debates between people who practice what are considered to be "traditionalist" forms of Islam and those who insist on a more rigidly textualist and universalist interpretation of Islam. These debates, however, are not purely "theological": like the competing interpretations of the *Manas* epic, they are also connected with differing conceptions of what it means to be Kyrgyz, and are thus linked with political identity discourses. The state, moreover, has not stood apart from these discussions: in

fact it has in many instances intervened directly in the religious sphere, in the hopes of fostering its own version of a politically quietist “traditional Kyrgyz Islam.” It is in these contestations over the proper relationship between Islam and Kyrgyz national identity that we can observe how different – and sometimes explicitly secular – grounded theologies contend for influence in the social sphere, blurring the lines between “sacred” and “secular.”

Chapter Six shifts the focus from the social arena to a more explicit look at how the connections between the state and the sacred can be observed in the confluence of political and sacred geographies. On the one hand, sacred geographies are oftentimes constrained by the logic of the sovereign territorial regime, effectively confining the religious imaginary within the borders of nation-states. At the same time, however, we will see how sacred geographies are often constitutive of political geographies, imbuing them with substance and meaning. In Kyrgyzstan, these sacred geographies are comprised of not only the network of *mazars*, or sacred spaces, and the multitude of mosques and religious schools, but also the country’s natural environment, veneration of which is considered one of the important characteristics of Kyrgyz national identity. We can therefore observe the ways in which cultural memory, power, and theology are literally grounded in the territory of the nation-state.

Finally, Chapter Seven will offer some conclusions based on the analysis presented in the dissertation, highlighting their importance to ongoing debates over the nature of secularism, post-secularism, and the sacred in the contemporary world. As we will see, although Kyrgyzstan may be an obscure vantage point from which to study phenomena that, in the minds of many, primarily affect the developed, post-industrial

West, there is nevertheless much to be learned from taking a closer look at how the connections between the state and the sacred are performed high in the Ala Too Mountains.

Chapter Two: Central Asia and the Kyrgyz

One of our scientists did research on nomadic people – Kyrgyz people. And he discovered a map about Kyrgyz people... On that map it shows... the Kyrgyz region – from the Baltic Sea to Japanese lands. It was the Kyrgyz region! Can you imagine that? Fifth or sixth century – before the Prophet Muhammad. Have you heard about Atilla? He was Kyrgyz! He was born in Issyk-Kul. In Kyrgyzstan!
- Mambit, *daavatchi*

The region of the world that we now call Inner Asia has long been viewed, at least in the popular imagination, as a series of tropes: the “mysterious” and “exotic” Silk Roads; the “wild steppe,” from whence emerged, suddenly and violently, Chinggis Khan and Amir Timur (Tamerlane); a ghostly, decaying place, where Western adventurers hunted for the ruins of long-lost civilizations (Hopkirk, 1980); a “grand chessboard” (Brzezinski, 1997) upon which imperial governments engaged in a “Great Game,” a dusty and quaintly incomprehensible struggle between paranoid European empires over a faraway place.

Even among scholars, Inner Asia has often been seen as a “periphery” (Luong, 2004), the most “curiously overdetermined yet understudied region of the world” (Liu, 2012, p. 16), or even “a sort of black hole in the middle of the world” – a “dark tabula rasa” (Frank, 1992, pp. 43-44) that remains largely inaccessible and mostly ignored by all but a few quixotic eccentrics. As Andre Gunder Frank put it, “Even world historians only see some migrants or invaders who periodically emerge from Central Asia to impinge on [other] civilizations and the world history *they* make” (ibid.). Peter Golden concurs, noting that “[t]he study of the history and cultures of

Eurasia, a region of considerable ethnolinguistic complexity, has long been the stepchild of scholarship that has traditionally focused on the great sedentary civilizations that surrounded the steppe” (Golden, 1998, p. 1). In short, Inner Asia is often viewed in terms of what it is supposedly not: settled, legible, and civilized, a place possessing a history aside from that produced by its collisions with more familiar parts of the world.

But of course Inner Asia was not always so “peripheral” as is often depicted.⁸ For millennia, the Silk Roads served not only as vital routes for the transportation of goods across the Eurasian continent, but also as crucial arteries for the circulation of people, ideas, religions, technologies, and diseases. Inner Asia, then, was the proverbial “crossroads of civilizations.” However, as S. Frederick Starr, who has recently argued in favor of seeing Central Asia as being the cradle of a unique, if forgotten, civilization, reminds us:

But strictly speaking, a crossroads is simply the abstract point between four real places, with no identity of its own. This is emphatically not the case for early Central Asia. While it was assuredly a “crossroads *of* civilizations,” it was, even more, a *crossroads civilization*, with its own distinctive features as such (Starr, 2013, p. 69).

Even the Mongols, regarded by their Christian and Muslim contemporaries as “the scourge of God” (Halperin, 1983, p. 50), “helped to bring about ‘a set of interlocking institutions’ or ‘world networks’ of information-technology exchanges and a ‘microbial common market’ that mark[ed] the beginning of a truly global historical age” (Golden, 1998, p. 2).

⁸ Arguably, of course, they never were. Although the economies of the Central Asian republics were never as large as those in other parts of the Soviet Union, they nevertheless provided roughly 90% of the cotton grown in the USSR. It is often forgotten that Tashkent was the fourth largest city in the Soviet Union, and for the Soviet government served as “a symbol of socialism and a beacon of hope for Asian peoples who lived under Western colonial domination” (Stronksi, 2010, p. 7). And today, places like the Dordoi Bazaar on the outskirts of Bishkek, in Kyrgyzstan, are among the largest commercial hubs in the world

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, cities like Bukhara had emerged as vital centers of Islamic civilization, and Inner Asia was the home of such great thinkers as Abu Ali al-Husayn Ibn Sina (Avicenna), a theologian, who wrote several important treatises on medicine; Muhammad al-Bukhari, one of the most important collectors of *hadith*; Abu Rayhun al-Biruni, a polymath who contributed to the study of mathematics, physics, and astronomy; Mahmud Kashgari, who compiled the first dictionary of Turkic languages; and Yusuf Balasaguni, a poet and ethicist. That some of these figures are unknown in the West does not diminish the profound impact that their thought has had in other parts of the world.

Likewise, despite sometimes being stereotyped as little more than barbarian warlords, whose conquests merely threatened the progress of the “civilized world,” both Chinggis Khan and Tamerlane were impressive military leaders. Both their military campaigns and the political orders that they established profoundly shaped the course of history across the entire Eurasian continent, their influence being felt as far away as Western Europe, China, Persia, and India. The last sparks of the political system established by Chinggis Khan only died out in the eighteenth century, and one of Tamerlane’s descendants, Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, who was a native of the Ferghana Valley, founded the Mughal Empire, which controlled the majority of the Indian subcontinent prior to the advent of British colonialism.⁹ The last Mughal Emperor ruled until 1857.

The first part of this chapter will provide a basic definition of what is meant by the term “Central Asia,” which is a geographic label that is applied, often inconsistently, to a large swathe of the Eurasian continent. The remainder of the chapter will be given over to a discussion of the basic contours of the history of the region up to the nineteenth century. The aim is to provide an

⁹ The last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, was only deposed by the British in 1857 in the wake of the so-called “Indian Mutiny.”

outline of the history of Central Asia, as well as of the Kyrgyz people, in order to familiarize readers with the broader context in which the remainder of this dissertation must be understood. Neither cultural memory nor national identity, after all, arise *sui generis*: both are inextricably rooted in a given community's past, real or imagined, and that past is always interwoven with the broader fabric of history.

2.1. Bounding the Region

Gavin Hambly notes that “[a]s a geographical expression term ‘Central Asia’ tends to elude precise definition” (Hambly, 1966, p. xi). As it turns out, Hambly was quite right. He himself defined the Central Asia in terms of its “complete isolation from oceanic influences” (ibid., p. 1), and argued that “it may fairly be said that where the steppe and desert give way to a different landscape there Central Asia ends – as in the north, where the steppes meet the southern limits of the *taiga*, the Siberian forest-zone” (ibid.). However, the steppe extends into areas of southern Russia and Ukraine that are not customarily considered to be part of Central Asia. Toynbee (1934), meanwhile, has defined the region strictly in terms of latitude and longitude, while Denis Sinor argues that “Central Eurasia” is “that part of the continent of Eurasia that lies beyond the borders of the great sedentary civilizations” (1969, p. 2). Anatoli Khazanov (1979) usefully distinguishes “Inner Asia” – Mongolia, Tibet, Dzungaria and Kashgaria (all now part of China) – from “Middle Asia,” which he defines as the area bounded by the Caspian Sea in the west, and the Pamir and Hindu Kush ranges in the south. Svat Soucek goes further, defining “Inner Asia” as including all of what Khazanov’s “Middle Asia” and “Inner Asia,” but excluding Tibet (Soucek, 2000, p. iix). Meanwhile, Andre Gunder Frank has questioned the utility of the term altogether:

[S]o where does [the Afro-Eurasian continent’s] center begin and end? How much of present day China, Russia, India, Pakistan,

Iran, or even European Hungary were effectively working parts of Central Asia during what times of their history? Speaking of Europe, what about the Magyars, Bulgars, Turks, and others who migrated as recently as in medieval times; or Dorians, Hittites and many other peoples who populated Greece and the Levant in classical and ancient times? Indeed Aryans went to India and Indo “Europeans” and their languages came to Europe. Yet all originated in “Central” Asia. So where and when does Central Asia begin and end (Frank, 1992, p. 48)?

Clearly, there are numerous ways of defining what we mean by terms like “Central Asia” and “Inner Asia.” However, for the purposes of this dissertation, the following conventions will be adopted (acknowledging, of course, that they are no less arbitrary than any other conventions): “Central Asia” will refer specifically to the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan; “Inner Asia,” meanwhile, will be used to refer to a broader geographical area, which includes Central Asia (as defined here), as well as Afghanistan, Iran, Mongolia, Tibet, and parts of northern and western China, including, but not necessarily limited to, Xinjiang, Manchuria, and Gansu. To this, one could perhaps even add portions of modern-day Turkey, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Russia. This is because, as noted by Frank, the entire Inner Asian region has long been tied together, economically, and, at times, politically, and current-day international borders often reflect only contemporary political realities, rather than longer-term historical and cultural connections.

2.2 Physical Geography

Physical geography has played an important role in the development, economic, social, and political, of Central Asia. The region is bounded in the south by the imposing Pamir, Tien Shan, and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, some of the tallest in the world, and in the north by the interminable Siberian *taiga*. Historically, the mountain ranges have served to hinder easy

movement from south to north, impeding trade (though certainly not preventing it) and, importantly, the easy projection of military force and political power from the steppe into the Iranian Plateau and China (and vice-versa). Likewise, the Kazakh Steppe (also known as the Dasht-i Qipchaq or the Qipchaq Steppe), which lies south of the *taiga* and runs in a belt from east to west, facilitates longitudinal movement, particularly by mounted nomads. But it long proved to be a significant barrier for Russian colonialists from the north and the armies of the sedentary states of Central Asia. In the west the Caspian Sea has long served as a major trade and transportation hub, while in the east the Altai range has historically only been able to support relatively small populations of pastoral nomads.

Aside from its inhospitable physiography, the climate of Central Asia can be characterized as arid. Much of Central Asia receives less than 10 inches of rain per year on average (Brunn, Toops, & Gilbreath, 2012, p. 53). While much of the steppe only receives between 11 and 19 inches of precipitation per year (*ibid.*), though as Hambly notes, this is sufficient for non-intensive grazing (Hambly, 1966, p. 4). However, there are also several major deserts in region, including the Kyzyl Kum ("Red Sand") and Karakum ("Black Sand"), which only receive an average of 4 inches of rainfall per year. In the Tarim Basin, which is located in what is now the Xinjiang province of China, lies the formidable Taklimakan Desert, which is almost totally uninhabitable but is ringed by important oasis settlements such as Kashgar, Xotan, Turfan, and Aksu. Due to their extreme aridity, neither the steppe nor the deserts can support large populations, and the deserts are largely unsuitable for grazing as well.

However, Central Asia has several major rivers whose origins are in the glaciers of the mountains of the south. Unsurprisingly, given the region's lack of precipitation, the growth of sedentary agriculture and the rise of states in Central Asia is closely associated with proximity to

these rivers (Brunn et al., 2012, p. 58). The Amu Darya and Syr Darya (also known in pre-modern sources as the Oxus and Jaxartes, respectively), which flow north out of the Pamirs and into the Aral Sea, are the most important waterways in the southern part of Central Asia, but the Chui, Ili, Ishim, and Irtysh Rivers are also crucial water sources in the region. Apart from the Caspian Sea, the largest bodies of water in the region are the aforementioned Aral Sea,¹⁰ Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan, and Lake Issyk Kul in Kyrgyzstan.

Even after the widespread adoption of irrigation techniques, Central Asia's generally arid climate meant that sedentary agriculture was simply not viable throughout much of the region. However, small settlements were able to survive in areas with sufficient access to water and suitable soil for farming, and many of them eventually developed into major urban centers. The Ferghana Valley (often rendered as Farghona), which is currently divided between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, today supports average population densities of 360 people per square mile (Starr, 2011, p. xii).

The domestication of the horse, which likely occurred around 4800 BCE (Golden, 2011, p. 10), represented a quantum leap in the development of human civilization. More will be said about this event, but for now it is enough to note that the mobility afforded by domesticated horses meant that the vast, arid steppes of Eurasia could now support communities of pastoral nomads, who could easily move from place to place along with their herds. On the steppes, which were largely unsuitable for settled agriculture, a parallel complex of cultures arose, sometimes complementary and sometimes hostile those of the sedentary farmers.¹¹

¹⁰ Decades of overexploitation of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers for growing cotton have effectively destroyed the Aral Sea (Brunn et al., 2012, pp. 64-66; Micklin, 2007).

¹¹ As David Sneath reminds us, "Much of the classical literature on steppe society has treated it as a single, timeless, traditional complex, frequently ranging across different regions and epochs to construct general models of Eurasian pastoral society" (Sneath, 2007, p. 21). In reality, however, steppe societies were often radically different in their internal organization, culture, and patterns of political legitimation.

2.3 The Silk Road

Although the forbidding physical geography of Central Asia has historically served as a considerable barrier to movement, the region nevertheless developed, at a relatively early date, into a major pivot of international trade.¹² Perhaps as early as the third millennium BCE, commercial links with India, Iran, the Middle East, China, and the scattered groups of taiga-dwellers to the north had been established. The rugged mountains and parched deserts meant that trade was inevitably funneled through certain mountain passes and oasis cities. Control over these routes was extremely lucrative, and many of the settlements along the caravan routes grew into thriving commercial centers. This network of trade routes, which has come to be known colloquially as the “Silk Roads,” had a profound impact upon the history of the Eurasian continent, and indeed of the world.¹³

The Silk Roads were vital arteries that served to connect the nascent societies of Central Asia to one another, but also to link more far-flung societies, such as China, Greece, and the Roman Empire, both with Central Asia and, ultimately, with one another. Thus, as Gavin Hambly has noted,

[Central Asia’s] ancient caravan routes provided a slender but almost unbroken thread by means of which... peripheral civilizations acquired a limited knowledge of their neighbors in addition to valuable commodities which might otherwise have been inaccessible or at least more difficult to obtain (Hambly, 1966, p. 5).

¹² Frances Wood notes that “seven thousand years before the Silk Roads were first given that name, goods were traded between the oasis towns surrounding the Central Asian deserts and China” (Wood, 2002, p. 26).

¹³ The term “Silk Road” (*Die Seidenstrasse*) was only coined in the nineteenth century, by the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen. See: Waugh (2007); Wood (2002, p. 9).

But, in addition to commercial goods, the Silk Roads also served as vectors for the spread of peoples, religions, languages, ideas, technology, disease, and genetic material (Christian, 2000, p. 3).

Although Central Asia is sometimes viewed as little more than a zone of transit between the markets of China and the West, S. Frederick Starr, has noted the crucial role played by the region in transcontinental trade:

first, the emergence of regional cities as commercial entrepôts; second the creation of a skilled class of professional traders with networks extending to distant lands; and, third, the development of export-driven economies based on high-quality local industries and manufactures... The presence from early times of all these merchants – most of them locally based – assured that Central Asian cities would become the major center of banking and finance for trade between China, India, and the Middle East.” (Starr, 2013, pp. 43-44).

Indeed, the connective and circulatory roles played by the Silk Roads led some scholars to liken them to a “premodern pattern of globalization” (Foltz, 2010), whose effects on the ancient and medieval worlds were no less transformative than contemporary globalization. Others, building on the work of Immanuel Wallerstein (2000), have suggested that the Silk Roads were fundamental to an ancient “world system” (Frank, 1992; Frank & Gills, 1993).

Inevitably, of course, new nodes of commerce in Central Asia sprung up over time, while others vanished as a result of climatic changes, shifts in patterns of trade, or war and instability. But the network itself proved to be remarkably durable. Even the growth of trade via sea routes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which severely curtailed the volume of overland trade to Europe, did not eradicate it entirely. Instead, routes began to shift, for example, to take advantage of new opportunities in tsarist Russia. Only in the twentieth century, with the

imposition of tight border controls by the Soviet Union, did overland, international trade across Inner Asia largely cease.

But there is now talk of a “New Silk Road” in Central Asia (de Cordier, 1996; Karrar, 2009; Kim & Indeo, 2013; Werner, 2003), in which international commerce and geopolitics are once again driving great powers to try to (re)assert their hegemony over Central Asia. China, Russia, and the United States, as well as regional powers, such as Iran and Turkey, are all working to extend their influence, be it political, cultural, military, or economic, over the states of the region (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013, p. 3). However, this situation is not a new development. Indeed, despite its supposedly “persistent peripheral status” (ibid., p. xv) attempts by its neighbors to dominate Central Asia’s cities, control its trade routes, and subdue its people have been a leitmotif of its history almost as far back as it can be traced.

2.4 Farmers and Horsemen

Central Asian history down to the twentieth century was, to a significant degree, characterized by the relationship between settled agriculturalists and nomadic pastoralists.¹⁴ This relationship was at the same time symbiotic and antagonistic. Thus, while the nomads have sometimes been written off as “barbarians” (Grousset, 1970, p. viii; Sinor, 1969, p. 5), the dynamic between settled and nomadic peoples was characterized as much by the mutual transmission of economic and cultural capital as by hostility and military confrontation. In fact, it should be noted that the two were never quite as distinct as is sometimes portrayed: nomads often abandoned the steppe for the comforts of the city, producing “powerful ruling houses that quickly took on the trappings of settled dynastic empires” (Golden, 2011, p. 15).

¹⁴ Interestingly, this split also broke down along ethno-linguistic lines. “[T]he nomad,” as Svat Soucek notes, “has in historic times been mostly Turco-Mongol, whereas the sedentary was either an Indo-European or else the Turkicized descendant of Indo-Europeans” (Soucek, 2000, p. 41).

Likewise, the rulers of Central Asia's city-states not only relied on nomads for protection and to sustain commerce with other nodes along the Silk Roads, but were in fact deeply influenced by – and sometimes descended from – the nomadic peoples with whom they interacted. In some cases, as in the Khanate of Khoqand in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nomads played the role of “kingmaker” for the rulers of the cities. Ultimately, as Peter Golden has noted:

Nomadic-sedentary interaction ranged over a broad spectrum of relationships, peaceful and hostile, depending on the political and economic needs of the two societies at a given time. Certainly the traditional image of the Eurasian nomad as conqueror and despoiler is grossly exaggerated. Indeed, over the course of history, the nomad has been as much put upon as his sedentary neighbor. In the Modern Era, it is the nomad who has suffered the greatest losses (Golden, 1992, p. 7).

Nomadic societies, unsurprisingly, were largely organized around the rearing of various kinds of livestock, including cattle, goats, sheep, horses, camels, and yaks (Golden, 1998, p. 8). With the change of the seasons, some pastoral nomads, such as the Kazakhs, would move themselves and their herds “horizontally” from one pasture to another; However, in more mountainous areas, such as in present-day Kyrgyzstan, periodic movement often took the form of “vertical” transhumance (Golden, 1998, pp. 8-9). In either case, the nomads produced furs, meat, dairy products, and other products derived from animals, and traded them with the city-dwellers in exchange for metal weapons, silk, and grains that the nomads needed but were unable to produce on their own (*ibid.*, p. 20). Thus, while there were certainly antagonistic interactions between nomads and city-dwellers, often taking the form of intermittent raiding on the part of the

nomads or attempts by sedentary states to pacify the steppe peoples, these kinds of interactions were not necessarily determinant of the character of the relationship between them.

2.5 Early Indo-Europeans

Evidence for very early human populations in Inner Asia has been unearthed in various places, ranging from sites in the Pamir Mountains in present-day Tajikistan to the Mongolian Altai. Some of these groups can be characterized as relatively sedentary, while others appear to have been wandering hunter-gatherers (Okladnikov, 1990). Agriculture likely spread to Central Asia sometime around 6000 BCE, although it is unclear whether it spread from other agricultural hearths, such as Mesopotamia, or developed independently (Golden, 2011, p. 9). At the same time, cattle breeding became more widespread, although Okladnikov notes that pastoralism did not yet resemble the type of nomadic livestock herding that developed later, being far more sedentary in nature (1990, p. 83).

The remains of stone tools, ceramics, and other implements have been recovered from sites associated with different groups, but it appears that different technologies were by no means distributed evenly among them. In any case, by the third millennium BCE knowledge of bronze-working had begun to enter the region, possibly from parts of Russia or northern China (*ibid.*, p. 83). Thus, by 2000 BCE relatively sophisticated “Bronze Age” societies had begun to develop throughout Central Asia, including the so-called “Oxus Civilization,” which was centered around the Margiana oasis of modern-day Turkmenistan (Hiebert, 1994, p. 372).

The Oxus Civilization was built on the foundations of settled agriculture and animal herding (Hiebert, Meadow, Miller, & Moore, 1994), but there is also evidence that it engaged in long-distance trade with India and Mesopotamia (Christian, 2000, p. 13), demonstrating the antiquity of the Silk Road trade networks. In addition to long-distance trade, the Oxus

Civilization and other Bronze Age cultures in Central Asia also engaged in the kinds of symbiotic commercial patterns with the nomadic peoples described previously.

One of the most significant events in the history of Inner Asia, and indeed the world, the domestication of the horse, may have occurred as early as 4800 BCE, although as Peter Golden notes, the precise dating of this epochal development is vehemently disputed (Golden, 2011, p. 10). Although horses had long been raised for the purposes of obtaining food, hides, bones, etc., developments in metal working technology during the Bronze Age enabled the invention of the bit (Okladnikov, 1990, p. 94), which itself represented a quantum leap in human history. As noted previously, the mobility that the development of horseback riding enabled spurred the evolution of a material culture that differed radically from sedentary peoples. Okladnikov also highlighted the rich spiritual and socio-political cultures of the nomads (ibid., p. 95), both of which were equally suited to their highly fluid and peripatetic existence. Importantly, the domestication of the horse also spurred the development new, highly mobile, forms of warfare, which would ultimately have world-historical consequences.

Evidence of the first human populations in Inner Asia is quite scarce, but we know that by the first millennium BCE, Indo-European peoples had begun to migrate into the region. Two of the most well-known of these groups were the Scythians (also known as Saka) and the Sarmatians, both of whom emerged between about 750 and 400 BCE (Melyukova, 1990, p. 97). Much of what we know about the Scythians comes from Herodotus, who devoted a significant portion of his *Histories* to them (Herodotus, 2007, pp. 281-338).¹⁵ Although the Scythians are often associated with nomadism there is some evidence that at least some Scythian tribes were sedentary agriculturalists (Melyukova, 1990, pp. 101-102). Moreover, while some scholars have

¹⁵ A.I. Melyukova, however, notes that the three different accounts of the origins of the Scythian people given by Herodotus contradict one another, so our picture of their emergence is necessarily hazy (Melyukova, 1990, p. 99).

argued that Herodotus was almost certainly incorrect in asserting the existence of a “common Scythian culture binding together tribes from the Danube to the Altai over many centuries” (Wheeler, 2009a, pp. 759-760), Everett Wheeler argues that the Scythians nevertheless

belonged to that complex of Iranian-speaking peoples inhabiting the vast expanse of Central Asia between the Ural Mountains of Russia and Kazakhstan and the Altai Mountains of southern Siberia in the third and second millennia, including the ancestors of the Medes and the Persians and the forebears of the various tribes of Sacae (also Scythians) around the Aral Sea and the Jaxartes (modern Syr-Darya) and Oxus (modern Amu-Darya) rivers. Many of these peoples shared some common cultural traits, particularly the building of subterranean burial chambers topped by large mounds for members of their elite (Wheeler, 2009b, p. 756).

Throughout Central Asia, it is still possible to find such burial mounds, and the State Historical Museum of Kyrgyzstan contains numerous Scythian artifacts recovered from various parts of the country.

In addition to the Scythians, other Indo-European groups inhabited Inner Asia as well. The Tocharian people inhabited what is now the Xinjiang Province of China. Little is definitively known about the Tocharians, and their origins are hotly disputed (Hemphill & Mallory, 2004). What is known is that they spoke an identifiably Indo-European language, which, along with Tocharian culture more generally, died out after the Turkic Uyghurs migrated into the Tarim Basin in the eighth century CE. However, it seems clear that the Tocharians adopted Buddhism, and most of the Tocharian manuscripts that have been recovered are translations of Buddhist texts (Guang-da, 1996, pp. 283-284). Moreover, Tocharian society seems to have been organized around commerce, and available evidence seems to indicate that, until being overrun by the Uyghurs, they were relatively prosperous (*ibid.*, p. 284).

Similarly, in what are now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the Sogdians and the Khwarazmians began to establish thriving urban communities, and both were to become significant powers in their own right. Sogdia (sometimes rendered as Sogdiana), which was a linguistically and culturally unified collection of largely independent city-states that included Samarkand, Bukhara, Khujand, and Panjikent, was one of the richest and most influential polities in Inner Asian history (Marshak & Negmatov, 1996, p. 233). This position was achieved both on the basis of its strong agricultural sector and, especially, its commercial power. Paintings recovered from Sogdian ruins, such as Penjikent in modern-day Tajikistan, depict the affluence of their merchant class, which became influential in other Inner Asian polities as well, such as the Türk and Uyghur khanates.

In many ways, the Sogdians were the archetypal “Silk Road” culture: Sogdia’s extensive networks of trade resulted in the development of a strikingly wealthy society that was also remarkably cosmopolitan. The Sogdians practiced Buddhism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity, and Zoroastrianism (Marshak & Negmatov, 1996, p. 253), but never adopted any as an “official” religion. Perhaps more than any other culture, Sogdians were the vector by which a number of different religions spread throughout Inner Asia.

Despite its economic and cultural power, however, Sogdian military might was no match for Alexander the Great, who defeated the Sogdians in 327 BCE and subsequently combined the territories of Sogdia and Bactria (the northern regions of Afghanistan) into a single province. In 250 BCE, the ruler of this province declared his independence and established the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, which would survive until 125 BCE, before being toppled by nomadic invaders who were fleeing from warfare in the east.

While the Sogdians were establishing their cultural and commercial hold on Transoxania, further east, in what is now Mongolia, the Xiongnu tribal confederation was beginning to coalesce. Although little is known about the origins of the Xiongnu (sometimes rendered in the literature as Hsiung-nu), there is some speculation that they were the ancestors of the Huns (Hambly, 1966, p. 38).¹⁶ In any case, the Xiongnu tribal confederation, which was centered on present-day Mongolia, began to take shape in the third century BCE, defeating neighboring nomadic tribes and extending its control over significant portions of the steppe. The Xiongnu expansion may have begun as a defensive response to the bellicose policies of the Qin dynasty in China, which had moved to fortify its frontiers and to subdue the nomads who lived beyond the nascent Great Wall.

Hostilities between China and the rapidly expanding Xiongnu tribal confederation began around 215 BCE and continued intermittently until sometime after 93 CE. During this time, Chinese emperors acknowledged the authority of the Xiongnu leaders and the Chinese state entered into an elaborate tributary relationship with the nomads in exchange for guarantees that the Xiongnu would refrain from invading Chinese territory (Ishjamts, 1994, p. 154). Nevertheless, as a result of protracted warfare, both with the Chinese and with other neighboring states and tribes, the vitality of the Xiongnu confederation was gradually sapped. It succumbed to civil war, occasioned by a succession dispute, and it ultimately split into two separate wings. In the end, the “northern” wing was pushed west by Chinese pressure into Transoxania and the “southern” wing was subjugated and incorporated into the Chinese state (ibid., p. 155).

Apart from their remarkable military successes, Xiongnu seem otherwise to have had much in common with other Indo-European groups that existed during the same period. Over time, the northern Xiongnu gradually became “ethnically differentiated” from the southern

¹⁶ This speculation, however, is hotly contested. See: Beckwith (2009, pp. 404-405, nn. 51-52).

Xiongnu, who became dependents of China (Golden, 1992). The mixture of Xiongnu culture with neighboring Iranian- and Turkic-speaking peoples, eventually resulted in the emergence of the Hunnic culture; However, as Étienne de la Vaissière cautions: “The Huns of Central Asia consciously succeeded the Xiongnu and established themselves as their heirs, and an authentic Xiongnu element probably existed within them, although it was probably very much in the minority within a conglomerate of various peoples” (de la Vaissière, 2006).

Much like the Huns three centuries later, the rapid and violent expansion of the Xiongnu tribal confederation set off the first wave of nomadic migrations across Eurasia. And much as during the Hunnic invasions, sedentary states were often unable to adequately defend against the invaders. The population movements that resulted from the rise of the Xiongnu pushed large numbers of displaced nomads towards Sogdia, the kingdom of Greco-Bactria established in Afghanistan after the conquests of Alexander the Great, and the city-states of the Tarim Basin. A similar pattern would repeat itself numerous times throughout history, and the rise of powerful nomadic confederations in Central Asia eventually resulted in the destruction of the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the Abbasid Caliphate, Kievan Rus’, and countless other states and empires.

By the end of the first century CE, Xiongnu power had largely waned, and the power vacuum in Inner Asia opened up space for the rise of other regional powers. One particularly notable state was the Kushan Empire, which was established in what are now Afghanistan and Pakistan. Kushan was founded by the remnants of the Yuezhi (sometimes rendered as Yüeh-chih), which was one of the tribal groups that had been displaced by the Xiongnu. The Yuezhi had been pushed into the territory of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, a former satrapy of the empire of Alexander the Great, from which it had declared its independence in 250 BCE. The Yuezhi established the Kushan Empire on the ruins of the Greco-Bactrian state, whose collapse

they had helped to precipitate, and they soon began to expand south, towards India. Like Greco-Bactria and Sogdia, the Kushan Empire was characterized by a striking cosmopolitanism, combining Hellenistic influences from Greco-Bactria and Buddhism from India. The Kushan period was also one of significant progress in the construction of infrastructure and irrigation, which was made possible by a remarkable degree of political stability and economic prosperity (Mukhamedjanov, 1994, p. 265).

However, by the middle of the third century CE, the Kushan Empire was in the process of being conquered by Sasanid Persia. By 270 CE the Sasanids succeeded in dismembering the Kushan Empire, but their control over the region was soon challenged by the rise of the Huns, who by this time had emerged as the new power on the steppe. One Hunnic group, the Chionites, began harassing Sasanid lands in the 350s, and within a decade they had taken control of the former Kushan territories. Only a quarter of a century later, however, the Chionite Huns themselves were displaced by other Hunnic groups, such as the Kidarites and Hephthalites, and they subsequently moved west, where they came into contact with Germanic tribes living on the right bank of the Volga. These Germanic tribes in turn were pushed further west, into Europe, where, about 100 years later, they ultimately helped to precipitate the final collapse of the already weakened Roman Empire.

2.6 The Emergence of the Turkic Peoples

The period following the splintering of the Xiongnu confederation, the rise of the Huns, and the dismemberment of Kushan also witnessed the collapse of the Han Dynasty, ushering in the tumultuous Three Kingdoms era in China. The Middle Kingdom subsequently lost its grip on its northern frontiers, and the Silk Road trade began to decline. Consequently, much of Inner Asia entered into a state of political and economic turmoil. It was out of this milieu that the first

Turkic peoples appeared. Although their origin and history is uncertain at best, they were to make a lasting impact on the world stage. The Türks,¹⁷ sometimes called the Kök Türks or Göktürks (“Blue” or “Celestial” Türks), had hitherto been the subjects of the Jou-Jan, another nomadic group that inhabited central Mongolia. In 553, however, the Türks, under the leadership of a man named Bumīn,¹⁸ rose up against the Jou-Jan and subsequently established an independent khanate.¹⁹

The Türk Khanate quickly established itself on the steppe, allying with Sasanid Persia to crush the Hephthalites, whose lands in Bactria and Transoxania they divided amongst themselves (Hambly, 1966, p. 56). Before long, the *demesne* of the Türks nominally stretched from Manchuria to the shores of the Caspian, making it “the first trans-Eurasian state directly linking Europe with East Asia” (Golden, 2011, p. 37). In reality, however, the Kök Türk Khanate was split between its eastern and western regions, the former being ruled by the Khan Bumīn, the latter by his brother, Ishtemi. Infighting between the eastern and western portions of the Qaganate was endemic, and rivalries between the eastern and western khans were encouraged by a newly-energetic China during the Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties.

Riven by internal divisions, the Türk empire soon began to fracture. Like the southern wing of the Xiongnu confederation before them, the Eastern Türks were crushed by China in 630 CE; the Western Türks followed suit in 659 CE. However, by the end of the seventh century the

¹⁷ To avoid confusion, the group who formed the sixth century khanate will be referred to as “Türks” or the “Kök Türks,” while the titular nationality of modern-day Turkey will be called Turks. Similarly, the language spoken by the modern Turks will be referred to as “Turkish,” while the broader ethno-linguistic group, which includes the Turks, the Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz, the Nogai, etc., will be referred to as “Turkic” – i.e. “the Chagatai language was a mixture of Turkic and Persian languages,” “the Özbeks were a nomadic Turkic group,” or “Turkish is one of the Turkic languages.”

¹⁸ Interestingly, the ruling clan of the Türk Empire, the Ashina, appears not to have been ethnically Turkic, and, according to Chinese sources, may have been of Xiongnu descent (Atwood, 2004, p. 553).

¹⁹ A khanate (also spelled *qaghanate*) is a characteristic nomadic political system, in which ultimate authority rests with the khan (also spelled *qaghan*). Until the nineteenth century, khanates were one of the most common forms of political organization in Inner Asia.

Tang court was preoccupied by palace coups and rebellions, and the Middle Kingdom's power in Inner Asia began to wane. Türk tribal leaders took advantage of Chinese feebleness and moved to restore their empire, establishing a Second Türk Khanate, which lasted from 682 until 744.

The Türks shared many of the same socio-cultural characteristics that are customarily identified with steppe peoples: they practiced pastoral nomadism; their military tactics emphasized mobility and horse-based archery; their relationships with settled peoples, such as the Sogdians and the Chinese, were marked by both cooperation and antagonism; and much of their wealth was derived from control over – or preying upon – the lucrative Silk Routes, whose importance was continuing to increase. Although the Türk Empire was larger than its predecessors, such as the Xiongnu confederation, it did not depart dramatically from established practice of seeking tribute in exchange for promises to refrain from raiding cities and trade routes.

If, in its broad outlines, the Kök Türk Empire was not dramatically different from other nomadic polities, its historical legacy should not be understated. The rise of the Türks brought to the world stage an ethnonym that persists to this day, while many of their influential contemporaries, such as the Jou-Jan and the Hephthalites, are obscure even to most scholars. Importantly, the dream of founding a Turkic empire centered on the Orkhon region of Mongolia, moreover, became something of a motif among many of the other Turkic tribes, such as the Uyghurs and the Karluks, who succeeded the Kök Türks on the steppe.

Culturally speaking, the Türks were no less important. As Denis Sinor points out, the Türks are the first people who we can conclusively identify as using a Türkic script to write a Türkic language (Sinor, 1990). Türk culture and traditions, moreover, continue to have an enduring impact. To this day, many Turkic peoples continue to revere Tengri, the sky god, and

Umay, the goddess of fertility, both of whom were important in the Türk pantheon. Moreover, the practice of venerating the dead and visiting sacred mountains and groves, which was common among the Türks, is still evident among the various Turkic peoples who still inhabit Central Asia. As we will see in Chapter Five, the cultural memory of these ancient Türk religious beliefs persists today in Kyrgyz culture.

2.7 The Uyghur Khanate

As often has been the case in Inner Asian history, the emergence of a new tribal confederation precipitated the downfall of its predecessor. So too was the case with the Second Türkic Empire. In 744 CE, the Uyghurs (sometimes rendered as Uighurs or Uigurs),²⁰ allied themselves with other neighboring Turkic tribes, such as the Qarluqs, to throw off the yoke of the declining Türk Empire. Like the Kök Türks before them, the Uyghurs established their own khanate, which was centered in present-day Mongolia.

Although the Uyghur state only survived for about 100 years (744–840 CE), it was nevertheless notable for a number of reasons. Partly as a result of the influence of Sogdians in Uyghur society, it was commerce, rather than pastoral nomadism, that formed the basis of Uyghur society. With Sogdian help, the Uyghurs were able to establish trade relations with China that were remarkably lucrative, even by the standards of the medieval Silk Road (Mackerras, 1990). Consequently, the Uyghurs, unlike most of the other Turkic peoples around them, partially abandoned the nomadic lifestyle and began to build substantial cities (Mackerras, 1990). The Uyghur capital, Karabalghasun, was protected by impressive fortifications --

²⁰ Although they are both Turkic peoples, the connection between the medieval Uyghurs and the ethno-national group known today as the Uyghurs, which inhabits the modern-day Xinjiang province in China, are uncertain at best. It is now commonly accepted by scholars that the ethnonym effectively disappeared for over five hundred years, only to reemerge in the 1920s during the period when the Bolsheviks were beginning the process of identifying and classifying the different ethnic groups that lived in the Soviet Union. The term spread to Xinjiang in 1935, during the tenure of Sheng Shicai, a Chinese warlord who was at that time a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and a devotee of Stalin. Since that time, the ethnonym Uyghur has been applied to the Turkic people who live in and around the Tarim Basin. See: Bovingdon (2010, pp. 12-13); Gladney (1990).

according to one account it had “twelve huge iron gates” (Sinor, Shimin, & Kychanov, 1998, p. 192) -- had well-defined districts for different trades, each of which was enclosed by its own walls, and served a major trade and administrative center. Such a city stood in marked contrast to the yurt-communities of the Türks, “which were little more than short-lived conglomerations of tents with a section containing a few mud-baked buildings” (Golden, 1992, p. 45).

While the Uyghur Khanate thus stood out from its largely nomadic Turkic neighbors, perhaps the most remarkable thing about Uyghur society was in the realm of culture and religion. Sometime in the mid-eighth century, the Uyghur khan and his court officially adopted Manichaeism, a religion that originated in Persia in the third century CE. Influenced by Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, and Buddhism (Foltz, 2010, pp. 70-75), Manichaeism had initially experienced rapid growth, and even patronage, from the Sasanids. However, once the religion’s founder, Mani, began to style himself as “the culminating prophet in human history, following Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus” (ibid., p. 73), he began to draw the ire of the dominant Zoroastrian establishment. Mani was imprisoned in 276 CE, dying not long after.

Manichaeans were heavily persecuted in the Persian and Roman Empires, but the Manichaean religion, like Nestorian Christianity before it, percolated east along the Silk Roads and found more receptive audiences in Inner Asia. The spread of Manichaeism was, to a significant degree, due to the efforts of Sogdian Manichaeans, who were instrumental in translating Manichaean texts from Syriac and Persian into the languages of Inner Asia (ibid., p. 75). From Sogdia, Manichaeism spread thence into China, where it enjoyed an ambivalent existence at best – official Chinese attitudes were on the whole rather negative, but there is some evidence that Manichaean communities persisted in China until the seventeenth century (Foltz, 2010, pp. 130-131). It was from Manichaeans living in China, as well as from the Sogdians, that

the Uyghurs adopted their new religion. Some have speculated that the Uyghurs' seemingly improbable choice of official religion was born out of a desire to assert their cultural autonomy from China:

Mou-yü kaghan's choice of Manichaeism rather than Buddhism or other religions was motivated partly by a desire to show his independence of T'ang influence. This was a faith which the Chinese disliked. It could boast but few adherents in the Middle Kingdom and the emperor had even condemned it... To adopt a religion such as Manichaeism would demonstrate to the emperor that he cared nothing for China, and would help lessen its political and cultural impact in his empire (Mackerras, 1990, p. 331).

The Uyghur khan's disdain for China was not entirely unwarranted. In fact, the Uyghurs were, for a time, one of the most influential states in Inner Asia. Although not as military powerful as the Türks had been at their apogee, the Uyghurs dominated the Silk Road trade routes, and they even became heavily involved in Chinese internal politics. Following the tributary patterns established between China and the Xiongnu, several Chinese princesses were married to Uyghur rulers as a means of cementing relationships between the two states. Moreover, after the pivotal Battle of Talas, about which more will be said later, the Uyghur Khanate assisted the Chinese state during the crippling An Lushan Rebellion, which broke out in 755. The revolt began when An Lushan, a successful Chinese general of Sogdian and Turkic ancestry (Golden, 2011, p. 44), declared himself emperor and established a rival dynasty in the northern regions of China. Although An Lushan was assassinated by his own son in 757 (who was in turn assassinated shortly thereafter), the rebellion continued until 763, severely impacting Chinese economic and agricultural output.

The years of fighting took a devastating toll on the Chinese state. Not only did the Middle Kingdom once again lose control over most of its territories in Inner Asia, but it was also forced to borrow heavily from Uyghur moneylenders in order to pay its armies, which were needed both to pacify areas of rebellion as well as to fend off the predations of increasingly aggressive neighbors, such as the Tibetan Empire, who sought to take advantage of Chinese weakness (Beckwith, 2009, p. 158). Peter Golden has suggested that the Uyghurs helped to prop up the Chinese state, both militarily and economically, not out of any kind of altruism, but rather in order to “maintain their access to Chinese goods and markets.” In fact, Golden argues that “the Uyghurs kept a weakened T’ang dynasty in power in order to maintain the level of exploitation of the Middle Kingdom to which they had become accustomed” (Golden, 1992, p. 159).

However, the Uyghur Khanate itself was continually faced with both internal and external pressures. The Qarluqs, who had, along with the Uyghurs, hastened the demise of the Second Türk Empire, effectively supplanted the Türks on the steppes east of Mongolia. By the middle of the ninth century, continual warfare with the Qarluqs was putting serious strain on the Uyghurs, whose armies were by that time also committed to the Chinese war against Tibet. At the same time, the Uyghur government itself had begun to succumb to the rot of perpetual court intrigue, and the khanate became increasingly unstable.

2.8 The Yenisei Kyrgyz

Around the same that the Uyghurs were finishing off the remains of the Türk Empire in Mongolia, another small group, known as the as the Kyrgyz (variously rendered as Kirgiz, Kirghiz, Qırğız, or Qırghız), established a nomadic state on the upper Yenisei, in modern-day Tuva. The earliest records that refer to the Kyrgyz are Chinese sources dating from sometime between 202 BCE and 9 CE (Drompp, 2002, p. 480). Although their exact origins remain

unclear, some argue that the Yenisei Kyrgyz were initially a multiethnic conglomerate that, much like the Huns, integrated various tribal groups that were displaced during the the Xiongnu era, and which subsequently became linguistically and culturally Turkified (Golden, 1992, pp. 176-178; Kyzlasov, 1969, pp. 161-169). Interestingly, both Chinese and Persian sources describe the Yenisei Kyrgyz as “tall people, red-haired, white-faced and green (or blue-)eyed” (Golden, 1992, p. 178; Sinor et al., 1998, p. 197).

The Kyrgyz likely came under Kōk Türk rule during the First Türk Khanate, and warfare between the Kyrgyz and the Türks continued unabated until the Türk Empire finally collapsed. However, after overthrowing the Türks, the Uyghur Khanate moved to subjugate the Yenisei Kyrgyz, and some sources report that in 758 CE the Uyghurs managed to defeat a Kyrgyz army of 50,000 warriors (Drompp, 1999, p. 482; Golden, 1992, p. 180). Subsequently, the Yenisei Kyrgyz largely disappear from the historical record, only reemerging in the ninth century, when warfare between the Kyrgyz and the Uyghur Khanate once again broke out. By this time, as we have seen, the Uyghur state was exhausted by warfare and internal dysfunction, and in 840 CE the Yenisei Kyrgyz crushed the Uyghur Khanate, whereupon the Uyghurs fled their Mongolian homeland, eventually settling in the Tarim Basin and abandoning nomadism entirely.

The history of the Kyrgyz after the destruction of the Uyghur Khanate, however, is nearly as murky as their origins. Some have claimed that the victorious Kyrgyz established a powerful, albeit short-lived empire in Mongolia, the so-called “Great Kyrgyz Power” (*Kyrgyzskoe velikoderzhavie*), sometimes referred to as the “Great Kyrgyz Khanate” (*Velikii Kyrgyzskii Kaganat*) (Akaev, 2003; Akerov, 2007; Dzhumanaliev, 2012; Grousset, 1970; Ploskikh & Dzhunushaliev, 2009). The extent of this state, by some accounts, stretched from Lake Baikal in

the north to Kashgar and the frontiers of Tibet in the south, and from Buir Lake in the eastern reaches of Mongolia, west to Lake Balkhash, in present-day Kazakhstan (Osmonov, 2014).

Moreover, having previously been isolated from lucrative Chinese horse markets by the Uyghurs, the Kyrgyz were now able to establish commercial relations with the Chinese, and there is some evidence that there were intermittent diplomatic exchanges between the Kyrgyz khan and the Tang court. While these envoys seem to have been met cordially, little came of the ninth century Sino-Kyrgyz entente. Nevertheless, according to those who support the idea of a Great Kyrgyz Power, its establishment had profound effects on the politics of the steppe and for the ethnic consolidation of the Kyrgyz themselves. As one recent textbook on Kyrgyz history argues:

In the first place, it permanently put an end to the internecine warfare and infighting of the Uyghur Khanate, and created favorable conditions for the development of the Kyrgyz state.

In the second place, the Great Kyrgyz Power became a reliable barrier on the northern and western frontiers of the Tang empire. Local tribes, moreover, were spared from constant raiding by the Uyghurs.

In the third place, new conditions contributed to the development, consolidation, and strengthening of the Kyrgyz ethnos. A number of smaller tribes thus joined with the Kyrgyz... Part of the Tatar, Manghit, and Nogai, peoples ancestrally related to the Mongols, unified with the Kyrgyz “sixty tribes” (Osmonov, 2014, p. 120).

Some scholars, however, have disputed the existence of the “Great Kyrgyz Power,” arguing that that there is actually very little conclusive evidence that it ever existed (Drompp, 1999; 2002, p. 483; Golden, 2011, p. 47). These scholars claim that while the Yenisei Kyrgyz certainly waged military campaigns on the steppe after overthrowing the Uyghur Khanate, there

is nothing that indicates that they ever established a stable presence in Mongolia, to say nothing of a vast empire. Calling it a “sharp departure from ideological tradition,” Peter Golden notes that the Kyrgyz “do not appear to have moved their capital to Mongolia nor to have taken possession of the sacred territory with which the imperial dignity in the steppe had hitherto been associated” (Golden, 1990, p. 350). Instead, the region remained “politically fractured among many contending tribes” between 840 and the rise of the Mongol Empire in the twelfth century (Drompp, 1999, p. 398). In any case, whether there was a “Great Kyrgyz Empire” or not, most scholars agree that, by 940, the Kyrgyz had retreated back to the Yenisei, and they only reemerge in the historical record during the time of the Mongol conquests some 300 years later.

2.9 The Arab Conquests

In 651, at roughly the same time that the First Türk Empire was fracturing, the last Sasanid king, Yazdgird III, was fleeing from the Arab armies that were at that time completing their conquest of Persia. Yazgird escaped to the city of Merv, in the region of Khorasan (present-day Turkmenistan, sometimes rendered as Khurasan), where he was promptly killed (Soucek, 2000, p. 56). As S. Frederick Starr has noted,

The desperate Persian shah had tried to enlist the support of Tang China against the Arabs, but the court at Chang’an (now Xian) rebuffed him. And for good reason, since the Chinese were experiencing troubles of their own, as were the Turkic tribes in Central Asia. This perfect storm of decaying empires opened a huge power vacuum across the region, which the Arab troops rushed in to fill... With little time to mobilize, Khurasan was unable to mount a strong resistance.. By the end of the year 651 Arab armies were camped at all the major cities of Khurasan, including Nishapur, the old capital of Tus, Sarakhs, and the gem of them all, Merv (Starr, 2013, p. 105).

The Arab conquest of Khorasan was completed shortly after the death of Yazdigird III, and it was, like the rest of the conquered Persian lands, incorporated into the Caliphate. However, the Arab armies subsequently made no serious attempts to advance into Transoxania, which in Arabic was called *Mawarannahr* (“Land beyond the River”). Gavin Hambly (1966, p. 64) has suggested that crises within the Caliphate during and after the reign of ‘Ali (656-661) are responsible for the pause in Arab expansion in Central Asia. Whatever the reasons, the Arab armies were largely content with launching intermittent raiding expeditions across the Amu Darya. The unstable political situation in the Caliphate, and indeed in Khorasan itself, meant that even the Arab defeat of Bukhara in 674, one of the first major Arabic forays across the Amu Darya, was not capitalized upon.

It was only after the consolidation of the power of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) that Arab advances in Central Asia resumed in earnest. The person most responsible for the Caliphate’s subsequent successes in Transoxania was a man named Qutayba bin Muslim (669-715), who between 705 and 710 extended Arab control over much of Bactria (in present-day Afghanistan), and important Sogdian cities like Bukhara, and Samarkand, the latter of which was the center of Sogdian power in the region. However, the rise of the Second Türk Empire, the bitter struggle between China and Tibet, and the ongoing resistance of the Sogdians meant that the Arabs faced stiff competition for mastery of Central Asia.

However, Qutayba bin Muslim was himself embroiled in the ongoing disputes within the Caliphate. When his “bitter personal enemy” Sulayman bin Abd al-Malik (674-717) ascended the throne, he refused to declare his loyalty to the new Caliph. He declared himself the “Commander of the Faithful” (Starr, 2013, p. 111) and was promptly murdered by his own soldiers while on campaign in the Ferghana Valley (Soucek, 2000, p. 61). After Qutayba’s death,

“Arab hegemony in Transoxania immediately buckled” (Golden, 2011, p. 59), setting off a desperate scramble to fill the vacuum. Both the Sogdians and the Türks moved to reestablish their power, and Arab dominance in the region entered a period of prolonged atrophy.

Despite the Arabs’ setbacks in Transoxania, however, Khorasan remained part of the Caliphate. In fact, it was soon to play an important part in the Abbasid revolt against the Umayyad dynasty: “No region, played a more crucial role than Central Asia in bringing down the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus and installing the Arab dynasty of Abbas in its place” (Starr, 2013, p. 124). During the initial stages of the revolt, Abu Muslim, a popular military commander who happened to harbor Abbasid sympathies, was dispatched to Khorasan by the anti-Umayyad conspirators to begin organizing a clandestine campaign. Much of the population there, particularly non-Muslims and non-Arab converts, was already chafing under the rule of the “Arab military aristocracy” that had established itself in Khorasan after the Arab conquest.²¹ Abu Muslim was thus able to draw upon a well of popular dissatisfaction with Umayyad rule, and “by 747 the heretofore secret campaign openly challenged the Umayyads” (Soucek, 2000, p. 63). The revolt quickly gained support, and Abu Muslim quickly overthrew the Umayyad governor of Merv, the economic and political center of the region. He then installed a supporter of the Abbasids as governor of Khorasan, which subsequently became an important base of power for the rebellion. By 750, in large part thanks to Abu Muslim’s military skill, the Abbasids had succeeded in overthrowing the Umayyad dynasty. However, fearing Abu Muslim’s power and popularity, the second Abbasid Caliph, al-Mansur, ordered Abu Muslim’s assassination in 754 (Moscatti, 2015).

²¹ The Umayyad period was characterized by a certain degree of Arab chauvinism, which did not sit well with many of the Caliphate’s new subjects, particularly in Iran (Esposito, 2005, p. 41).

Despite such double-crossing, the reinvigorated Caliphate of the early Abbasid period was in a much better position to reconsolidate its position in Central Asia, where, as noted above, Arab power had been waning since the death of Qutayba bin Muslim over thirty years earlier. By this time, the Arabs' primary opponent in the region was Tang China, which was once again trying to extend its own influence into Transoxania. In 751, only a year after the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate, Arab troops clashed with a large Chinese army, supported by Qarluq mercenaries and some local potentates, somewhere in the vicinity of the present day cities of Talas, in Kyrgyzstan, and Taraz, in Kazakhstan. During the course of the battle, however, the Qarluq mercenaries defected to the Arab side, and the local troops quit the field. The result was a stunning rout for the Chinese.

At first glance, it may seem that this little-known battle was of little consequence. After all, the Arabs ultimately did not press much further east, and the Chinese continued to maintain a presence in the region on until the ravages of the aforementioned An Lushan Rebellion, which began four years after the Battle of Talas, made it impossible for the Middle Kingdom to maintain any sort of hold on its outlying provinces. In hindsight, however, the Battle of Talas actually appears to have had a rather profound effect on the course of history in Inner Asia and, arguably, the world. The reason is because battle marked the effective end of Chinese attempts to expand into Central Asia, at least until the time of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty in the seventeenth century (Barthold, 1977, p. 200; Grousset, 1970, p. 120; Hambly, 1966, p. 68; Soucek, 2000, p. 68). Thus, although direct Arab control over the region gradually gave way to indigenous rule, Central Asia, and Transoxania in particular, nevertheless became an integral part of the Muslim

world, while the influence of Chinese culture and civilization henceforth would remain relatively peripheral.²²

2.10 Samanids & Karakhanids

After the Battle of Talas, the Abbasids gradually consolidated their influence in Transoxania. Reflecting the new cultural orientation of the Baghdad-based Caliphate itself, with its capital in Baghdad, it was Persian, rather than Arabic, that began to be utilized as a *lingua franca* among the increasingly numerous Muslims in Central Asia. However, control over the outlying areas of the Caliphate was exercised by local governors, who enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy as long as they continued to pay taxes to the center. Thus, in the early ninth century, the powerful satrapy in what is now northern Afghanistan began to extend its influence in modern-day Iran and Central Asia.

Named after the founder of the dynasty, Saman Khuda, who converted to Islam at the time of the Arab conquest, the Samanid Empire (819-999) is most commonly identified with his grandson, Ismail Samani, under whom the dynasty became a major regional power. The Samani family first came to prominence under the Umayyads, but by the middle of the ninth century the Samanid Empire was a largely autonomous, province of the Abbasid Caliphate, and it controlled such crucial Silk Road cities as Samarkand, Bukhara, Balkh, Tashkent, and Ferghana (Starr, 2013, p. 229).²³ Bukhara, which is in modern-day Uzbekistan became the center of the empire,

²² Some have argued that Chinese prisoners of war captured during the Battle of Talas were the vector by which the technique of making paper spread to the Arabic Middle East and thence to Europe (Hambly, 1966, p. 68; Soucek, 2000, p. 69). This theory, however, is likely incorrect, since there is evidence that the Sogdians, among others, were using paper centuries before the battle occurred (Bloom, 2001, p. 40).

²³ Notwithstanding this fact, it is the Tajiks, an Iranian-speaking people, not the Uzbeks, a Turkic group, who proudly trace their “national” history back to the Samanids. Moreover, many of the urban centers that are now located in Uzbekistan, such as Samarkand and Bukhara, were, at the time of the Soviet-era national delimitation of Central Asia, populated by Tajik speakers, and had long been centers of Persian culture and literature. The cultural memory of the glorious past of these cities meant that they “occupied, and still do, a special place in the hearts of the Tajik intelligentsia” (Akbarzadeh, 1996, p. 1109). Consequently, the fact that Samarkand and Bukhara, among other

and the Samanids, perhaps even more than the Arabs, can be credited for spreading Islam in Transoxania. Indeed, it was during the Samanid period that the first flowering of a distinctly Central Asian Islamic civilization occurred, and it was out of this milieu that such renowned Muslim thinkers as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Khwarazmi (from whose name the word “algorithm” is derived) and Muhammad al-Farabi emerged.²⁴ Moreover, “the governmental and cultural styles set by [the Samanids] would be, to varying degrees, the legacy of every Muslim state in the region” (Golden, 1990, p. 361).

Despite their remarkable achievements in the spheres of politics, economy, and culture, however, Samanid rulers always wisely acknowledged the primacy of the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. But by the end of the tenth century, Samanid power was beginning to wane. Internally, the rise of rival groups like the Ghazvanids,²⁵ who would eventually break away from the Samanids and establish a sizeable empire of their own (975-1187), began to fracture the Samanid state. Externally, the Samanids were weakened, like other sedentary states before them, to the growth of strong nomadic powers on the steppe.

Over the course of the tenth century, a new Turkic tribal confederation had begun to emerge in the Tarim Basin and the Semireche regions.²⁶ Like similar nomadic groups, the origins of the people who were given the name “Qarakhanids” (sometimes rendered as Karakhanids,

places, are located in Uzbekistan has been a source of irritation for the Tajik government, which has sought to identify contemporary Tajikistan as the inheritor of the Samanid legacy.

²⁴ It should be noted that, despite the Persianate character of Central Asian Islam, Shi'a Islam has never been widespread in the region. Most Central Asian Muslims are Sunnis of the Hanafi *madhab*.

²⁵ The Ghazvanids were descended from a man called Sebüktegin, who was a military slave (*ghulam*) in the service of the Samanid king. Sebüktegin was able to amass a substantial amount of power and territory, and, when the time was ripe, his son, Mahmud of Ghazni (for whom the dynasty is named), declared independence.

²⁶ The word *semireche* is a Russian translation of the Turkic word *jetisu*, which literally translates as "Seven Rivers." The term refers to the area between the Tien Shan mountain range and Lake Balkhash, and contained parts of what are now southern Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan.

Kara-Khanids, Qaraxanids, or Ilek Khanids) by nineteenth century European Orientalists,²⁷ is largely unknown, but they are thought to have had their genesis in the union of other Turkic groups, such as the Qarluqs and the Yaghma (Golden, 1990, pp. 354-358). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Qarakhanids shared many cultural characteristics with other Turkic groups in the region, all of which “shared a common language, social structure and the lifestyle of pastoral nomads, practicing a lively exchange with the neighboring settled peoples and acquiring a taste for the products of agricultural and urban civilizations” (Soucek, 2000, p. 84).

What set the Qarakhanids apart from other contemporary tribal confederations, and indeed what makes them particularly notable in the history of Inner Asia, is the fact that sometime towards the end of the tenth century, the Qarakhanid khans, and by extension, their subjects, converted to Islam, one of the first Turkic groups to do so, though by no means the last. The upshot of their conversion was that there were now two rival Islamic powers in Central Asia: the Qarakhanids and the Samanids. Each, moreover, represented a rather distinct culture and mode of life: Turkic nomad and sedentary Persian, respectively. But, by the end of the tenth century, Samanid power was waning, and the Qarakhanids, along with the aforementioned Ghazavanids, effectively divided the territories of the defunct Samanid Empire between them.²⁸

The Qarakhanid state, which was “chaotic,” at best (Golden, 1990, p. 357), was divided into a number of sub-regions, each of which was administered from a major urban center, such as Kashgar, Samarkand, Uzgen, or Balasagun,²⁹ each of which was ruled by a member of the

²⁷ The name is derived from the title of its supreme leader that Kara-Khan (“Black Khan”). Arabic sources called them *al-Kaqaniya* (“the Khans”), while Persian sources call them *al-i Afrasiyab* (“of the Afrasiyabs”), a reference to a city north of Samarkand (Soucek, 2000, p. 83).

²⁸ The Ghazavanids and the Qarakhanids evidently enjoyed “lively relations” and “friendly contacts that sometimes included stately meetings between monarchs” (Soucek, 2000, p. 97). On the other hand, the Qarakhanids and the Ghazavanids sometimes fought one another for control of important cities like Bukhara, which changed hands several times before being finally wrested from Ghazavanid control in 1032 (Grousset, 1970, p. 146).

²⁹ Balasagun no longer exists, save for the remains of the famous Burana Tower, which lies not far from the city of Tokmok, in present-day Kyrgyzstan.

Qarakhanid royal family. Thus, different portions of the Qarakhanid state were ruled by often hostile branches of the ruling clan. Moreover, during the eleventh century, the Qarakhanid state was divided into eastern and western halves, although as Peter Golden notes, “It is unclear whether Qaraxanid Qağānate was bipartite *ab ovo*³⁰ or chose this form of organization in response to outside stimuli” (Golden, 1992, p. 215). Thus, while “Semireche and Kashgaria appear to have conserved the prestige of the dynasty’s original domains... their khans retained an implicit, though often only theoretical, seniority over those members who ruled in Transoxania and Fergana” (Soucek, 2000, p. 84).

As a result of constant infighting, the Qarakhanid state expanded in fits and starts, but never succeeded in establishing an empire comparable to the Xiongnu or the Kōk Türks. As Peter Golden noted,

The Karakhanids... were as often at war with one another as with their opponents. Indeed, their great gains came only when their opposition proved weaker and even less cohesive than that segment of the Karakhanid confederation that attacked them. Thus, the Karakhanid conquests of Sāmānid territory were as much a reflection of the decline in the “House of Sāmān” as they were a reflection of Karakhanid power (Golden, 1990, p. 358).

Ultimately, the Qarakhanid confederation would not prove to be durable. By the end of the eleventh century the Western Qarakhanids had been subjugated by another Turkic group, the Seljuks,³¹ while the Eastern Qarakhanid lands were overrun by the Mongolic Khitan (sometimes

³⁰ That is, from the start.

³¹ The Seljuks, who lived in the Khwarazm region south of the Aral Sea, had adopted Islam late in the tenth century. After the collapse of the Samanid Empire, The Seljuks entered the fray against both the Qarakhanids and the Ghazavanids, and quickly expanded their power. Ultimately, one Seljukid branch, the Rum Seljuks, formed a state in Anatolia (hence the name “Rum,” or “Rome,” since the Byzantine Empire at that time controlled Anatolia) after the Seljuks’ crushing defeat of the Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Manzikert (1068). It was out of the Rum Seljukid state that a small tribe, led by a *bey* (a petty lord) named Osman, emerged. It was Osman’s dynasty that ultimately went on to found the Ottoman Empire (Finkel, 2005, pp. 11-12; Kafadar, 1995, pp. 118-135). Meanwhile,

referred to as Kara Kitai). But the eclipse of Qarakhanid power did not spell the end of their legacy. The Qarakhanid era ultimately had two enduring consequences for the cultural history and geography of Central Asia. First, as mentioned, the Qarakhanids had converted to Islam *en masse*, and they proved to be enthusiastic patrons of their new religion. Under the Qarakhanid khans, numerous *medressehs* and mosques were constructed throughout their domains, which were fairly extensive. During the Qarakhanid period “Muslim Turkic domination had become deeply rooted in Kashgaria and in the Issyk Kul basin” (Grousset, 1970, p. 148).³²

The second major legacy of Qarakhanid defeat of the Samanids was the beginning of the gradual supplanting – or, perhaps, supplementing – of the Persian-speaking culture of the region by a Turkic-speaking one (Golden, 1992, p. 216). Although Persianate culture certainly endured after the Qarakhanid conquests, and while the Persian language maintained its prestige well into the Timurid period (and indeed lives on in the form of modern-day Tajik), its hegemony was beginning to weaken. This was in part a result of the growing political influence of Turkic speaking peoples in Inner Asia, but can also be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that the cultural prestige conferred Islam was, increasingly, being claimed by Turkic groups like the Qarakhanids and the Seljuks.

2.11 The Mongol Empire

By the turn of the thirteenth century, Central Asia was once again succumbing to political entropy. Qarakhanid power had long since collapsed, and their former territories in the

Seljuk tribes living further east eventually dismantled the Ghazavaniid state and established themselves as a major player in Abbasid politics after capturing Baghdad.

³² W.W. Barthold has argued that, “[h]ad [the Kyrgyz] lived in the Semirechyé at the time of the Qarakhanids, they would have converted to Islam in the tenth or eleventh century,” rather than converting some five or six centuries later (Barthold, 1956, p. 92). Nevertheless, present-day Kyrgyz historiography, while not ethnically identifying the Kyrgyz with the Qarakhanids, emphasizes the Kyrgyz people’s cultural connections with them, pointing to the latter’s historical presence on the territory of the Kyrgyz nation-state. For example, the Burana Tower, all that remains of the Qarakhanid city of Balasagun, is featured prominently in nationalist images, and is considered by many Kyrgyz Muslims to be a *mazar*, or a sacred place.

Semireche and Kashgaria were under the control of the Khitans, who did not follow their predecessors in converting to Islam. Meanwhile, the Seljuk confederation, which had taken over the Qarakhanids' Transoxanian fiefdoms, had itself disintegrated. Transoxania changed hands several times between the Seljuks and the Ghazavanids before the Khwarazmshahs, a Persianate dynasty that established a quasi-independent state in Khwarazm under Khitan suzerainty. However, the Khwarazmshahs ruled over a "cobbled together realm" consisting of "an unstable mix of professional Turkic soldiery, restless eastern Qipchaq tribes with whom the dynasty intermarried, and the settled Irano-Khwarazmian people" (Golden, 2011, p. 76). China, meanwhile, was divided between the Jürchen (Jin)³³ and Sung dynasties, who ruled from Peking and Hangzhou, respectively. The Tarim Basin remained under the control of the Uyghurs, while to the east the Tibetan-influenced Tangut Kingdom (also called Hsi Hsia or the Western Xia Dynasty) had established itself in the mid-eleventh century in parts of what are now the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Xinjiang, Shaanxi, and Qinghai.

Meanwhile, the steppe, as it always had, remained an ever-shifting mosaic of nomadic clan and tribal confederations.³⁴ Perhaps the most powerful nomadic group in late twelfth century Mongolia was the Tatars. Due to political fragmentation and the bitter rivalries between different tribes and clans, the Tatars enjoyed a hegemonic position on the eastern steppes (Beckwith, 2009, p. 184). The Tatars benefitted from Jürchen patronage, while the Jürchen employed the Tatars to ensure that no potential threats would arise among the nomads.

³³ The Jürchen were a Tungusic people who established a rival state in Manchuria and eventually conquered northern China. The descendants of the twelfth century Jürchen later established the Manchu (Qing) Dynasty, which ruled China from 1644-1912.

³⁴ Importantly, as Michael Khodarkovsky reminds us, the emergence of such confederations was "first and foremost a process of political formation and did not coincide with ethnic boundaries. Members of the same tribe often found themselves part of different confederations founded and distinguished by a ruling dynasty" (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 16). But these confederations were highly entropic, and elements of a particular tribal confederation might at any time splinter off to join another tribal grouping or to found its own. These new confederations usually took the name of the ruling household or the most powerful constituent tribe.

It was into this milieu that, probably in 1167, Temujin, the son of a Mongol leader, was born. The Mongols were one of the many groups that inhabited the Mongolian Plateau and, until that time, they scarcely differed from any other nomads in the region. Indeed, Svat Soucek has argued that “[t]he first enigma of the Mongol phenomenon is the relative insignificance of the tribes and territories where Genghis Khan had arisen... a country of nomads, mainly Turkic, grouped into tribes but lacking any larger political cohesion or cultural dynamism” (Soucek, 2000, p. 103).

Temujin’s father, Yesügei, was a feudal lord who, typical of the era, followed in the footsteps of his own grandfather and tried to forge a Mongol tribal confederation to challenge Tatar hegemony. However, Yesügei was poisoned by Tatars (Onon, 2001, p. 61), leaving his family destitute outcasts, who faced hostile neighboring clans. Temujin was thus forced to live by his wits for much of his childhood, and he placed a premium on loyalty, military prowess, and intelligence, traits that would characterize many of his future generals. It should be noted that while Temujin was perhaps more able than most, he was in many ways a product of his environment. His father

was a characteristic product of nomadic feudalism, a lord possessing his own herds and serfs, who could muster a strong following of kinsmen and retainers to assist him in the endemic tribal warfare of the age. Temüjin was therefore not an obscure barbarian of genius; he was, despite a youth passed amidst great hardship, the heir to an aristocratic tradition and to dreams of ancestral glory (Hambly, 1966, p. 90).

Similarly, Peter Golden pointed out that “Chinggis was not the only man in Mongolia with royal ambitions. He was simply better able to capitalize on his foes’ divisions. He was also lucky, having several times escaped captivity or the plots of his enemies through a convenient turn of

fortune. He not only acknowledged this luck, but advertised it as a sign of divine favor” (Golden, 2011, p. 81). As his renown grew, Temujin began to attract a retinue of companions (*nökürs*), who were attracted to his charisma or joined him simply out of desperation (many of them were also outcasts). Temujin’s *nökürs* would eventually “form[] the core of his military retinue, providing the future generals and administrators of the Mongol empire (Golden, 2011, p. 79).

Temujin also proved adroit at making alliances with other tribal leaders, and his political shrewdness, combined with his military prowess, allowed him to succeed where others had failed. He managed to assemble a coalition of local tribal leaders and avenged his father’s murder, crushing the Tatars in 1202. Temujin’s rapid ascent (which was hastened by the murder of his erstwhile allies against the Tatars, Toghril Khan and Jamugha, leaders of the Kerait and Jadaran tribes, respectively) led to his being elected khan and christened Chinggis Khan (often rendered as Genghis Khan, and meaning “universal emperor”) at a *quriltay* (political/military council) held in 1209.

It is not necessary here to describe in detail the entire history of the Mongol conquests of Inner Asia. Suffice it to say that by the time that Chinggis Khan died in 1227, the Mongols had subjugated the Jürchen, the Tanguts, the Khwarazmshahs,³⁵ and the Uyghurs, the latter of whom, like the Sogdians before them, lent their substantial expertise in commerce and government to the administration of the Mongol empire and its economy. Eastern Iran, the Qipchaq Steppe, and Kievan Rus’ had all been invaded and plundered, and each was eventually conquered by Chinggis Khan’s successors, who carried the Mongol conquests further yet: at its apex, the Mongol Empire stretched from present-day Poland and Lithuania to Korea, from Anatolia to the

³⁵ Peter Golden has described the fate of the last Khwarazmshah ruler, who attempted to resist the Mongol invasions: “Regardless of how one resolves the question of who really provoked the Mongol-Khorezmian war, its outcome was as predictable as the war itself was inevitable. Muhammad ended his days a refugee on a Caspian island and many of the lustrous cities of Central Asia lay in smoking ruins” (Golden, 1990, p. 370).

South China Sea, and from Siberia in the north to Pakistan in the south. The Mongols shattered the Abbasid Caliphate, Kievan Rus', and the Song Dynasty in China, as well as the Bagratid Kingdom in Georgia, the Rum Seljuk Sultanate and the Empire of Trebizond in Anatolia, among many others.

Most accounts of the Mongol period focus on the brutality of the invaders, the wholesale destruction of cities,³⁶ and the consequent de-urbanization that followed in the wake of the conquests (see for example: Soucek, 2000, pp. 114-116). In many cases, however, these dramatic narratives are the result of overreliance on contemporary Russian and Islamic sources, which cast the Mongols in the role of “the scourge of God” (Golden, 2011, p. 81). The medieval *Chronicle of Novgorod*, for example, laments:

That same year [that Novgorod was defeated by the pagan Lithuanians], for our sins, unknown tribes came, whom no one exactly knows, who they are, nor whence they came out, nor what their language is, nor of what race they are, nor what their faith is; but they call them Tartars ... God alone knows who they are and whence they came out (Michell & Forbes, 1914, p. 64).

Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, a thirteenth century emissary sent by Pope Innocent IV to persuade Ögedei, Chinggis Khan's successor, to turn his attacks towards the Muslim lands of the Middle East (Jackson, 2009, p. 43), also described the aftermath of the Mongols' invasion of Kievan Rus':

When [the Qipchaqs, Arabs, Persians, and others] had been defeated, the Tartars advanced against Russia and devastated it. They destroyed cities and castles and killed men and besieged Kiev and killed the townspeople, so that when we went through that country we found countless human skulls and bones from the dead

³⁶ Merv, Konya Urgench, Bukhara, and Samarkand, for example, were all sacked.

scattered over the field. Indeed Kiev had been a very great and populous city but now is reduced to almost nothing. In fact, there are hardly two hundred houses there now and the people are held in the strictest servitude. Carrying the war from there, the Tartars destroyed all of Russia (del Carpini, 1996, p. 68).

Similarly, the medieval Arab historian, Ibn al-Athir, described the Mongol invasions as

The greatest catastrophe and most dire calamity ... which befell all men generally, and the Muslims in particular; so that, should one say that the world, since God Almighty created Adam until now, hath not been afflicted with the like thereof, he would but speak the truth. For indeed doth history not contain aught which approaches or comes nigh unto it ... Nay it is unlikely that mankind will see the like of this calamity, until the world comes to an end and perishes, except the final outbreak of Gog and Magog (Ibn al-Athir, 1956, pp. 427-428).

Such histrionic depictions are typical of many of the primary sources available regarding the Mongol invasions. While it would be remiss to suggest that the Mongols were not capable of exceptional brutality, it should also be remembered that the imposition of Mongol rule over a significant portion of the Eurasian continent had other, more positive outcomes as well. These developments, while certainly not as dramatic as stories of razed cities and enslaved populations, were perhaps more significant over the long term.

The first outcome, and the most noted in the literature, was the imposition of what has been called the *Pax Mongolica* across Eurasia. In essence, the *Pax Mongolica* was a more-or-less unified administrative and commercial zone that encompassed the territory of the Mongol Empire:

The Mongols established, or at least patronized, the first known large-scale international trade and taxation system, the *ortaq*. It

was essentially a merchant association or cartel, run mainly by Muslims, which lent money for caravans and other enterprises and included tax-farming services for the rulers ... The openness of the empire to commerce, and the unprecedented safety merchants and craftsmen could expect, drew businessmen from the four corners of Eurasia (Beckwith, 2009, p. 201).

The significance of this system should not be underestimated. Although as a “geopolitical medium” the Mongol Empire was certainly not “frictionless and continuous,” as it has sometimes been described (Abu-Lughod, 1989, p. 359), it was, at least for a time, both relatively regular and fabulously lucrative. Tellingly, it was during the Mongol period that many of the most famous pre-modern trans-Eurasian travelers made their journeys across the continent, including Marco Polo (1245-1324), Ibn Battuta (1304-1369), the aforementioned Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (1185-1252), William of Rubruck (1220-1293), and Rabban bar Sauma (1220-1294), among others.

By the mid-fourteenth century, however, the *Pax Mongolica* had largely disintegrated, both due to the increasing fragmentation of the Mongol Empire, caused by infighting between various claimants to the title of Great Khan, as well as to the ravages of the Black Death, which killed tens of millions across Eurasia and severely depressed transcontinental trade (Beckwith, 2009, p. 183). Although the economic and political benefits of the Mongol conquests were relatively ephemeral, the legacy of the Mongol empire vis-à-vis patterns of territoriality and political legitimation, both on the steppe and in more sedentary areas, would prove to be significantly more durable (Junko, 1999, pp. 319-320).

Inner Asian nomads were “organized hierarchically in lineages, clans, and tribes defined by descent, real or fictive, from a common patrilineal ancestor” (Golden, 2009, p. 109). This arrangement often meant, in many cases, representatives from different branches of the royal

family had valid claims. The Mongols, like many other pastoral nomads, attempted to bring some semblance of order to the succession process by implementing a quasi-electoral system, in which lesser khans would gather at a *quriltay*, where they were expected to reach a consensus about who the next leader would be. Unfortunately, this system frequently led to vicious fratricidal wars between numerous potential heirs to the throne, since the *quriltay* system meant that contenders to the throne sought to ensure, often by force of arms, that their faction carried the vote.

Mongol succession patterns were thus a function both of heredity (a ruler had to be able to trace descent from Chinggis Khan) and of selection (a prospective ruler had to be elected by other khans at a *quriltay*). In some cases, this system worked relatively smoothly. The first succession after Chinggis Khan's death in 1227, for example, was a relatively peaceful affair. This was largely due to the fact that Chinggis Khan had indicated his preference that his third son, Ögedei (sometimes spelled Ogödäi or Ogodei), be next in line to the throne, thus passing over his first and second sons, Jochi (sometimes Jöchi or Juchi, who in any case predeceased Chinggis by six years) and Chagatai (sometimes rendered as Jagatay, Chaghatay, or Chagatay). Thus, in 1229, after a two-year regency by Chinggis Khan's youngest son, Tolui (sometimes Tului), Ögedei was duly elected at a *quriltay*. He ruled ably until his death in 1241, and it was primarily during the reign of Ögedei that the Mongol Empire developed the legal and administrative infrastructure that resulted in the *Pax Mongolica*.

The next succession, however, was somewhat less smooth. After the death of his chosen successor, his son Kuchu (Khoch), Ögedei designated his grandson, Shiremun, to succeed him. However, after Ögedei's death, his wife, Törgene, assumed the regency and rapidly consolidated her own power, eventually adopting for herself the title of Khatun (the feminine form of the

word khan). Törgene Khatun held the regency for five years, during which time she engineered the election of her own son, Güyük as Great Khan.³⁷ However, upon his coronation, Güyük quickly moved against his mother, having Törgene Khatun and many members of the influential base of support she had established during her regency killed.

Perhaps due to his ruthless nature, Güyük proved to be a fairly proficient leader. Not long after the liquidation of Törgene Khatun's court, he began to recognize the danger posed by the other descendants of Chinggis Khan. In particular, he was wary of Batu, the son of Jochi, who had inherited his father's holdings and led the so-called "Golden Horde," which was centered on the Qipchaq Steppe. Batu's prestige had been greatly enhanced by the Golden Horde's conquests of Volga Bulgaria, Kievan Rus', and the Kingdom of Hungary, and his military successes, as well as the seniority of the Jochid branch of the Chinggisid line, meant that his prestige equaled or even exceeded that of the Great Khan himself. Moreover, as a result of the great distance between the Jochid realms in the west and the center of the empire, where Güyük ruled, meant that Batu enjoyed substantial autonomy.

By 1248, mutual suspicions had erupted into outright hostilities, and the armies of Batu and Güyük readied themselves for battle somewhere in the Semireche region of present-day Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. But Güyük, "prematurely worn out by drink and debauchery" (Grousset, 1970, p. 272), died on the eve of the battle. His successor, Möngke (sometimes Mongka), was of the son of Tolui, Chinggis Khan's youngest son. With Güyük out of the way, Batu was the most influential member of the Chinggisid line. Assuming the role of kingmaker, Batu engineered the coronation of Möngke (sometimes Mongka), the son of Tolui without the assent of the Ögedeid and Chagataid branches of the family.

³⁷ Kuchu was Ögedei's son by another wife, and so Shiremun, Ögedei's chosen successor, was not related to Törgene Khatun.

The new Khan's indebtedness to Batu meant that the latter was free to ignore Möngke's writ. Consequently, the Golden Horde operated largely independently until Batu's death, sometime around 1255. In an effort to forestall the same kind of insurrection that had unseated Güyük, Möngke quickly consolidated power after Batu's death. Firmly in control, he recommenced the expansion of the Mongol Empire, which had largely been consumed with internal difficulties since the death of Ögedei. Möngke's reign, however, was the last under which the Mongol Empire could truly be said to be a unified, since the crippling entropy that had resulted in the fragmentation of previously characterized earlier nomadic polities was beginning to reemerge in the Mongol state.

Möngke died in 1259, while campaigning against Sung China. His brother, Qubilai (Kublai), quickly had himself elected as Möngke's successor by his own army (Grousset 1970, p. 285), sparking a war of succession with his other brother, Ariq Böke, who ruled in the Mongol homelands and who had already had himself declared Möngke's rightful heir at his own *quriltai*. By 1263, however, it was becoming clear that Qubilai would prevail, and Ariq Böke submitted to his brother, dying in captivity three years later. Although Ariq Böke had been defeated, however the war raged on. Qaidu (sometimes Kaidu or Khaidu), the grandson of Ögedei, controlled a small portion of what is now southern Kazakhstan, but he deftly "exploited intra-Chinggisid rivalries, gained control of much of Turkestan in the early 1270s, and in 1281 formed an alliance with the Chaghadaids, which lasted for two decades" (Golden, 2011, p. 85). In the end, Qaidu controlled most of the Semireche and Transoxania and, as a result, these regions would gradually reassert their independence from the Mongol homelands to the east.

By the time of the civil war between Ariq Böke and Qubilai Khan, then, it was clear that the Mongol Empire had irreversibly splintered. Qubilai had installed himself as the head of the

newly-founded Yuan Dynasty, which ruled China from 1271-1368. He relocated the traditional imperial capital from Karakorum, in Mongolia to Khanbaliq, near Beijing, and for a time the Mongol homelands were effectively absorbed by the Yuan state. Meanwhile, Qubilai's other brother, Hülegü (also Hulagu), had established the Ilkhanate in Persia and completed the Mongol conquest of Iran and Iraq, sacking Baghdad in 1258. Tensions between the Ilkhanate and the Golden Horde, now led by Batu's younger brother, Berke, resulted in conflict between them, and Berke's successor, Mengu-Timur, lent his support to Qaidu against both the Ilkhanate and Qubilai Khan.

At the same time, the Chagataids were chafing under the boot of Qaidu, with whom their "alliance" had quickly devolved into ignominious vassalization after the Chaghataid khan, Baraq, unsuccessfully rebelled against Qaidu. When Qaidu finally died, in 1301, Baraq's son, Duwa, swiftly declared his independence, establishing a khanate in the old Ulus of Chagatai, which controlled most of Transoxania and the Semireche region, from the Ilkhanate frontiers on the Amu Darya to the edge of the Qipchaq Steppe, which remained under the control of the Golden Horde. In the east the Ulus of Chagatai encompassed the Tarim Basin, but not Mongolia, which remained part of the Yuan Dynasty, and in the west it stretched nearly to the Aral Sea. At its height, it included such great cities of Tashkent, Osh, Bukhara, Samarkand, Kashgar, and Kabul.

As the "universal" aspirations of the early Mongol state gave way to a more familiar pattern of pseudo-imperial states with loosely-defined frontiers, the continual process of political and territorial consolidation, dissolution, and reconstitution had a profound effect on the distribution of populations and ethnonyms. These effects can be seen even down to the present

day, a testament the staggering scale of population transfers that occurred across Eurasia as a result of the Mongols' military campaigns.

2.11.1 The Kyrgyz during the Mongol Period

Like many other conquerors, the Mongols often forcibly relocated the populations of their defeated enemies, either in retribution for their resistance or in order to take advantage of their skills (Golden, 2011, p. 87). Perhaps more significant than these kinds of forced relocations, however, was the fact that the Mongol armies consisted of not only Mongols, but other nomadic peoples as well. When a tribe was conquered or joined voluntarily, they were not absorbed into the Mongol military as a whole. Mongol armies were organized according to a decimal system, into groups of 10, 100, 1,000, and 10,000 men, and in order to forestall the possibility of clan-based loyalties arising within the ranks, Mongol generals broke down tribal groups and distributed their members these formations, which were often geographically disparate. However, old ethnonyms sometimes survived in the new context:

The survivors of these wars, Mongolic and Turkic, were scattered among the Chinggisid armies of Inner Asia, subsequently giving rise to clans or retribalized groupings bearing these names among post-conquest Turkic peoples. A similar fate awaited lesser tribes ... that were melded into larger military units of diverse ethnic and tribal origins (Golden, 2009, p. 112)

The Kyrgyz were one of the tribal peoples who were swept up in these movements. The Mongols had advanced into southern Siberia in 1207, bringing them into contact with the Yenisei Kyrgyz, who voluntarily submitted to Mongol rule.³⁸ Until the end of the thirteenth century, the Kyrgyz largely remained in their traditional homeland on the Yenisei. During the

³⁸ As one modern account portrays it, however, “the initiative for establishing relations with the Mongols came from the Kyrgyz” (Osmonov, 2014, p. 146).

civil war between Ariq Böke and Qubilai, they received “protection and patronage” from the rebel leader, Qaidu, whose headquarters was in the Chui Valley, in present-day Kyrgyzstan (Osmonov, 2014; Ploskikh & Dzhunushaliev, 2009). Consequently, many clans supported Qaidu, and the Yenisei Kyrgyz were inexorably drawn into the ongoing conflict between Qaidu and Qubilai. The Mongolian homelands, however, remained largely under the control of the Great Khan, and continual attacks from Mongolia drove large numbers of Kyrgyz out of the Yenisei in search of security. Many of those who did not escape were subject to policies of “forcible resettlement” to other parts of the Mongol Empire (Osmonov, 2014, p. 150).

After the defeat of Qaidu, the history of the Yenisei Kyrgyz becomes somewhat murky. As the historian V.V. Barthold notes, some Yenisei Kyrgyz likely had already migrated to the Semireche during the tenth and eleventh centuries, when the region was ruled by the Qarakhanids, but the bulk of them remained in the upper Yenisei until the period of the Mongol civil war (Barthold, 1956). By the fifteenth century, however, peoples identifying themselves as Kyrgyz had already migrated in large numbers to the Semireche, including to present-day Kyrgyzstan. By this time, contact with other Turkic tribes had resulted in their language becoming heavily influenced by the Qipchaq Turkic dialect spoken by the neighboring Kazakhs,³⁹ while the Kyrgyz themselves had mingled with various Mongol and Turkic tribes.

During the course of these migrations, it is likely that the Yenisei Kyrgyz began to intermingle with other peoples with whom they came into contact, both other nomadic tribes and the inhabitants of the places where they settled, and the result was the emergence of the predecessors of the modern Kyrgyz. Perhaps the most commonly accepted theory that the

³⁹ Qipchaq is one branch of the Turkic language family, and includes modern-day Kyrgyz, Kazak, Kalmyk, and Nogai, in addition to Bashkir and Tatar. Other branches of the Turkic language family include Qarluq (Uzbek, Uyghur, etc.), Oghuz (Turkish, Azeri, Turkmen, etc.), and Siberian (Sakha, Tuvan, Altai Oirat, etc.). Some sources indicate that the Yenisei Kyrgyz originally spoke a language more related to Qarluq (Golden, 1992, p. 182), but by the time a definable Kyrgyz *ethnie* emerged in the Semireche, it had been Qipchaqized.

modern Kyrgyz are “the descendants of various Turkish tribes such as the Türgesh and Qarluq (Mongolized during the Chingizkhanid period) which had absorbed the Kirghiz of the upper Yenisei” (Hambly, 1966, p. 148).

Although contemporary Kyrgyz nationalists have a tendency to draw unambiguous connections between the modern Kyrgyz and the Yenisei Kyrgyz (Akaev, 2003, p. 69), clear evidence of a direct connection between the Yenisei Kyrgyz and the modern Kyrgyz is scarce, and the subject remains one of much debate (Abramzon, 1971). As noted, significant ethnic and linguistic shifts would have had to occur during the course of the Kyrgyz’s migration from the Yenisei to account for the makeup of the modern Kyrgyz. Although Peter Golden concludes that such shifts are well within the realm of possibility, he notes that “[t]here is no evidence for a mass migration of Yenisei Qirğiz to the Tien-Shan. Nonetheless, the name Qirğiz had come to its current bearers from the Yenisei grouping. Whether it came as a genuine ethnonym or a political name (and if so when?) cannot be determined with certainty. We should be cautious, however, about severing completely the ethnic links between the two” (Golden, 1992, p. 406). In any case, it was during this time of instability and upheaval, that “[p]eoples bearing [the ethnonym Qirghiz] ... came to Moghulistan. It was here, on the territory of today’s Kyrgyzstan, that the modern Qirghiz, now Qipchaqicized in language and incorporating other Turkic groups, took shape” (Golden, 2009, p. 117). But it was only in the sixteenth century that a distinct and consolidated Kyrgyz *ethnie* only emerged out of the disparate Turkic and Mongol tribes that it comprised (Bregel, 2003, p. 78).

2.12 Chagataid Remnants in Moghulistan

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the Mongol Empire had ceased to exist as a unified entity. “Distance,” as Peter Golden has noted, “and the growth of diverging family and

local interests created ever-widening fissures in Mongol unity” (Golden, 2011, p. 85). The various *uluses* that had composed the empire – the Qipchaq Khanate (the Golden Horde), the Ulus of Chagatai, the Yuan Dynasty, the Ilkhanate, etc. – had in effect become more or less independent entities. Moreover, not only were these realms politically divergent, but they were culturally divergent as well: the Yuans became increasingly Sinicized, while the Ilkhans were more influenced by the Persian culture of their subject peoples; meanwhile, the Golden Horde adopted Islam.

The Ulus of Chagatai, which had formerly been held together by the power and prestige Qaidu, fractured into western and eastern halves. The western half, called the Chagatai Khanate or Western Turkestan, had a more sedentary character. It encompassed most of the great cities of Transoxania, including Bukhara, Herat, and Samarkand (Golden, 2011, p. 93) and would later become the center of the Timurid empire, about which more will be said presently. By contrast, the eastern half of the Ulus of Chagatai included parts of Mongolia, Xinjiang, and the Semireche region. Eastern Turkestan became known as Moghulistan (“Land of the Mongols”⁴⁰), and many of the tribes that resided there remained staunchly committed to preserving Mongol traditions, which included a resistance among many of the khans against adopting Islam.

One notable exception to this resistance to Islam was the conversion of Tughluq-Timur, grandson of the aforementioned Duwa, who had declared his independence from Qaidu almost a half-century earlier. In 1348, Tughluq-Timur consolidated his power in Moghulistan and mounted several successful invasions of Transoxania, but was never able to establish a secure foothold there, and the old Ulus of Chagatai remained splintered. Tughluq-Timur died in 1363,

⁴⁰ According to Peter Golden, the appellation “Moghulistan” is “ethnographically inaccurate,” since “[t]he bulk of its inhabitants were Turks and Turkicized Mongols” (Golden, 2011, p. 94).

and after that time Moghulistan remained fragmented, led by a dizzying array of different khans, many of whom were mere puppets of the Timurid Empire, about which more will be said shortly.

By this time, the Kyrgyz were firmly entrenched in the Semireche region, and around the Tien Shan Mountains. Sources from this period indicate that the Moghul khans launched a number of military expeditions against the Kyrgyz as a result of the latter's incessant raiding (Barthold, 1956, pp. 154-156). But ultimately, such campaigns had little lasting effect, save to sap what little strength was left among the Chaghataid khans of Moghulistan. As Hambly notes,

During the course of the sixteenth century the khanate of Mughulistan as it had existed during the middle years of the fifteenth century virtually disappeared for the Oirots had seized Jungaria, the Kazakhs had recently established themselves in Semirechie and the Kirghiz of the Tien Shan recognized no overlord. Only in Kashgaria did Chaghatai rule survive, growing increasingly feeble, until it was replaced – at least in the major centres of population – by quasi-theocratic regimes headed by an ambitious dynasty of Khojas from Mawarannahr (Hambly, 1966, p. 136).

Eventually, pressure from the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakh resulted in the complete collapse of Moghul power in Moghulistan; subsequently, many nomad tribes merged with Kazakh and Kyrgyz groups, further hastening the decline of Chagatayid power in the region.

2.12.1 The Oirots

At this point, a brief word needs to be said about the Oirots (Oirats), who are also sometimes referred to as the Kalmyks (Kalmaks) or the Dzungars (Jungars). The Oirots were a Mongolian-speaking tribe that was conquered, along with the Kyrgyz, during the early Mongol expansion. Also like the Kyrgyz, they largely stood against Qubilai Khan during the civil war between Qubilai and Ariq Böke/Qaidu. Like the Mongols, however, and despite their seemingly

modest origins, the Oirots became a major force in Inner Asia between the mid-fifteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries.

Oirot power in Mongolia reached its peak in 1449, during the so-called “First Oirots Empire” (Grousset, 1970, p. 505), when Esen Taishi, a powerful Oirots leader, invaded his erstwhile ally, Ming China. During the course of this war, the Oirots managed to capture the Ming emperor, Zhengtong, dealing a significant blow to the Chinese. In addition to their campaigns against the Ming, the Oirots put significant pressure on the neighboring Kazakhs, as well as significantly weakening what was left of Chagataid power in Moghulistan. Subsequently, Esen Taishi, who was only loosely related to Chinggis Khan, attempted to claim the title of khan without going through the still-traditional process of confirmation at a *quriltay*.⁴¹ His usurpation of the title of khan provoked a full-scale rebellion, and he was killed by a rival in 1455.

Oirots power declined after that, largely due to internal fragmentation, pressure from the Özbeks, as well as incessant attacks by the neighboring Mongols, who were beginning to reunify after the collapse of the remnants of the Yuan dynasty. Some Oirots remnants had been pushed west, towards Dzungaria and it was from this base that the Choros tribe began, around 1620, the process of rebuilding the Oirots empire. This “Second Oirots Empire,” usually known as the Dzungar Empire, has the distinction of being the last of the great “steppe empires” of Inner Asia.

As in other cases, the driving force behind the early Dzungar empire was a dynamic individual, Galdan, a descendant of Esen Taishi, and who was consecrated by the Dalai Lama.⁴² Like other great conquerors before him, Galdan shrewdly made and broke alliances, eventually becoming the undisputed leader of the different Oirots tribes (Grousset, 1970, pp. 527-527). The Dzungar Empire quickly began to move against its neighbors, first in Kashgaria, and then in

⁴¹ It should be noted that this was hardly unusual at the time. As Junko Miyawaki has noted, in the sixteenth century “more and more Mongol khans appeared, all flaunting their title at the same time” (Junko, 1999, p. 223).

⁴² The Oirats, like most of the Mongols, had converted to Tibetan Buddhism sometime around 1615.

Mongolia proper. But, unlike the endemic squabbling among the remnants of the Yuan Dynasty, which had continued unabated since the collapse of Mongol power in China in the fourteenth century, Dzungar expansionism was cause for alarm in Manchu China.

There is no room or need here to detail all of the Dzungars' conquests – they clashed with the Russians, accepted tribute from the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz, and conquered Tibet and sacked Lhasa, before succumbing to internal fragmentation and finally being crushed in 1757 by the Chinese, who “almost exterminated” the entire Dzungar population (Grousset, 1970, p. 538). But besides their distinction as the “last steppe empire,” the Dzungars are important to our story for another reason – namely: they figure prominently in the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, about which more will be said in Chapter Five. The cultural memory of the Kyrgyz struggle against the far more powerful Oirats (usually referred to by Kyrgyz as Kalmaks) at a time when the Kyrgyz were just beginning to emerge as an identifiable ethnic group, forms part of the basis of Kyrgyz ethnic identity. The memory of the struggle against the Oirots, moreover, has been imbued with a religious significance as well, as reflected by the fact that, in the epic, *Manas*'s staunchest companion, Almambet, is a Buddhist Oirots who converts to Islam and joins *Manas* and thus, symbolically, joins the Kyrgyz ethno-religious community as well.

2.13 Timurids and Shaybanids

2.13.1 The Timurids

We have seen how Moghulistan eventually succumbed to the centrifugal forces unleashed by ceaseless warfare, dynastic struggles, and the last gasp of the steppe empires. While these events were unfolding, however, the western half of the old Ulus of Chagatai was experiencing very different, yet no less significant, ethnic and political transformations, and for a significant period after the establishment of the Chagatai Khanate, western Turkestan too was

riven by almost constant internal disorder. Transoxania, after all, had been devastated by the Mongol conquests a century earlier, and in many places urban life had not yet recovered by the turn of the fourteenth century (Hambly, 1966, p. 128). The civil war between Qaidu and Qubilai had resulted in even further ruin, and after Qaidu's death, the various heirs to the Chagatai lineage began to fight among one another for political and economic supremacy. Peter Golden has characterized Transoxania at this time as "a crazy quilt of intersecting alliances and enmities of various tribal entities and the personal armies of Chinggisid princes" (Golden, 2011, p. 94).

Much as in the case of the rise of Chinggis Khan from the chaos of thirteenth century Mongolia, it was out of the endemic instability that characterized Transoxania in the fourteenth century that another of history's "great conquerors" emerged. Born sometime in the early 1300s near Samarkand, Timür, also known as Tamerlane ("Timur the Lame," an appellation given because of a crippling childhood injury), was the son of a minor noble, "the humble product of a century and a half of intermarriage between a minor branch of Chinggis Khan's Mongols and local Turks" (Starr, 2013, p. 478). He initially came to power in 1360, as a result of a Moghul (i.e. from Moghulistan) invasion (Beckwith, 2009, p. 198), having been granted control over the lands of his tribe, the Barlas, by the aforementioned khan Tughluq-Timur.

Like Chinggis Khan before him, Timür was able to forge a number of alliances with other local potentates, and together they were able to push the Moghuls out of Transoxania. But, also like Chinggis Khan, Timür, upon achieving his short-term objective of freeing himself from Moghul suzerainty, subsequently turned on his erstwhile allies in order to remove potential rivals. By 1370, Timür was largely in control of the Chagatai Khanate, and those with whom he had previously allied were dead or conquered.

However, as discussed previously, one of the political legacies of the Mongol period was the requirement that rulers be able to prove their descent from Chinggis Khan himself in order to legitimately assume the title of khan. Timür, however, did not have any Chinggisid blood, and so he had to remain content with the title *amir*, or “commander.”⁴³ Unable to assume the title of khan for himself, Timür “enthroned puppet Chinggisids while he actually ruled, legitimating his power by marrying Chinggisid brides” (Golden, 2011, p. 94). In this, then, Timür proved wiser than the aforementioned Oirat leader, Esen Taishi, who openly usurped the title of khan, and in doing so provoked a rebellion that eventually led to his early demise.

In any case, Timür is mostly remembered for his military exploits, which were indeed substantial: by the time of his death in 1405, the Timurid Empire encompassed modern-day Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, northern India, most of Central Asia, excluding the Qipchaq Steppe, and parts of Syria and the Caucasus.⁴⁴ Timür’s conquests are often described using the familiar and dramatic imagery of “devastation and slaughter” (Golden, 2011, p. 95), of sacked cities with thousands burned alive in mosques and tens of thousands of defenders “systematically killed” (Starr, 2013, p. 479), and of “bloodsoaked pyramids” of skulls erected with the severed of vanquished foes (Grousset, 1970, p. 420) – that is, those heads that were not instead loaded onto catapults and tossed at fleeing ships (Starr, 2013, p. 479).

But despite the titillating accounts of shocking acts of brutality carried out during the course of Timür’s conquests, which were “matched only by Chinggis Khan himself” (Starr, 2013, p. 479), the Timurid age was in many ways an era of florescence in the realms of art and

⁴³ Similarly, Edige, the founder of the Nogai Horde, a powerful nomadic confederation that splintered from the Golden Horde in the fifteenth century, could not trace his lineage back to Chinggis Khan, and he only had the title of *beg*, or chief (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 10).

⁴⁴ As Beckwith notes, however, there were some notable differences between Timür’s campaigns and those of his nomadic predecessors: “On the whole, Tamerlane’s campaigns were indistinguishable from those of a European, Persian, or Chinese dynastic founder. There were no lightning cavalry raids across vast distances, nor, of course, any great naval campaigns. He had cavalry in his army and used it to great effect, but the vast majority of his forces were infantry, and his targets were exclusively cities, which he was an expert at capturing” (Beckwith, 2009, p. 200).

culture. Timür himself was fond of grandiose architecture, few examples of which have, unfortunately, survived centuries of warfare, neglect, and seismic activity (ibid., pp. 481-485). But his successors were, in many ways, some of the finest patrons of arts and letters to ever emerge from Central Asia.

After Timür's death, another round of bloody internecine succession struggles⁴⁵ eventually gave way to 42 two years of relative stability under the rule of Timür's son, Shahrukh, who has been described as "humane, moderate, a lover of Persian letters, a great builder, a protector of poets and artists" (Grousset, 1970, p. 457). Indeed, Timür's successors were far less interested than their predecessor in conquest, and they are primarily remembered today for their signal achievements in the realm of culture. As Peter Golden notes, "Some historians argue that the Timurids, with their emphasis on promoting culture and meritocracy, were like the Renaissance monarchies of Europe in which cultural displays became essential parts of governance" (Golden, 2011, p. 98).

However, others, while recognizing the "stunning, if one-sided, cultural effervescence" of the Timurid period (Starr, 2013, p. 486), also note the apparent slowing of scientific and technological progress during that time. As S. Frederick Starr has observed:

Most creative people of Timur's era acted as if they had inherited a finished system of knowledge, whole and complete. Because it no longer demanded their attention, they allowed themselves instead to concentrate on ornamenting and beautifying their world. This is not to diminish the aesthetic achievement of [the era's] artists, craftspeople, and architects. But their achievement was aesthetic, not scientific or philosophical. With only one outstanding exception ... the civilization of Timur's successors was concerned

⁴⁵ Indeed, Grousset writes that, "[o]n the very morrow of Tamerlane's death, the quarrels, coups and palace revolutions began" (Grousset, 1970, p. 457).

more with beauty than with exploring the world of nature, or of humans' relation to God and the universe. In this respect, they differed radically from the mainstream of Central Asian civilization over the preceding millennium (Starr, 2013, pp. 491-492).

The “one exception” that Starr mentions was in fact Timür’s grandson, Mizra Muhammad Taraghay, more commonly known as Ulughbeg, who succeeded Shahrukh upon his father’s death in 1447. Not only did Ulughbeg patronize thousands of students (Starr, 2013, p. 493), but he was himself a remarkably accomplished astronomer; the ruins of the observatory that he built and used in Samarkand are still there today. Likewise, he had the words “The search for knowledge is the duty of every Muslim” inscribed on the doors of the Ulughbeg Medresseh that he had constructed in the Registan Square in Samarkand (ibid., p. 494). Moreover, it was during the reign of Ulughbeg that the literary language known as Chaghatay, which blended elements of Turkic and Persian languages, emerged (Golden, 2011, p. 98).

The glories of the Timurid era, however, were relatively short-lived. Most accounts of Ulughbeg’s reign note that his accomplishments in the realm of science and mathematics were not accompanied by a corresponding aptitude for statecraft. Even before he had come to power, Ulughbeg had suffered a number of humiliating military defeats as a regional governor, and he fared no better as the ruler of the Timurid realm. The once-fearsome Timurid armies were resoundingly defeated by the nomadic Shaybanids, a tribe of Özbeks,⁴⁶ who were led by the descendants of Shiban, a grandson of Chinggis Khan. In 1449, Ulughbeg was murdered by his

⁴⁶ The modern-day Uzbeks, although related to the nomadic Özbeks, cannot be completely identified with them. Modern Uzbek identity is the product of the Soviet period, when the sedentary Turkic-speaking peoples of Transoxania, who were sometimes known as “Sarts,” an ill-defined and problematic label – see Bregel (1978) – were redefined by Soviet ethnographers as “Uzbeks,” while the Persian-speaking peoples in the same region became known as Tajiks. See: Allworth (1990, pp. 176-179). For the purposes of clarity, this dissertation will refer to the present-day Uzbeks as “Uzbeks,” while the fifteenth-century nomadic group with the same name will be written as “Özbeks.”

son ‘Abd al-Latif, who himself was assassinated in 1450 (Grousset, 1970, p. 460). The combination of Shaybanid invasions and incompetent leadership meant that after a relatively brief period of cultural florescence, Timurid rule quickly collapsed in Transoxania.

2.13.2 The Shaybanids

After wresting Transoxania from the Timurids, the descendants of Chinggis Khan established the Khanate of Khiva (1511-1695) and the Khanate of Bukhara (1505-1598), effected what might be considered a “Chinggisid restoration” after the Timurid interlude.⁴⁷ However, the Shaybanid period in Central Asia is a time that is often associated, perhaps unfairly, with decline and decadence. The opening of maritime trade routes between Western Europe and India and China began to reduce the importance of the overland routes across Eurasia, which were in any case atrophying due to the prolonged instability across Inner Asia. In Moghulistan, endemic warfare, the Oirat invasions, and the efforts of a newly-reinvigorated China to once again extend its power into the Tarim Basin, had prevented any further attempts at consolidation in East Turkestan. Similarly, the weakened remnants of the Golden Horde, once the “scourge of God,” were now giving way to the inexorable expansion of the Russian state. One by one the Khanates of Kazan, Crimea, Astrakhan, and Sibir, as well as the nomadic groups, such as the Nogai Horde, that still roamed the steppes, succumbed to Russian armies.

2.14 The Russian Conquest

The growing weakness in the middle of the fourteenth century of the Golden Horde vis-à-vis its neighbors was the result of several factors. First, reflecting trends common throughout the Mongol world, the Golden Horde increasingly fell prey to internal divisions and rivalries

⁴⁷ In one sense, the last of the Timurids actually lasted until the 1857 deposition of Bahadur Shah II, the last Mughal emperor in India. The Mughal (that is, Mongol) Empire was established in what is now Afghanistan in 1526 by Babur, a descendant of Timūr, who ruled in the Ferghana Valley before being driven out of his lands by Özbeks. The Mughal Empire eventually grew to encompass much of present-day Pakistan and India before Bahadur Shah II was deposed by the British in the wake of the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857.

between different branches of the ruling family. With help from Timür, one of the claimants to the throne, Tokhtamysh, was able to establish control over much of the khanate. However, Tokhtamysh subsequently became embroiled in ill-considered wars with both the Timurids and the Shaybanids, sapping what was left of the Golden Horde's strength during a critical period when its restive European vassals and tributaries were beginning to consolidate their strength.

Another crucial factor in the decline of the Golden Horde was the increasing adoption by Europeans of firearms, which "rendered nomadic armies incapable of seizing towns surrounded by new types of fortifications and backed by cannon" (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 19). Suddenly, the nomads, whose mounted warfare tactics had ensured centuries of military dominance, were at a serious, and increasing, disadvantage vis-à-vis the infantry armies of their sedentary neighbors. Moreover, the relatively small number of nomads grew increasingly dependent on often unreliable local auxiliaries, since horsemen killed in battle could not be readily replaced (Beckwith, 2009, p. 339). If the contest between the steppe peoples and their sedentary neighbors had for centuries been weighted in favor of the nomads, increasing centralization and the adoption of new forms of technology tipped the scales decisively in the opposite direction.

The decline of the Golden Horde opened created a power vacuum in Qipchaq Steppe and opened up a political space for the Grand Duchy of Muscovy to expand its own influence at the expense of its former suzerain. The rise of Muscovy ultimately pitted "Christian Russia, a military-bureaucratic state with urban centers and a dynamic agricultural-industrial economy" against "various non-Christian societies with kinship-based social organizations and static, overwhelmingly nomadic-pastoral economies" (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 8). The incompatibility between the two forms of socio-political organization, not to mention the religious and ideological overtones of Orthodox Christian Muscovy freeing itself from the Muslim Tatar

“yoke,” meant that their interests were “fundamentally irreconcilable and that confrontation between them was unavoidable” (ibid.). There is no space here to recount the whole history of the expansion of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, its subsequent transformation into the Russian Empire, or tsarist Russia’s conquests of the various remnants of the Golden Horde.⁴⁸ What concerns us more is the Russian expansion into Central Asia, which began in the mid-nineteenth century and continued, arguably, until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a peculiar change affected the way that the Russians viewed the nomads. Previously, the “[n]omads of the steppe and Muslims were always recognized as being equal partners, even if they were infidels” (Kappeler, 2001, p. 168). However, over time the Russians progressively “adopted from the west a eurocentric feeling of superiority towards Asia. The distance between Russia and the Asiatic peoples increased, and terms such as Islam, nomadic life, Asia and the Orient now acquired connotations that were definitely negative” (ibid.). These attitudes meant that by 1864, the Russian Foreign Minister, Aleksandr Gorchakov, could announce that

[t]he situation of Russia in Central Asia is similar to that of all civilised states which come into contact with half-savage nomadic tribes without a firm social organization. In such cases, the interests of border security and trade relations always require that the more civilised state have a certain authority over its neighbours, whose wild and unruly customs render them very troublesome. It begins first by curbing raids and pillaging. To put an end to these, it is often compelled to reduce the neighbouring tribes to some degree of close subordination (quoted in Hosking, 1997, p. 38).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ For more background on this protracted and multifaceted process, see generally: Khodarkovsky (2002).

⁴⁹ Curiously, Gorchakov’s justifications for the Russian encroachment into Central Asia mirror Khodarkovsky’s description of the “organic colonialism” of the Muscovite state of the sixteenth century, which was “largely

At the time of Gorchakov's proclamation, the Russian Empire had no serious presence in Transoxania, and had only begun to make major inroads into the Qipchaq Steppe. But this state of affairs was not to last: by 1875, Tashkent had been conquered, Khiva and Bukhara had been effectively vassalized, the khanate of Khoqand had been annexed outright, and the Kazakhs, fearing the encroachments of the Dzungars, had, submitted themselves, with considerable encouragement, to Russian "protection."

Russian colonialism in Central Asia never penetrated as deeply as did the French or British colonial projects in Asia or Africa, and the question of what was to be done with Central Asia once it was conquered was the subject of a great deal of confusion. As Daniel Brower has shown, Russian policy towards the region was heavily divided between those who saw the region's large Muslim population as a grave threat to the security of the empire and those who sought to integrate Central Asia into the Russian economy. Ultimately the Russian government chose a kind of middle ground approach: colonization and development, but under auspices of a military government that would quickly deal with any potential Muslim insurrection (Brower, 2003, pp. 27-29). Henceforth, various parts of Central Asia would be divided at different times between a number of different administrative units of the Russian Empire, including the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan (also called Russian Turkestan) and the Governor-Generalship of the Steppes. Meanwhile the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva were reduced to the status of Russian protectorates and the Khanate of Khoqand, which had split from Bukhara in 1709, was annexed by Russia in 1876.

characterized by its defensive needs to secure and stabilize the empire's southern borderlands." However, Khodarkovsky argues that Russian expansion into Central Asia and the Caucasus in the nineteenth century resembles "a classic example of western colonialism driven to conquest and domination by utilitarian concerns" (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 229).

Even before the conquest of Turkestan, the Russian government had carried out “a broad study of the military, political, and economic capacities of the Central Asian Khanates and of regional trade routes” (R. Abdullaev, Khotamov, & Kenensariiev, 2011, p. 69). Now that it controlled the region, it hastened to transform much of Transoxania a vast cotton plantation for the benefit of the Russian economy, and earmarked much of the rest of the arable land for settlement by farmers from the western part of the empire. As Abdullaev et al. noted, “[t]he goals of this effort were to weaken both the settled and nomadic aristocracies, to expropriate the land from the indigenous population, to exploit agriculture to the maximum extent possible, and to foster colonization” (ibid., p. 77). To a significant degree, these goals were to be accomplished by means of demography: large numbers of settlers were encouraged to migrate to the region, and the result was the gradual expropriation of land from pastoral nomads by Slavic farmers (Brower, 1996).

In terms of nineteenth century geopolitics, the Russian conquest of Central Asia helped to raise tensions with the British Empire, which perceived Russian expansion as a direct threat to the security of British India. The struggle between the Russian and British Empires for influence in Inner Asia became known colloquially as the “Great Game” or, in Russian, the “Tournament of Shadows.” Although the details of the Great Game are largely beyond the scope of this dissertation (see Hopkirk, 1994; K. Meyer & Brysac, 1999), one important outcome of imperial competition was that it led to the first systematic attempt to delineate borders in Inner Asia. Specifically, efforts were made to create a buffer between the British and Russian Empires, so as to preclude the possibility of cross-border conflict between the two expansionist powers. The result was the creation of the state of Afghanistan, whose odd territorial protrusion, the Wakhan Corridor, which separates present-day Pakistan (formerly part of British India) from what is now

Tajikistan, which became part of the Russian Empire in the 1880s, was a result of this geopolitical anxiety (Rowe, 2010).

It is thus around this time that we can begin to conceive of Central Asia – present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan – as a somewhat unified region in the sense that, henceforth, its destiny would begin to diverge from other parts of Inner Asia, including Tibet, East Turkestan (Xinjiang and, to a lesser extent, Mongolia), Persia, or Afghanistan, each of which followed its own trajectory.⁵⁰ This is to say that, from the time of the Russian conquest until the present day, the history, politics, and culture of Central Asia cannot be meaningfully separated from their relationship with Russia and the Soviet Union. Even now, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the shadow of Russian military, political and economic dominance continues to loom large.

2.14.1 The Kyrgyz under the Russian Empire

After the decline of the Timurids and, later, the Shaybanids, Central Asia entered into a period that is often described in terms of “decadence” and “decline.” Indeed, for Europeans of the nineteenth century, this is precisely how they appeared:

Like other “Oriental” societies, the societies of Transoxania appeared stagnant and isolated, their rulers corrupt, effete, and cruel. Climate and race played their part in setting these societies on a path toward decline and submission to superior European forces, but their evident zeal for religion, so often highlighted in travelers’ accounts, struck Russians as the fundamental cause of their immobility (Crews, 2006, p. 246).

⁵⁰ To a significant degree, Mongolia’s path mirrored that of the other Central Asian Republics. However, since the Mongolian People’s Republic was a Soviet satellite, and not an integral part of the Soviet Union itself, we will largely set its story aside.

However, many of the problems suffered by the post-Shaybanid states of Central Asia were the result of the political fragmentation and economic decay that were the wages of decades of internecine warfare and economic decline (Bregel, 2009), rather than the consequences of “Oriental” decadence or Islamic despotism.

By turn of the eighteenth century, Transoxania was divided between the Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara, which had been founded by members of the Shaybanid ruling family. The three great Muslim “Gunpowder Empires” – the Ottomans, the Persian Safavids, and the Mughals in India – were all engaged in desperate rearguard battles against European encroachment. Meanwhile, as we have seen, the territory of modern-day Afghanistan was gradually being reconfigured as a buffer state between the Russian and British Empires. Much of the Qipchaq Steppe had been absorbed by Russia, and the Dzungar conquests had decimated groups like the Kyrgyz and the Kazakhs, the latter of whom were compelled to request protection from the tsar (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 150). The Dzungars themselves were soon crushed by a resurgent China under the Manchu (Qing) Dynasty.

Between 1709 and 1876 the Khanate of Khoqand, which splintered from the Khanate of Bukhara, ruled over much of the Ferghana Valley. Its authority extended into the Chui Valley in present-day Kyrgyzstan, where it also controlled the fortress of Pishpek (now Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital) and Tokmok, which is adjacent to the ruins of the old Qarakhanid city of Balasagun. As a reflection of the fading, but still potent, legacy of Chinggisid charisma, the Khoqand khans claimed descent from Chinggis Khan himself, although it is likely that this lineage was simply invented (Dubovitskii & Bababekov, 2011). In any case, with its capital in the city of Khoqand (now in Uzbekistan), the khanate “existed at the point of junction of three world civilizations: the Muslim world to which it belonged, the Orthodox Christian Russian

Empire, and the Buddhist-Confucian China of the Qin Empire” (ibid., p. 29), and its very centrality proved both to be its greatest asset as well as the source of its undoing.

After China finally destroyed the remnants of the Dzungar state, it began to consolidate its power over East Turkestan. However, several influential Islamic rulers, called *xodjas*, who had gradually assumed power after the waning of Chagataid power in East Turkestan (Millward & Perdue, 2004, pp. 47-48), subsequently fled their base of power in Kashgar and took refuge in Khoqand. From there, they attempted to reestablish their power in East Turkestan, which negatively impacted the khanate’s relations with China (Dubovitskii & Bababekov, 2011, p. 43).

Despite tensions with its neighbor to the east, with its position astride the ebbing, but still lucrative, Silk Routes, Khoqand was initially prosperous enough to pursue an energetic policy of development. Its substantial revenues enabled it to invest in several major infrastructure projects, such as expanding the region’s vital irrigation system. However, almost ceaseless warfare with Bukhara,⁵¹ as well as the geopolitical intrigues of the Great Game (ibid., pp. 53-57), served eventually to undermine the khanate’s fragile stability and sap the vitality of its economy. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Khanate of Khoqand was afflicted with a collapsing economy, beset by invasions by its neighbors, and convulsed by internal rebellion.

Much of this internal instability, however, was the khanate’s own doing. At the time of its founding, Khoqand’s rulers had recognized the khanate’s precarious position, and sought allies among (and protection from) the neighboring Kyrgyz and Qipchaq tribes living in the Ferghana Valley and the Semireche (Ploskikh & Dzhunushaliev, 2009, p. 127). By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, more reckless leaders sought to expand their territory and subjugate the nomads. As a result of such policies, the period from the 1840s until 1876 witnessed a series

⁵¹ After the overthrow in 1785 of the khan of Bukhara, who could legitimately trace descent back to Chinggis Khan, by the Manghits, who could had no Chinggisid patrimony, the Khanate of Bukhara became known as the Emirate of Bukhara. It remained an emirate until 1920, when it became the Bukharan People’s Soviet Republic.

of revolts debilitating revolts by the Kyrgyz against Khoqand. In 1876, Khoqand was annexed by the Russian Empire, the proximate cause for which was an uprising by rebellious Kyrgyz tribes against the khanate's Russian-supported ruler, Khudayar Khan. The Kyrgyz were led by a man named Pulat Khan, a pretender to the throne, who was more interested in seizing power in Khoqand than he was in waging war of aggression against the Russians. Nevertheless, As Dubovitskii and Bababekov note, "When Pulat Khan rose up against Kokand, the Russian army rolled in under the pretext of suppressing the rebellion and soon conquered the entire state" (Dubovitskii & Bababekov, 2011, p. 57).

It is important to note that Kyrgyz society at this time was not united, and different tribes often pursued their own interests. Thus, around the same time that Pulat Khan was fighting against the Russians, the famous Kurmanjan Datka, whose husband, Alymbek Datka,⁵² was a vizier to the khan of Khoqand, rose to power. After Alymbek was assassinated as a result of "palace infighting" (Ploskikh & Dzhunushaliev, 2009, pp. 167-168), Kurmanjan was recognized as the leader of the Alai Kyrgyz in the Ferghana Valley. Under Kurmanjan Datka's leadership, several Kyrgyz tribes allied themselves with the Russians. Although the Kyrgyz were now free from Khoqand, their territory was subsequently incorporated into tsarist Russia, which proceeded to open up the Semireche to settlement.⁵³

The Russian acquisition of the Kyrgyz lands resulted in major changes to the Kyrgyz way of life: incorporation into the Russian Empire also meant the imposition of tsarist colonial administration and its attendant policies of social and political development, which began to undermine the tribal basis of Kyrgyz society. Russian colonialism also brought with it the spread

⁵² "Datka" is a title that roughly corresponds to "general" (Ploskikh & Dzhunushaliev, 2009, p. 168).

⁵³ In the summer of 2014, with Kyrgyzstan's controversial entry into the Russian-led "Customs Union" looming, many Kyrgyz interpreted the blockbuster film adaptation of Kurmanjan Datka's story as a thinly-veiled warning against the dangers of growing too close to Russia. After all, Kurmanjan Datka's own sons were executed for running astray of the Russian colonial authorities.

of the capitalist economy Central Asia, which chipped away at the traditional feudal economy prevalent among the Kyrgyz. As Daniel Brower has noted, “a market economy was penetrating the countryside. No matter what settlement policy the Russian administration chose, the irreversible decline of the old nomadic way of life had begun” (Brower, 1996, pp. 44-45). Indeed, as time progressed, many nomads began to adopt a settled lifestyle, either out of a desire for the trappings of modern industrial life or because the gradual expropriation of their pastures for use by Slavic farmers made the nomadic lifestyle infeasible.

One of the major problems faced by the tsarist administration was that the region’s best agricultural land, located in the Ferghana Valley (now split between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan), was already densely settled. This meant that the Semireche, which was more arable than the arid expanses of the Qipchaq Steppe or the deserts of Transoxania, was one of the primary destinations for migrants from the western parts of the empire. This problem became especially acute in the territory of what is now Kyrgyzstan: because of the relatively small amount of suitable farming land in the mountainous regions adjacent to the Tien Shan, settlers and nomads often found themselves living in rather close proximity to one another. As has often been the case in colonial situations, the new settlers detested the Kyrgyz, viewing them as illegitimate occupants on what they viewed as “the tsar’s land”:

[L]ike other pioneers they seem to have treated the nomadic inhabitants of their new land with disdain, and to have bitterly resented official efforts to restrain their land hunger to protect the Kyrgyz pastoral economy. The authorized allotments for settlement were perennially inadequate to meet the needs of the new migrants, who often proceeded to settle (semi-legally or completely illegally) on Kyrgyz grazing lands (ibid., p. 48).

Given the often high-handed attitude of the colonial authorities and Slavic settlers towards the nomads, friction was almost inevitable. Anti-colonial revolts periodically broke out across Russian Turkestan, the largest of which was centered around the city of Andijan in the Ferghana Valley. Such revolts inevitably provoked a harsh response from the Russian government, which only deepened the local resentment against their new colonial overlords. This resentment only continued to grow after the expansion of settlement after 1905.

Inter-ethnic tensions were thus already high when, in 1916, desperately in need of manpower to fight against the Germans and their Austro-Hungarian allies, the tsarist government revoked the exemptions against serving in the Russian army that the nomads had previously enjoyed. The region's economy had already been mobilized to support the Russian war effort, and taxes had been raised to untenable levels (R. Abdullaev et al., 2011, p. 76); consequently, the new rules, which required all men aged 19-31 to register for conscription, proved to be the spark that ignited the tinder.

A massive, violent uprising broke out across Russian Turkestan, confirming the worst fears of the Russians, who were still haunted by the specter of a "fanatical Muslim insurrection" similar to the one led by Imam Shamil in Chechnya (Gammer, 2006, pp. 45-66; King, 2008, pp. 77-83). Consequently, in settled areas the revolt was put down brutally, and many smaller settlements were razed (Brower, 2003, p. 160). However, if the insurrection eventually subsided in the cities, it quickly spread among the restive Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz as well. Kazakh resistance mainly took the form of sporadic raids against Russian outposts, but Kyrgyz resentment at the dispossession of their land and the progressive collapse of their traditional culture found expression in a well-organized campaign against Russian settlers and colonial authorities. Although the center of the uprising was the city of Przhevalsk (the present-day city

of Karakol, on the east side of Lake Issyk Kul), the revolt was widespread. In the end, upwards of 2,000 settlers were killed (Brower, 2003, p. 162).

The settlers were merciless in their reprisals against the Kyrgyz, who did not possess either the numbers or the weapons to mount a determined resistance:

Cossack and army detachments roamed the area, hunting down any Kyrgyz groups that they found. The remaining Europeans received arms and organized themselves into militia. They formed lynch mobs in the Przhhevsk region, executing any non-Europeans who fell into their path and seizing whatever Kyrgyz livestock that they could find. Even Sart inhabitants who sought refuge within Russian towns from the violence fell victim to their blind fury (ibid.).

In the end, many Kyrgyz had no choice but to flee across the mountains into China; many succumbed to starvation and exposure along the way. By some estimates, over 200,000 people, roughly 42% of the entire Kyrgyz population at the time, perished either during the revolt or the *Urkun*, or “exodus,” across the mountains (Hambly, 1966, p. 225; Osmonov, 2014, p. 345; Pannier, 2006; Ploskikh & Dzhunushaliev, 2009, p. 179).

As traumatic as it was for, the 1916 Kyrgyz uprising was soon overshadowed by the February and October Revolutions, which overthrew the Tsar and brought the Bolsheviks to power. As Daniel Brower points out, “The Turkestan revolt was a thing of the past when the empire fell... Turkestan was, like the rest of the empire, on the sidelines of the unexpected political transformation which ‘arrived in Turkestan by telegram’” (Brower, 2003, p. 171). Soon, Central Asia would once again be thrown into chaos, as Red, White, and local armies all vied for control of the rubble of the tsarist empire.

2.15 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been twofold: first, in briefly sketching the history of Central Asia, it aimed to introduce the reader to what is often considered to be an obscure and peripheral part of the world, providing historical context for the remainder of this dissertation; and second, this chapter has laid the groundwork for the remainder of this dissertation by outlining what is known of the history of the Kyrgyz people until the early twentieth century, a history that remains salient in contemporary Kyrgyz discourses on national identity.

It is important to note, however, that, by the time of the 1916 uprising, the concept of nationality as such had not penetrated Kyrgyz society. Although the Kyrgyz seem to have possessed an ethnic self-awareness, they remained non-national and largely organized around tribe and territory. But the eventual victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet Union would bring cultural, social, and political changes to Central Asia that proved to be even more momentous than those that accompanied the Russian Empire. Among these changes, and, arguably, the most important, was the idea of nationality. The spread of this idea in Central Asia will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Constructing Ancient Nations

Kyrgyz, as one of the ancient peoples of Central Asia, inherited the great culture of the nomadic civilization, glorified in the “Manas” epic’s ideology of the national statehood and spirit of the ancestors, based on the unity of the nation, tolerance, and humanism.

- Tabyldy Akerov (Akerov, 2007, p. 288).

The carnage of the 1916 revolt had scarcely subsided when Tsar Nicholas II abdicated and the entire Russian Empire descended into civil war. Central Asia was not spared. War, famine, and economic collapse ravaged the region, which, although nominally controlled by the new Provisional Government, was in reality riven between monarchists, revolutionaries, and local armed groups. By the end of 1917, leftist revolutionary organizations had begun to spring up, and their anti-colonial rhetoric won them significant support from many who had suffered during the 1916 revolt (Osmonov, 2014, p. 375). But this support was not enough to ensure total victory, and the unrest continued until more substantial and better-organized forces from Bolshevik Russia intervened.

By 1920, the Red Army, under the command of Mikhail Frunze, a native of the fortress town of Pishpek (now renamed Bishkek; the city, which was the capital of Soviet Kirghizia, was named during the Soviet period after Frunze) had largely defeated the anti-Soviet resistance in the region, and in 1924 the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Oblast (AO) was officially created as a district of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist

Republic (RSFSR). But the very act of creating the Kara-Kirghiz AO represented more than just the political-territorial incorporation of Kirghizia into the Soviet Union: it also presupposed the existence of the object that it territorialized – namely, the Kyrgyz nation itself.

Paradoxically, however, it was largely as a result of state intervention that from 1924, the Kyrgyz were endowed with what Soviet nationalities theory held to be the objective qualities of nationhood, including a defined territory with an “autonomous” government, a standardized language, national scientific and cultural institutions, and a developed industrial economy. However, as Robert Kaiser has pointed out, before the October Revolution, “with the exception of the indigenous nations of the more developed northwest... mass-based perceptions of a national homeland were only beginning to take shape” (Kaiser, 1994, p. 94).

The absence of a broad-based, developed sense of national identity was especially true among the nomads of Central Asia, who largely continued to identify themselves in terms of kinship or territory, rather than in terms of nationality. Even the 1916 revolt was not a “national liberation movement” in any meaningful sense; rather it was motivated primarily by resentment over persistent mistreatment at the hands of Russian settlers and colonial authorities. By 1991, however, the Kyrgyz, like the neighboring Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs, and Turkmen, were accustomed to viewing themselves not only as a nation, but as an ancient one, whose emotional and spiritual connections with the territory of their modern-day nation-state was primordial and unbreakable.

The roots of this remarkable transformation can be traced to seemingly-paradoxical Soviet policies that encouraged the development and reification of national

identity. But as we will see in this chapter, although the growth national identity in Kyrgyzstan was to some degree fostered by the Soviet state, nationality in the Soviet Union was never a univocal discourse. Almost from the very beginning, specifically “Soviet” narratives of nationhood were challenged, co-opted, and undermined by indigenous counter-memories of what it meant to be Kyrgyz.

3.1 Nationalism in Tsarist Russia

In 1914, the map of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as most of what we now call Central Asia, looked strikingly different than it does today. After the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, the Ottoman Empire had lost the bulk of its Balkan possessions, including Romania, Montenegro, and Serbia, which together accounted for more than one third of its territory (Keyder, 1997, p. 33). Much of the rest of Central and Eastern Europe remained part of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. Further east, the Russian Empire, which was increasingly wracked by mounting instability and socio-political and cultural contradictions, maintained an increasingly shaky grip over its empire in Poland and Finland, as well as Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

By the end of 1918, all three of the great continental empires were gone. The first to fall was the Russian Empire, which disintegrated in March of 1917. The proximate causes of the revolution that overthrew the Tsar were the inhuman conditions endured by soldiers in the Russian Imperial Army and the crumbling economy and daily privations on the home front. But the revolution was also the culmination of decades of social upheaval, growing popular discontent with the autocracy, and the longstanding “revolutionary tradition” among the intelligentsia (Fitzpatrick, 1994, p. 23). The

Provisional Government that came to power in Russia after the February Revolution,⁵⁴ however, proved unable to contain the tensions that continued to divide the former empire along class, ethnic, and ideological lines.

One of the most intractable issues faced by all of the great multiethnic empires of the nineteenth century was nationalism. The Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian states all faced the challenge of formulating and implementing policies that could reconcile the growing demands of their subject peoples for national self-determination (Hroch, 1995) with the necessity of preserving an imperial mode of government and territorial control that was fundamentally antipathetic towards minority nationalism. In the Ottoman case, the *Tanzimat* reforms attempted to construct a multinational society by abolishing the longstanding *millet* system, under which the empire's various religious minorities were afforded a fair measure of communal autonomy. Although the *Tanzimat* reforms were intended to promote state centralization by encouraging a sort of pan-Ottoman identity, they instead provoked even further unrest, since minority groups were loath to give up their customary autonomy. The Habsburg state also passed laws that, at least in theory, guaranteed access to education and administration in local languages and otherwise affirmed the equal rights of various nationalities in the Austrian parts of the empire (Staatsgrundgesetz vom 21. Dezember 1867, 1867).⁵⁵

In the Russian Empire, by contrast, the state consistently refused to make any concessions whatsoever to the growing awareness of national identity among its subject

⁵⁴ Russia continued to use the Julian calendar until 1918. Consequently, the event that is usually referred to as the February Revolution occurred in March, according to the Gregorian calendar, while the October Revolution, which brought the Bolsheviks to power, occurred in November.

⁵⁵ Of course, the reality of ethno-national politics in Austria-Hungary did not always live up to the ideal set out in the Constitution. Both ethnic Germans and Magyars, who were the dominant groups in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, often resisted the demands for equal rights of other ethno-national groups living in their respective parts of the Empire (Evans, 2006; A. J. P. Taylor, 1948, p. 113).

peoples. The reality of diversity was subsumed under an ideology of familial unity and loyalty to the Tsar. For example, in 1883, Mikhail Katkov, the editor of *Moskovskiiie Vedemosti* (*Moscow Times*), one of Russia's most important newspapers at the time, argued:

There is in Russia one dominant nationality, one dominant language, developed by centuries of historical life. However, there are also in Russia a multitude of tribes, each speaking in its own language and having its own customs; there are whole countries, with their separate characters and traditions. But all these diverse tribes and regions, lying on the borders of the Great Russian world, constitute its living parts and feel their oneness with it, in the union of state and supreme power in the person of the Tsar (quoted in Hosking, 1997, p. 375).

However, the fiction that the empire was an organic entity forged out of a common sense of loyalty and submission to the Tsar and the state became increasingly difficult to maintain. For example, the 1897 census had revealed that less than half of the population of the empire, only 44.32 percent, were "Great Russians" (Pipes, 1997, p. 2). In reality, this number almost certainly over-estimated the actual number of Russians, since the census categorized people primarily according to which language they spoke. This meant that many linguistically Russified Ukrainians, Poles, Georgians, Tatars, and others were likely classified by census-takers as "Russian" (*ibid.*).

Moreover, many of the peoples of the Russian Empire, including the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and other Muslim peoples, were formally classified by the state as *inorodtsy*. This term can be loosely translated as "non-Russian," but we must be careful of assigning to it a nationalist inflection. When the Russian Empire first began to expand its frontiers

to the east, the primary line separating the Slavic settlers and the nomads was religion. Consequently, as Andreas Kappeler has pointed out, the designation of *inorodtsy* actually originated in the division between Orthodox Christians and *inovertsy*, or “non-believers” (Kappeler, 2001, p. 168). It was only later, under Catherine II, when European Enlightenment thought began to spread in Russia, that this relationship started to be reconceptualized in terms of a civilizational-developmental discourse that pitted primitive nomadic herdsmen against sedentary farmers (ibid., p. 169).⁵⁶

As time passed, however, the term *inorodtsy* began to take on more of a nationally-inflected meaning. Particularly after the revelation that ethnic Russians were becoming a minority in their own empire, the term began to lose its original civilizational-developmental meaning and take on a more xenophobic character. Thus, as John Slocum has pointed out,

Constant themes of difference and threat underlie the different meanings attached to the term *inorodtsy*. The juridical category included those inhabitants of the empire most radically different from the Russified core population, whose difference involved social structures, belief systems, and patterns of land use that placed obstacles in the way of direct imperial domination... The age of nationalism threw up a series of new threats, suggesting that the empire’s unity might be threatened by its loyal, “civilized” non-Russian subjects (Slocum, 1998, p. 190).

⁵⁶ As John Slocum has noted, however, Jews were also classified as *inorodtsy*, which “points to a fundamental ambiguity in the underlying logic of this category: was it more and indicator of a given people’s purported level of civilizational development, or a legal marker of racial difference?” (Slocum, 1998, p. 174).

It is important to note, moreover, that the term *inorodtsy* was always an exogenous classification, one that always denoted “otherness.” It was never adopted by the *inorodtsy* themselves as a way of differentiating themselves in “national” terms from the Russians.

Ultimately, of course, both the problem of the waning dominance of the “Great Russians” and the supposed threat posed by the *inorodtsy* were a direct result of the empire’s incomplete absorption of Poland and its rapid expansion into Central Asia, both of which brought significant, and frequently restive, non-Russian populations under the imperial roof. Ultimately, it was only by classifying Belorussians and Ukrainians (who were demeaned as *malorusskie* – “Little Russians”) as Russians who merely spoke a corrupted or “peasant” dialect of the Russian language that the illusion of “Russian” dominance in the Russian Empire could be maintained.⁵⁷

Compounding the problem of the progressive dilution of the “Russian” character of the population of the Russian Empire, however, was the growing sense of national self-awareness and assertiveness among many of the Tsar’s subjects, primarily in the western regions of the empire. Andreas Kappeler has argued that the development of national self-identification in the Russian Empire largely conformed to the model outlined by Miroslav Hroch (1985):

- 1) A period of increased scholarly interest in recovering and preserving ethnic traditions and folklore, which were conceived of as the cultural patrimony of the nation;
- 2) This initial stage, which was primarily limited to the intelligentsia and other elites, was then followed by

⁵⁷ Any linguistic and cultural differences between Ukrainians and Belorussians on the one hand and “Great Russians” on the other was blamed on the perfidious influence of Poland or Austria-Hungary. As Alexander II’s Interior Minister, Pyotr Valuyev, argued: “There never has been, there is not, and there cannot be an independent Little Russian language. The dialect spoken by the man in the street is Russian, and has merely been corrupted by the influence of Poland” (quoted in Kappeler, 2001, pp. 255-256).

attempts to inculcate a sense of national identity among the masses, perhaps through newspapers, music, or theatre;

3) Finally, these efforts precipitated the emergence of a broad-based nationalist movement that agitated for increased autonomy and representation (Kappeler, 2001, p. 214).

For those caught up in this kind of “national awakening,” stifling political control and policies of cultural and linguistic Russification, which were intended to “inspire among all peoples of the empire a subjective sense of *belonging* to Russia, whether through the habit of using the Russian language, through reverence for Russia’s past, its culture and traditions, or through conversion to the Orthodox faith” (Hosking, 1997, p. 367), usually accomplished little more than provoking resentment and, increasingly, nationalist unrest.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first truly *national* challenges to tsarist authority occurred in Poland. Before being partitioned between Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Prussia in the late eighteenth century, Poland had enjoyed a long history as a powerful state. The memory of this glorious past clashed with the reality that Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, had since 1772 partitioned the territory of Poland amongst themselves, and fostered a significant degree of popular bitterness. This resentment ultimately manifested itself in violent rebellions against the tsarist authorities, often provoked by attempts to conscript Poles into the Russian military or other abuses: the first major Polish uprising occurred in 1830 (the “November Uprising”), and was followed by further revolts in 1863-1864 (the “January Uprising”), and in 1905 (the “Łódź Uprising”).

The revolts provoked harsh responses from the tsarist authorities, who sought not only to put down the rebellions themselves, but also to make an example of Poland, as a

warning to incipient nationalist groups elsewhere in the empire. But the Russians' heavy-handed punitive measures did little to stymie similar movements from organizing in Finland, the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Belarus. By the turn of the twentieth century, nationalist rebellions, often working in concert with social revolutionaries, had broken out in Georgia and Armenia as well (see Hosking, 1997, pp. 376-397; Kappeler, 2001, pp. 216-234; Suny, 1994, pp. 144-181). Fearing similar unrest in Ukraine, the tsarist government placed strict restrictions on the use of the Ukrainian language, banning its use in literature, periodicals, or theatre and instead intensifying policies of Russification (Yekelchik, 2007, p. 44). As noted in Chapter Two, anti-Russian revolts also broke out in Turkestan during this time, but these rebellions did not have a clearly national character; rather, they were the result of what the indigenous population perceived as abuse and injustice at the hands of Slavic settlers and the Russian colonial administration.

Interestingly, while minority nationalist movements metastasized throughout the tsarist empire, Russian nationalism itself remained a relatively marginal force. To a certain extent, this fact was due both to lack of support from the state, as well as to the ideological character of the state itself. The conceptual basis of the empire, which combined both political and religious authority in the person of the Tsar, effectively precluded the emergence of a broad-based, Russian nationalist ideology oriented, as nationalisms must be, horizontally, towards *the people*.⁵⁸ While the ideology of "Official Nationality," which was encapsulated in the slogan "*Pravoslaviie, samoderzhaviie, narodnost*" ("Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality") had been developed as early as 1833,

⁵⁸ As the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789 states: "The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation" (Declaration of the Rights of Man, 1789). Such a sentiment stood squarely opposed to the Russian autocratic tradition in which all power was vested in the Tsar.

during the reign of Nicholas I, the third aspect of conceptual trinity, "nationality," was conceptually undeveloped until the early twentieth century. Thus, Russian "nationality" was primarily understood in terms of belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church and fluency in the Russian language, not as a *political* project focused on securing a state for the "Russian people."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, a nascent Russian nationalist movement had emerged by the late nineteenth century, and it was increasingly alarmed by the presence of nationalist sentiment among the non-Russian populations of the empire. The Russian nationalist movement in the nineteenth century was exemplified by the notoriously xenophobic and anti-Semitic "Black Hundreds," but was also represented by groups like the "Union of Archangel Michael," the "Russian Assembly," and the "Union of the Russian People." Like the Black Hundreds, such groups tended to be xenophobic, chauvinistic, Orthodox, and staunchly monarchist.

Although Russian nationalist movements had become increasingly vocal after the Polish Uprising of 1863, they "lacked effective organization, continuity, and cohesion, as well as a solid ideology" (Riasanovsky, 1963, p. 500), and had relatively little influence in Russian politics until the 1880s. Despite the potential appeal of Russian nationalists for countering minority nationalisms, the tsarist state recognized, as the famous Russian statesman, Sergei Witte, argued, that "an empire like [Russia] cannot have the motto of converting all people into true Russians" (Sergei Witte, quoted in Vitukhnovksaya, 2001, p. 24). Indeed, the weak tsarist state "had neither the means nor even the desire to

⁵⁹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that the distinguishing mark of nationalist is its relationship with politics and its orientation towards the state. He writes: "A nationalist holds that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries, whereas many ethnic groups do not demand command over a state. When the political leaders of an ethnic movement make demands to this effect, the ethnic movement by definition becomes a nationalist movement" (Eriksen, 2002, p. 7).

extirpate all non-Russian languages, cultures, and religions” (Weeks, 2001, p. 96). In fact, in most cases tsarist authorities preferred policies of what Ladis Kristof has termed “Rossification” – “the development of an unswerving loyalty and direct attachment to the person of the tsar, by God’s will the sole power-holder (*samoderzhets*) and head of *the* Church.” Kristof counterpoises “Rossification” to “Russification,” which was “aimed at making the non-Russian subjects of the state Russian in language and identity” (Kristof, 1968, p. 350). In the eighteenth century there had been hopes of transforming the *inorodtsy* into “civilized” people, which would have entailed their full “Russification.” But by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the empire struggling to defend autocracy against ideologies like socialism and nationalism, such ideals had largely been abandoned, and “Rossification” was the best that could be hoped for in most cases.

Thus, while Russian nationalists represented a potentially useful ally for the autocracy against social revolutionaries and non-Russian national movements, their ideology, which often focused on the Russian people, as opposed to the autocracy as such, was severely out of step with the empire’s conservatism and “called into question traditional legitimacy and the autocratic system’s monopoly on power” (Riasanovsky, 1963, p. 500). Moreover, the multinational character of the Russian Empire and the stubborn resistance of the autocracy to cede power to the parliament (*Duma*) essentially committed the Russian state to a “supranational ideology of integration” (Kappeler, 2001, p. 239). Consequently, the tsarist government continued to view Russian nationalists warily.

However, the collapse of the autocracy in 1917 created political and discursive space not only for social revolutionary forces like the Bolsheviks, but also for both Russian and non-Russian nationalist movements alike. Indeed, although often referred to as the “Russian Civil War,” the chaos that erupted after the overthrow of the Tsar and, later, the Provisional Government, engulfed most of the former Russian Empire, including its non-Russian territories. Thus both “White” (monarchist and Russian nationalist) and “Red” (social revolutionary, including Bolshevik) factions found that they suddenly had to contend with a multitude of newly-minted “national” armies, such as the Ukrainian People’s Army, the People’s Guard of Georgia, and the Polish Army, as well as more disorganized militias, such as the Basmachi in Central Asia.⁶⁰

Many of these local armies and militias were hastily formed in order to protect nascent independent states, such as the People’s Republic of Ukraine (1917-1921) or the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), many of which were led by nationally-oriented social revolutionary parties. These experiments in nation-building, however, would prove to be short-lived. Not only were they often riven by internal dissention, but they also faced organized invasions by the Red Army. As a result, by the end of the civil war, the majority of the territory of the former tsarist state, with the exceptions of Poland, the Baltic States, and Finland, had been reconquered by the Bolsheviks and incorporated

⁶⁰ The Basmachi (from the Turkic word *basmachilik*, or “banditry”) were a loosely organized group of Central Asians, who, in the spirit of the 1916 revolt, fought for their independence from Russian rule (Abazov, 2004c). Although Soviet sources often accused the Basmachi of waging a religious *jihād* (Polonskaya & Malashenko, 2008, pp. 83-89), their primary motivations were anti-Russian, not Islamic (Khalid, 2007b, pp. 54-55), even if they did at times employ Islamic rhetoric. As Adeeb Khalid notes, “Peasant insurgency had a logic all its own: the Basmachi rebellion was largely local and sought to preserve order and protect the food supply from outsiders. Basmachi leaders did not act on behalf of abstract entities such as ‘the nation’ or ‘the Islamic community’” (ibid., p. 55). See generally: Broxup (1983); Fraser (1987).

into the newly-formed Soviet Union.⁶¹ Henceforth, the logic of national identity in the territories of the former Russian Empire, which had theretofore developed in a largely autonomous and disorganized fashion, would be centrally directed the Soviet state and shaped by its ideological priorities. It is to an examination of Soviet nationalities policies that this chapter now turns.

3.2 Constructing Ancient Nations in the Soviet Union

Yuri Slezkine once observed that “Soviet nationality policy was devised and carried out by nationalists” (Slezkine, 1994, p. 414), and indeed the centrality of the so-called “national question” to Soviet policy was underscored by the fact that the Commissariat of Nationalities (*Narkomnats*), which was headed by Josef Stalin, was the first governmental department established by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution.⁶²

At first glance, the Bolsheviks’ fixation on nationality may appear to be incongruous with their rhetoric of class warfare and the dictatorship of the proletariat, but in reality non-Russian nationalism was a problem whose solution was considered to be of critical importance for the construction of a viable, internationalist socialist state; more conceptually, solving the “national question” was viewed as a fundamental step towards spreading socialism in a world of nations and nation-states. Indeed, as Lenin himself argued:

⁶¹ Of course, Bolshevik revanchism continued into the 1940s. Poland fought a war against the Bolsheviks over the territory of modern-day Ukraine and Belarus from 1919-1921; in 1939 Poland was once again partitioned, this time between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. A similar fate awaited the Baltic States, which were also conceded to Stalin in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Although Finland escaped outright conquest, it was nevertheless forced to concede territory to the Soviet Union in the aftermath of two separate wars, fought between 1939 and 1944.

⁶² By way of contrast, the Department of State (at that time called the Department of Foreign Affairs) was the first federal agency established by the American government after the War of Independence. The difference between the priorities of the two revolutionary governments – “internal” nationalities issues versus “external” relations with other states – is revealing of what each revolutionary state viewed as its most urgent priorities.

The full equality of nations; the right of self-determination; the merger of the workers of all nations – this is what our national program, informed by Marxism and the experience of the whole world and of Russia teaches to the workers (Lenin, 1960, p. 190).

Indeed, although it has become commonplace to observe that it was nationalism, as much as economic collapse and the failure of *perestroika*, that precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union, it should not be forgotten that in the end, Soviet nationalities policy was in many ways remarkably successful, and the logic under which it operated continues to shape the development of national identities across Eurasia.

The considerable attention that the Soviet state devoted to the “national question” has resulted a vast meta-literature devoted to analyzing Soviet approaches to the problem of nationalism and national identity (see for example: Bremmer & Taras, 1993; Conquest, 1986; D’Encausse, 1979; Hirsch, 2005; Kaiser, 1994; Martin, 2001; Motyl, 1995; Nahaylo & Swoboda, 1989; Pipes, 1997; Seton-Watson, 1956; G. Smith, 1990; Suny, 1993; Suny & Martin, 2001; Szporluk, 2000b; Wixman, 1984, 1986). A significant proportion of this literature has been devoted to exploring the instrumental aspects of Soviet nationalities policy, particularly with regards to their relation to strategies of “divide and rule” (Khalid, 2007b; Roy, 2000; Wixman, 1986, 1993). But it is equally important to examine the ways in which the Soviet state understood nationality as a concept.

Prior to the 1930s, the Bolshevik position was that nations were fundamentally modern and constructed. Stalin himself, who was the most important and influential Soviet nationalities theorist, states this basic position clearly:

The modern Italian nation was formed from Romans, Teutons, Etruscans, Greeks, Arabs, and so forth. The French nation was formed from Gauls, Romans, Britons, Teutons, and so forth. The same must be said of the British, the Germans and others who were formed into nations from people of diverse races and tribes. Thus, a nation is not racial or tribal, but a historically constituted community of people (Stalin, 1973, p. 18).⁶³

Consequently, the Soviet approach to national identity before the 1930s was to treat it as constructed, contingent, and transient – a kind of “false consciousness” that, with careful guidance by the state, could both be manipulated and, ultimately, undermined.

The historian Terry Martin, among others, has argued that a significant epistemic shift regarding the character of nationalities occurred during the 1930s. After this time, nations were no longer conceived of simply as a transient phase of social development, as a mask, or as a tool of bourgeois capitalists; rather, national identity was reconceptualized as historically *rooted*, as opposed to historically *constructed*. Beginning in the 1930s,

Soviet propaganda increasingly focused on the twin poles of a powerful, paternalistic state and an obedient, contented people (*narod*) ... This new cult of *narodnost* led to a massive increase in the amount of attention devoted to folklore and *völkisch* artistic expression in the 1930s. Dozens of new Institutes of National Culture sprang up across the Soviet Union after 1933, dedicated to the celebration of ethnically distinct, folkloric, primordial national cultures (Martin, 2000, p. 357).

⁶³ In Russian, the phrase used is “исторически сложившаяся общность людей” (*istoricheski slozhivshaysya obschinost’ liudei*) which translates as “historically formed community of people” (Stalin, 1913).

Others have rejected the idea that the 1930s represented a disjuncture between constructivist and primordialist approaches to the problem of nationality. Francine Hirsch, for instance, has argued that Soviet nationalities policies was characterized from the very beginning by a certain dualism. In her view, the Soviet state engaged in what she calls “state-sponsored evolutionism,” which was “premised on the belief that ‘primordial’ ethnic groups were the building blocks of nationalities *and* on the assumption that the state could intervene in the natural process of development and ‘construct’ modern nations” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 8). But in practice the “national question” was increasingly sidelined after the end of World War II, and in many respects it remained conceptually neglected until the middle of the 1980s. Although Hirsch argues that the Soviet state “cared about the population’s ‘consciousness’ – not its inherent biological traits” (ibid., p. 307), she nevertheless concedes that

[o]ver the course of the 1920s and 1930s, membership in one of the official nationalities had become linked to land, national rights, and significant cultural and economic resources; local national leaders and their populations had learned to speak the language of *natsional’nost’* ... In the postwar era, as the passport system spread throughout the USSR, nationality categories became even more embedded in the structure of Soviet life (ibid., p. 318).

Ultimately, therefore, regardless of whether the state itself was concerned with “consciousness” or with “biology,” national identity was increasingly internalized by the people of the Soviet Union as a fundamental, heritable category of human identity. Nationality, in other words, had begun to assert its discursive autonomy. “National cultures” were increasingly valorized by the state, and every nation was said to have its

own “progressive” national history, archeological heritage, literary and artistic forms, its own national language, cuisine, costume, etc., all of which were said to make up the essence of the nation itself.

As the emphasis on “progressive” heritage suggests, however, the trappings of national culture were always intended to promulgate Soviet values. Soviet nationalities thus came to be understood as being “national in form, socialist in content.” Soviet authorities accepted the objective existence of nations, and even insisted on their antiquity, but at the same time the state was careful to ensure that national culture was articulated in socialist terms. But, as alluded to above, according to Bolshevik dogma, national forms required territorial containers. Thus, even before the October Revolution, Lenin and Stalin stressed the necessity of creating “autonomous” national territories as a fundamental step towards the development of both the “national form” and its “socialist content,” and therefore towards the satisfactory resolution of the “national question” in the Soviet workers’ state.

3.2.1 National-Territorial Autonomy and Korenizatsiia

Unlike many contemporary Marxist thinkers, including Rosa Luxemburg and the famous “Austro-Marxists” Otto Bauer, and Karl Renner, Lenin and Stalin strongly supported the right of nations to territorial autonomy. Before the October Revolution, they argued that granting autonomy to the peoples of the Russian Empire was the only way to truly counter the “great power chauvinism” of the Russians. During the Civil War, this stance won the Bolsheviks a substantial amount of support among the empire’s minority populations, many of whom, as we have seen, were clamoring for national autonomy or outright independence. However, Lenin also “believed that once the

suspensions of the oppressed peoples were overcome, the economic advantages of living in large, integrated states would outweigh the nationalistic desire for independence” and that they would voluntarily reunite with the socialist state in the end (Kaiser, 1994, p. 98).

Failing voluntary reunification, of course, “the socialists could always, with appeal to the higher principle of ‘proletarian self-determination,’ bring the separated borderlands back into the fold” (Pipes, 1995, p. 108). In the end, as discussed above, forcible reintegration is precisely what transpired. But the Bolsheviks’ stated commitment to autonomy was not merely a cynical promise, and even after the end of the Civil War and the establishment of the Soviet Union, the principle of national-territorial autonomy was not abandoned. Quite to the contrary, it was duly codified in the 1922 Treaty on the Creation of the Soviet Union, reaffirmed in the 1924 Soviet Constitution, and was in some ways strengthened in the 1936 “Stalin” Constitution.⁶⁴ However, it is important to note that, in the Soviet system, “autonomy” primarily meant that “territorial units ‘belong’ to the nations whose name they bear. They can legitimately be ‘filled up’ with a particular national language and culture” (Brubaker, 1994, p. 59).⁶⁵

Initially, the Bolsheviks envisioned that the new “national-territorial system would be extended downward into smaller and smaller national territories (national districts, village soviets, collective farms), until the system merged seamlessly with the

⁶⁴ The Union Republics were given the trappings of sovereign states, allowing the Byelorussian and Ukrainian SSRs to join the United Nations. Stalin originally demanded that all of the fifteen Union Republics be allowed to join the UN, but the United States countered by suggesting that each of the forty-eight US states also be given representation at the UN. Subsequently, “Stalin announced that he would be happy with just three additional seats – for the Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Lithuania. These republics had suffered most in the war. What would they think of him if he told them they were not going to have their own representation in the world parliament?” (Ulam, 1989, p. 606). Ultimately, the United States backed down from its demands, but only the Belorussian and Ukrainian SSRs joined the United Nations.

⁶⁵ The ethno-national group for which a particular sub-unit of the Soviet Union was named is usually referred to as the “titular nationality”: Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, Georgians in Georgia, Abkhazians in Abkhazia, and so on. The titular nationality usually received preferential access to native language education, positions in the government, etc., although in practice policies of linguistic and cultural Russification became increasingly prevalent (Wixman, 1986).

personal nationality of each Soviet citizen" (Martin, 2001, p. 10), but this proved to be unworkable. Although the Soviet state never achieved these heady ideals in practice, but it nevertheless created autonomies for many of the ethno-national groups that lived in the USSR. Ultimately, the Soviet Union comprised fifteen Union Republics, also known as Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs, which subsequently became independent states after the collapse of the USSR), nineteen Autonomous Republics (ARs), eight Autonomous Oblasts (AO), and ten Autonomous Okrugs – a total of 52 ethnically-defined territories with varying levels of autonomy, which were nested hierarchically. At the top was the "all-Union" level – the USSR itself – which was controlled by the Central Committee in Moscow. Beneath the all-Union level were the fifteen Union Republics (Russian, Kyrgyz, Ukrainian, Kazakh SSRs, etc.), and within the Union Republics were the Autonomous Republics (ASSRs) and Oblasts (AOs). Union Republics can in some ways be conceptualized as "smaller versions of the [Soviet] Union itself, with parliaments, constitutions, and virtually all the state structures enjoyed by independent states" (Cornell, 2001, p. 41), while ASSRs and AOs usually only had control over limited social and cultural matters within the borders of their autonomies.

The creation of national republics began almost immediately, starting first in the Middle Volga region with the creation of the Bashkir (1919) and Tatar (1920) ASSRs as sub-units of the RSFSR (Wixman, 1993, p. 427).⁶⁶ By 1924, the process of national

⁶⁶ Wixman and others (see: Bennigsen & Lemercier-Quelquejay, 1967; Roy, 2000) have interpreted the creation of the Bashkir ASSR, and Soviet nationalities policy in general, in almost purely instrumental terms. As Wixman argues: "The primary reason for the creation of many of the Middle Volga autonomies was not merely to recognize the rights of local ethnic groups to territorial and cultural integrity... the fact that the Bashkirs received the first ASSR clearly indicates the calculated political nature of the decision to single out that specific group for support at that time, i.e. at a time when would have been best to thwart the creation of the [proposed pan-Tatar] Idel Ural state. In fact, the policies to grant limited autonomy and cultural identity to all of the ethnic groups in the region appeared to be designed for one ultimate purpose – to diminish Tatar influence" (Wixman, 1993, p. 428). Nevertheless, while the fear of pan-Turkism, pan-

delimitation (*razmezhivanie*) had largely been completed. However, periodic changes to the borders or autonomous status of various districts continued well into the mid-1930s, particularly in Central Asia. Moreover, although national delimitation has often been depicted as having been imposed from Moscow with little or no regard for the affected populations, the reality, as we will see, was that local actors often had significant input into the final configuration of the borders of their national autonomies.

By far the most significant aspect of Soviet nationalities policy apart from the conceptual linking of ethno-national groups with particular bounded territories was the policy of *korenizatsiia*,⁶⁷ or "indigenization," which was implemented beginning in 1923. *Korenizatsiia* has been describe as being, in effect, a Soviet version of "affirmative action" policies, writ large (Suny, 1993, p. 109):

In each national territory, the language of the titular nationality was to be established as the official state language. National elites were to be trained and promoted into positions of leadership in the party, government, industry, and schools of each national territory (Martin, 2001, p. 10).⁶⁸

The basic motivation underlying *korenizatsiia* was that giving the titular population a leading role in their own republic would hasten its cultural, political, and economic development and demonstrate the Soviet state's commitment to national-territorial

Islamism, or simply Tatar power may have been among the motivations for the division of the Middle Volga, national delimitation in Bashkiria and elsewhere was also consistent with the doctrine of state-sponsored evolutionism (Hirsch, 2005, p. 8).

⁶⁷ The original term that was used was *natsionalizatsiia*, or "nationalization." As Martin points out, "*Korenizatsiia* gradually emerged as the preferred term to describe this policy, but it should be noted that Stalin always used *natsionalizatsiia*" (Martin, 2001, p. 12).

⁶⁸ Of course, not every group enjoyed the same level of autonomy, and this fact often meant that such groups had little no access to national institutions, including native-language education. Ultimately, in keeping with Bolshevik historical-materialist thought, such groups were meant to assimilate with their larger neighbors.

autonomy. As Robert Kaiser notes, “[p]olitical *korenizatsiya* as a method of coopting potential nationalist leaders was a major achievement of the interwar period, and was probably crucial to the survival of the USSR during this difficult phase of state-building” (Kaiser, 1994, p. 132). In these terms, *korenizatsiia* was an attempt to create “national cadres” that would embody the slogan “national in form, socialist in content” and carry out the work of revolutionizing nations from the inside out.

In many parts of the Soviet Union, particularly in Siberia and the Russian Far East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, linguistic *korenizatsiia*, or the creation and codification of national languages, was pursued with especial vigor. In many cases, linguistic *korenizatsiia* even included efforts to create alphabets for languages that had previously been unwritten, or which had previously been written in a different script. Certain languages, particularly those that had previously used the Arabic alphabet, actually underwent multiple orthographic shifts, first from the Arabic to the Latin script, and later from the Latin to the Cyrillic alphabet.

But there was a dark side to the orthographic reforms. In Central Asia, and especially in Transoxania, which had for centuries been an important center of a highly literate Islamic and Persian culture, as well as in the Caucasus, the shift from the Arabic script to the Latin script, and thence to Cyrillic, made older texts incomprehensible, and thus inaccessible, to the growing number of people who were unable to read the Arabic alphabet. Combined with the near total ban on the publication of religious literature in the new “national” languages, the ultimate consequence of the orthographic shift was to cut younger generations off from their literary heritage (Wixman, 1980, pp. 146-151).

Korenizatsiia influenced virtually all aspects of social and cultural life in the non-Russian republics, from language and the arts to education, employment, and political representation. But the question remains: how were any of these policies, from the delimitation of national borders to the reformation of languages and alphabets, intended to resolve the “national question” in a socialist state? The answer, unsurprisingly, is rather complex.

Terry Martin notes that “[a]lthough the center consistently supported *korenizatsiia*, it was vague in its instructions on how to implement it” (Martin, 2001, p. 140). Ultimately, the idea was that *korenizatsiia*, like Soviet nationalities policy more generally, was intended to precipitate first the *sblizhenie* (“coming together”) and then the *sliianie* (“merger”) of the nations of the USSR. *Sblizhenie* implied the process of consolidating economic, political, and cultural ties between the separate nations of the USSR, as exemplified in the rhetoric of “friendship of the peoples,” while *sliianie* denoted the ultimate disappearance of all separate nationalities into a consolidated socialist people that incorporated the progressive aspects of all nations.

Ultimately, however, the contradictions embodied in *korenizatsiia* threatened Stalin’s vision of multi-national unity under the direction of a powerful central government. *Korenizatsiia* simply “proceeded too rapidly to ensure that those indigenes placed in charge of their home republics would be loyal first and foremost to the Soviet Union and the Communist Party” (ibid., p. 134). Thus, in Ukraine, where both linguistic and political *korenizatsiia* had been implemented with particular zeal, it soon became

evident that thoroughgoing *Ukrainizatsiia* (“Ukrainization”)⁶⁹ was encouraging, rather than attenuating, the growth of what was interpreted as ethnic particularism.

Increasingly, “local nationalism appeared to be a greater danger than the Great Russian Chauvinism of which Lenin repeatedly warned” (Suny, 1993, p. 104). Consequently, in Ukraine, as well as in Georgia, another of Stalin’s *bête noirs*, “bourgeois nationalists” were blamed for the unexpectedly ardent resistance to industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture (G. Smith, 1990, p. 6). Stalin subsequently concluded that “nationalism could not be disarmed by *korenizatsiia*, but would remain a permanent, lurking danger necessitating periodic purges and terror campaigns” (Martin, 2001, p. 346).

Stalin’s reversal vis-à-vis *korenizatsiia* sent a signal to Party officials in the republics that indigenization had perhaps gone too far. Not wishing to fall afoul of the center, Soviet administrators followed suit. The official retreat from *korenizatsiia* was exemplified by the so-called “Skrypnyk Affair.” Mykola Skrypnyk was an Old Bolshevik⁷⁰ and a powerful member of the Ukrainian Politburo, who had vigorously pursued *korenizatsiia* in the Ukrainian SSR. However, after complaints that he had forced a number of Russian schoolchildren to learn Ukrainian, Skrypnyk was accused of “fetishizing nationalities policy,” of “mixing” nationalism and Bolshevism, and of making “the nationalities policy something self-contained, [instead of] part of the general problem of the proletarian revolution” (Martin, 2001, p. 350). In the face of these

⁶⁹ As early as 1927, for example, more than three quarters of all children in the Ukrainian SSR were receiving Ukrainian language education (Suny, 1993, p. 103).

⁷⁰ Old Bolsheviks were people who had been members of the Party before the October Revolution. Many of them were executed or sent to forced labor camps by Stalin during the Great Terror.

accusations, and confronted with the eventuality of being humiliated in a show trial and forced to recant his “crimes,” Skrypnyk committed suicide in 1933.

Mykola Skrypnyk, of course, was neither the first, nor the last, to fall prey to the shifting political winds in Stalin’s Soviet Union. But after the heavily publicized “Skrypnyk Affair,” the “national communisms” that had begun to develop in the republics during the height of *korenizatsiia* were criticized as “a dangerous threat to the unity of the Soviet Union” (Martin, 2001, p. 356). As a result, throughout the 1930s, a series of purges effectively liquidated anyone suspected of “bourgeois nationalist deviations.” The eradication of the “national communists” effectively paved the way for a shift towards an ideology that celebrated the Russians as “an ‘elder brother’ in the ‘Soviet family of nations’” (Rakowska-Harmstone, 1986, p. 237), rather than denigrating them as “great power chauvinists.” By the end of the 1930s, then, the emphasis of Soviet nationalities policy had fundamentally shifted: learning Russian was now mandatory for all students, and, “[t]hough native languages were also taught, their status was inferior to the all-state language, Russian, and they were often seen as insufficient for successful careers in politics or science” (Suny, 1993, p. 108).

However, the retreat from *korenizatsiia* did not result in the end of the idea of national-territorial autonomy in the Soviet Union. If political and cultural *korenizatsiia* would no longer “be allowed to foster a general sense of the indigenous nationality’s priority in their own republic” (Martin, 2001, p. 3093), and while linguistic *korenizatsiia* was for all intents and purposes superseded by policies of linguistic Russification (Szporluk, 2000a, p. 16), then the basic principle that underpinned Soviet nationalities policy – the necessity of providing national-territorial autonomy and encouraging the

“flowering” (*ratsvet*) of progressive national cultures – remained. After Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev denounced the abuses of his predecessor and reaffirmed “his



Figure 1: Monument to the friendship of the peoples in Bishkek (photo by author).

commitment to the dialectics of nationality development,” through which “[s]eparate national cultures were to ‘flourish’ alongside their ‘drawing together’ until their final ‘merger’... was realized” (G. Smith, 1990, p. 8).

Characteristically, however, Khrushchev went a step too far, suggesting that *sliianie* – the ultimate merger of all nations in the Soviet Union – was, in fact, imminent. Consequently, he argued, the Soviet Union would soon have no need for a national-federal structure at all, since “the Soviet federation had fulfilled its historic role and might soon be replaced by a unitary state” (Szporluk, 2000a, p. 16). Unsurprisingly, such pronouncements were cause for alarm among elites in the non-Russian republics, who feared that their national-cultural and territorial autonomy was in danger of being revoked. Unsurprisingly, then, after Khrushchev’s downfall in 1964, the Brezhnev regime quickly adopted a more conciliatory tone. Henceforth, it was made clear that

[t]he Soviet Union [was to] remain a federal state. Non-Russian languages [still had] a future, and, according to the party, the nationalities of the USSR [were] not a single nation in the making, but a qualitatively new group of peoples who retain their ethnic characteristics while forming, at the same time, “the Soviet people” (ibid.).

This position remained basically unaltered until the end of the Soviet Union. Indeed, throughout the Brezhnev era, more and more functional autonomy was ceded to the republics, which in many cases became the personal fiefdoms of the local Party bosses, as long as production quotas were met.

Nowhere was this dynamic more evident than in Central Asia, where patronage relationships, with the tacit acceptance of the authorities in Moscow, became “a system of social control that produced political quiescence and kept society in check” (Khalid,

2007b, p. 89).⁷¹ Indeed, it was in this region of the world, where nations had never before existed, that the logic of Soviet nationalities policy was, arguably, the most successful. Thus, by the time the Soviet Union collapsed, “[n]ational identities coexisted with quite genuine Soviet patriotism, the sense of common citizenship in a multiethnic country” (Khalid, 2007b, p. 97). In the next section, we will explore in more depth the process creating nations in Central Asia. However, it is important to note that this process was not univocal or entirely top-down: once activated as category, nationality became the site of vigorous negotiation and contestation.

3.3 Nation-Building in Soviet Central Asia

Soviet power in Central Asia was not established easily. In 1917, when the tsarist government was overthrown, the region collapsed into anarchy. Revolutionary organizations like the Tashkent Soviet, which was established in November of 1917, tried to take advantage of the chaos, unsuccessfully attempting to form a socialist government. Crucially, however, the Tashkent Soviet was a purely Russian concern, and “[t]he natives were excluded under the pretext that they lacked proletarian elements” (Broxup, 1983, p. 65). Consequently, the Tashkent Soviet’s revolutionary pretensions appeared to many as nothing more than a reaffirmation of Russian colonial domination of Central Asia under different guise.

In response, local political and religious leaders formed their own autonomous government, sometimes referred to as the “Kokand Autonomy.” The Kokand Autonomy,

⁷¹ Indeed, upon gaining independence in 1991, “the rulers that came to power within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), with all that implies about methods and mentality... stayed” (Merry, 2004, p. 25). Even Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and Almazbek Atambaev, the current presidents of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan and who are the only leaders in Central Asia who have not been in power since the collapse of the Soviet Union, are nevertheless former members of the CPSU. See also: Olcott (1994).

however, however, did not survive for long. Kokand was captured and sacked by a ragtag Bolshevik force “mostly composed of foreign prisoners-of-war and mercenaries” (Marshall, 2003, p. 8) in February of 1918. At least ten thousand people were killed during the siege and pillaging of the city, which also devastated the local food supply and precipitated a local famine, which drove much of the local population into the Basmachi resistance (Bregel, 2003, p. 92).

However, the collapse of White resistance around Orenburg, near the edge of the Kazakh Steppe, meant that the Red Army was able to open a new front in Central Asia, colloquially known as the Turkestan Front, or *Turkfront*. Led by Mikhail Frunze, the Bolshevik forces that broke through to Tashkent brought with them more than guns and numbers.⁷² Frunze himself had been born in Pishpek, and he spoke the local language. His army, moreover, had a large Bashkir and Tatar contingent, “which would prove useful in political work” (Marshall, 2003, p. 9). This combination of assets allowed Frunze to succeed where the flailing Tashkent Soviet had largely failed.

The crumbling of tsarist authority also created a power vacuum on the Kazakh Steppe. Alash Orda, a proto-nationalist political organization founded by members of the Kazakh intelligentsia, declared its independence in 1917. Although the largely ephemeral “Alash Autonomy” was initially aligned with the White faction in the Russian Civil War, it eventually switched sides, since “Lenin’s government seemed more willing to grant the Kazakhs the autonomy that they so desperately wanted” (Crowe, 1998, p. 402; Olcott, 1987, pp. 154-155). In either case, by August of 1920, the Alash Orda government, which

⁷² The strength of this army, however, should not be underestimated. As Alexander Marshall notes: “Between 1920 and 1923, this force amounted to between 120,000 and 160,000 men, with artillery, aircraft, armoured cars and trains, a naval flotilla, and heavy machine-gun support. Nothing like it had ever been seen before in Central Asia” (Marshall, 2003, p. 9).

had never enjoyed much more than a nominal existence to begin with, was abolished and the Kazakh Steppe was reorganized into the Kirghiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and incorporated in to the RSFSR.

Meanwhile, the rulers of both the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva, the last scions of the great empires of pre-Russian Central Asia, attempted to weather the storm. The Emir of Bukhara, desperate to win local support, promised to implement social and political reforms. However, his overtures were viewed with suspicion by reformists in Bukhara, who, following the example of reformists in the Ottoman Empire, had styled themselves as “Young Bukharans.”⁷³ However, the slow pace of reform convinced the Young Bukharans that the only way forward was to overthrow the Emir and create a new society, and they increasingly aligned themselves with the Bolsheviks:

From “the kind father of the Bukharans, the king who protects his people,” the amir became a bloodthirsty tyrant who lived off the toil of the peasants, and whose concerns did not extend beyond his own body. The Young Bukharans’ relations with the Bolsheviks were always uneasy, but each side had some use for the other. In 1920, the Red Army invaded Bukhara, toppled the amir, and installed the Young Bukharans at the head of a “people’s soviet republic” (Khalid, 2007a, p. 144).

The overthrow of the Emir of Bukhara in October of 1920 followed the abdication in February of the last khan of Khiva, under pressure from a similar group of “Young

⁷³ The original core of the Young Bukharans consisted of members of the Jadid movement, which was a group of Muslim reformers who, inspired by Muslim reformers in the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire hoped to modernize Central Asian Islam and prepare Central Asian Muslims to face the challenges of the modern world See: Baldauf (2001); Khalid (1998, 2001); Lazzerini (1992).

Khivans,” and the subsequent establishment of the Khorezm People’s Soviet Republic (Becker, 2004, pp. 223-230).

By the end of 1920 the Bolsheviks had largely prevailed in Central Asia, although as noted significant Basmachi resistance continued until 1924, with localized attacks continuing into the 1930s in some parts of Kyrgyzstan (Loring, 2008).⁷⁴ But the new socialist republics that had been established in Central Asia, with the exception of the Kirgiz (Kazakh) Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, were not “national” in character – the Bukharan and Khorezm People’s Soviet Socialist Republics were merely the nominally independent successor states to the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva, while the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was an amalgam of the remainder of Transoxania and the Semireche.

The political-territorial situation in revolutionary Central Asia was thus inconsistent with the Leninist-Stalinist position regarding national-territorial autonomy. But before Central Asia could be divided into “national” territories, some criteria had to be applied to determine which of the dizzying arrays of peoples in the region could be counted as a “nation” in the first place. Although Stalin’s dictum that “[a] nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common

⁷⁴ In a strange twist of fate, the Basmachi were actually led for a period by the renowned former Ottoman general, Enver Pasha. Enver had fallen out with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and fled to Moscow. From there he was sent to Bukhara by Lenin himself, who believed that the Ottoman hero could convince the Basmachi to lay down their arms. But in characteristically dramatic fashion, Enver, who harbored pan-Turkic pretensions, sided instead with the rebels. He quickly started to shape the inchoate Basmachi bands into a credible fighting force organized according to German military doctrine and led by veteran Ottoman officers (Hopkirk, 1995, p. 160). The Basmachi began to win a series of victories over the Bolshevik forces, but the Red Army quickly regained its footing and Enver Pasha was ultimately killed in battle against Bolshevik forces in August of 1922.

culture” (Stalin, 1973, p. 22) provided a rough guide, in practice the process of classifying the nationalities of the Soviet Union was rather more complex.

This was especially true in Central Asia, where a sense of national identity had previously only been present among a fairly small segment of the intelligentsia, while it remained very weakly developed, if not non-existent, among the majority of the population.⁷⁵ Adrienne Edgar, for example, has described the difficulties faced by Soviet ethnographers when attempting to decide on the national and territorial status of certain Turkmen tribal groups:

Soviet policy required that administrative borders correspond as closely as possible to the boundaries of ethnic groups. Yet it was difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the ethnicity of the Khīdīr-Alī. The members of the tribe, who inhabited a region between the prospective Uzbek and Turkmen republics, claimed to be Turkmen. Soviet ethnographers refused to accept this claim, noting that the Khīdīr-Alī did not resemble Turkmen in dress, dialect, or way of life ... Meanwhile, indigenous communists of both ethnic groups entered the fray, seeking to aggrandize the territory of their own future republics by claiming the Khīdīr-Alī as their own (Edgar, 2004, p. 41).

This account highlights not only the substantial human and political obstacles that frequently stood in the way of the work of “scientific” classification of ethno-national populations, but, importantly, it also brings to light the important point that nationality

⁷⁵ Adeeb Khalid argues that many of the more secular-minded members of the Jadid movement had migrated towards a sort of pan-Turkic proto-nationalism, noting that, by 1918, “Central Asian Jadids... commonly claimed that all inhabitants of Central Asia were ‘really’ Turkic; if they did not speak Turkic, it was because they had forgotten it” (Khalid, 2001, p. 157). However, we should be careful to avoid taking the views of the Jadids, who represented a fairly thin stratum of well-educated intellectual and cultural elites, as wholly representative of the majority of people in Central Asia in the early twentieth century.

was not simply “invented” out of whole cloth and imposed “from the top,” as is sometimes asserted.⁷⁶ Indeed, while the state remained understandably sensitive to questions regarding the economic viability of the proposed autonomies, local voices often became deeply involved in defining and contesting the boundaries of their respective nations, both in conceptual and in cartographic terms:

The process of dividing the Ferghana Valley into “Uzbek” and “Kara-Kyrgyz”⁷⁷ parts involved a variety of issues that related directly to the borders themselves. The first of these concerned the characteristics by which a person qualified as being “Uzbek” or “Kara-Kyrgyz,” and how to handle groups whose linguistic and cultural identity was unclear. The second issue concerned the process of territorial divisions in areas where “Uzbeks” and “Kara-Kyrgyz” lived discretely or in close proximity, and at the same time shared pastures, roads, and irrigation systems. The third issue concerned the manner in which a Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region could develop its economy to the point that it could exist as an independent administrative unit (S. Abashin, Kamoludin Abdullaev, Ravshan Abdullaev, Arslan Koichiev, 2011, p. 107).

Ownership of cities was key to these debates, since cities would be the anchors of economic development in the industrialized Soviet economy. On the one hand, the

⁷⁶ S. Enders Wimbush, for example, has argued that “[the Soviet Muslim] has a national identity as an Uzbek, Kazakh, Tadzhik, Turkmen, Kirgiz, Azerbaijani, or a member of one of the smaller Muslim peoples. This political identity is the result of Soviet efforts in the 1920s and 1930s to create largely artificial allegiances among Soviet Muslims that would undermine pre-Soviet attachments to pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic ideals...” (Wimbush, 1986, p. 219). Similarly, Olivier Roy has argued that *razmezhivanie* was essentially a case of the Soviet government “amusing itself” by drawing borders with no apparent rational basis, “whether geographic, economic or ethnic” (Roy, 2000, p. 68), the sole purpose being to facilitate a policy of “divide and rule.”

⁷⁷ The people known today as Kyrgyz were referred to as “Kara-Kyrgyz” (“Black Kyrgyz”) in Russian and early Soviet sources, and the territory of what is now Kyrgyzstan was originally designated the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast.

Uzbeks could claim that the populations of most of the major cities in the Ferghana Valley were primarily Uzbek in their ethnic makeup (since the nomadic Kyrgyz, after all, tended not to settle in dense urban areas). The Kyrgyz, meanwhile, mobilized ethnic categories in their own defense. While they conceded that the cities had historically not been populated by *Kyrgyz*, they nevertheless “pointed to the fact that the population of many settlements in Ferghana’s east, former Andijan, Margilan, and certain districts of Osh were of ‘non-Uzbek’ ethnicity. The exchanges on these matters were replete with references to the populations as ‘Turks,’ ‘Kipchaks,’ ‘Kashgaris,’ and ‘Tajiks’” – and should therefore *not* be classified as “Uzbek” (ibid., p. 109). Ethno-national identity was, increasingly, being mobilized in support of territorial claims.

In a similar fashion, the Tajiks, whose republic was initially formed as a district of the Uzbek SSR, consistently claimed ownership of Samarkand and Bukhara, arguing that these cities had traditionally been centers of Tajik culture and that their population was anyways predominantly Persian-speaking (Hirsch, 2005, p. 179). The Uzbek government, meanwhile, countered that the current-day ethnic makeup of these cities meant that they belonged to Uzbekistan. Indeed, throughout the negotiations over the territorial extent of the Tajik ASSR “the Tajik and Uzbek representatives focused primarily on the ethnographic principle in their presentations to the commission. Each side marshaled census data to prove that their *narodnost*’ predominated in the contested regions” (Hirsch, 2005, p. 178). In the end, Uzbek arguments prevailed, a fact that vexes Tajik nationalists even today (Akbarzadeh, 1996, p. 1109).

As the above examples illustrate, by activating nationality as a politically and economically meaningful category, the process of *razmezhivanie* itself helped to reify and

strengthen the very object that it presupposed – nationality. National identity, moreover, was quickly internalized, due in no small part to the efforts of the state, which saw “cultural education” as being key to the inculcation of new Soviet values, including nationality (İğmen, 2012, p. 27). Increasingly, Central Asians, “who formerly identified themselves mainly in terms of their place of residence or profession, began realizing that they were also Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks” (K. Abdullaev & Nazarov, 2011, p. 125). However, as we will see in the next section, what it meant to be Kyrgyz, Tajik, or Uzbek still had to be harmonized with Soviet values.

3.4 National in Form, Soviet in Content?

By 1936, the process of national delimitation in Central Asia had been completed.⁷⁸ However, although the borders were fixed, what they *signified* still required some articulation. That is to say, Central Asians had begun to think of themselves in terms of being “Uzbek” or “Kyrgyz,” but what these labels meant both in theory and in practice was in many cases still rather unclear. Indeed, as Ali İğmen notes,

Soviet administrators found it difficult to categorize and manage these communities because most people in Kyrgyzstan identified themselves with multiple groups. Uzbeks and Kyrgyz could call themselves, alternatively, Muslim, Oshtuk (being from the Osh region), Bugu, (belonging to a Kyrgyz tribe), Ichkilik (belonging to a

⁷⁸ The Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), and the Turkmen SSR were created in 1924. From 1924 until 1929, the Tajik ASSR was part of the Uzbek SSR, after which point it became the Tajik SSR. The Kirghiz (Kazakh) ASSR, created in 1920 as part of the RSFSR, became the Kazakh SSR in 1936. The Kara-Kirghiz Autonomous Oblast (AO) was created as part of the RSFSR in 1924, becoming the Kirghiz ASSR, still within the RSFSR in 1926. The Kirghiz SSR was finally created in 1936, the last of the Union Republics of Central Asia to be created. Besides the Union Republics, there were also the Gorno-Badakhshan AO, which was created within the Tajik ASSR in 1925, and which remained part of the Tajik SSR after 1929, and the Karakalpak ASSR, which had been the Karakalpak AO within the Kirghiz (Kazakh) ASSR until 1936, at which time it was transferred to the Uzbek SSR and upgraded to the status of an Autonomous Republic.

clan), Sart (living a settled lifestyle), and so forth (İğmen, 2012, p. 31).

Indeed, precisely what it meant to be “Kyrgyz” in an urbanized, industrialized, and sedentarized Kyrgyz national republic, complete with demarcated borders and official state and cultural institutions, was a significant challenge, since these developments represented a radical departure from any previous understanding of what it meant to be Kyrgyz.

One component of this process, as alluded to previously, was linguistic *korenizatsiia*, which entailed the codification of fixed national literary languages in place of overlapping gradients of local dialects. In Soviet Kirgizia, for example, the dialect of Kyrgyz spoken in the northern part of the country was the basis for the national language (Wixman, 1984, p. 108). In practice, of course, the official literary language did not supplant the spoken language in many contexts – speakers of Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan even today continue to speak a language that is heavily influenced by that of their Uzbek neighbors, and vice versa (Liu, 2012, p. 28). Nevertheless, the establishment and codification of an official literary language was considered to be one of the markers of the distinctive identity of a genuine nation.

Similarly, newly-established national Academies of Science were tasked with the development of “scientific” national histories that emphasized the progression of primitive nations along the path of development, as well as their fraternal relations with the other nations of the Soviet Union. As the official *History of the Kazakh SSR* notes, for example:

The Kazakh nation has its own centuries-old history, which is closely linked with the history of brotherly nations of

Central Asia and the Russian nation. At the heart of the history of the Kazakh nation, as with all nations, lies the development of the means of production, the development of productive forces and relationships among people. The history of Kazakhstan is first of all a history of the production of wealth, a history of the laboring masses, a history of their struggle against social and national oppression (Auezov et al., 1957, p. 3).

Meanwhile, the nomadic way of life, like everything else that was considered to be “backwards” and “primitive,” was denigrated. For example, a Soviet pamphlet from 1960, entitled *Kirghizia: Complete Transformation of Former Backward Colony*, contrasts Soviet Kirghizia with the “primitive” conditions that had prevailed among its population when they were nomads. Before the revolution, people “squatted on the mats” in smoky yurts, and had only a few “soot-stained” possessions and clothes made of “coarse homespun cloth or sheepskins” to call their own. They slept on the floor and “[a]ny rules of hygiene or sanitation were unknown; no bath houses existed” (Dikambayev, 1960, p. 20).

Soviet socialism, by contrast, brought with it progress and comfort, and lifted the Kyrgyz out of their backwardness and misery: Abandoning their “smoke-filled dark yurts for real homes,” they began to settle in one of the “fifteen new cities” that had been “built up in Kirghizia in the process of socialist construction” (ibid., p. 20). If the nomads had previously been illiterate and uneducated, “[t]oday there is not a single Kirghiz boy or girl, in town or country, who would stay away from school” (ibid., p. 21). If “the Kirghiz were doomed by the tsarist government to gradual extinction” (ibid., p. 22), then the

“successes of Kirghizia’s socialist industry and agriculture” were responsible for dramatic increases in living standards (ibid., pp. 22-23).

Historiography was thus one vector through which a Soviet narrative of national development was promulgated, but it was by no means the only one. Ideologists in Kirghizia were also expected to work on issues of social and cultural importance, including “[w]omen’s liberation, girls’ education, nomads’ sedentarization, and shepherds’ transformation into more productive workers” (İgmen, 2012, p. 40).⁷⁹ Moreover, according to Kurman-Ghali Karakeev, the former Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Kirghiz SSR, “Cultural educational institutions were strongly involved in propaganda activity. Great importance was attached to lectures about social and political themes” (Davlembaeva, 2012, p. 84), and progress in the arts and culture was measured by the growth in the number of museums, national philharmonics, national academies of science, opera houses, cinemas and libraries (Dikambayev, 1960, p. 23). These institutions, which were explicitly patterned on Russian and European models, were intended to effect the “transformation and reinforcement” of a Soviet socialist type of national identity (Suny, 1993, p. 105). This transformation was to be effected through the elaboration of “scientific” national histories, the production of putatively “national” forms of music, dance, architecture, visual arts and cinema, and so forth.

⁷⁹ Soviet cultural initiatives in Central Asia took a particular interest in the liberation of women, who were viewed as a sort of “surrogate proletariat” (Massell, 1974), from the shackles of what the Bolsheviks viewed as an hopelessly backwards Islamic culture. As Adeeb Khalid puts it, “For the Bolsheviks, the ‘archaic’ and ‘degrading’ customs prevalent in Central Asia, as well as Islam itself, meant that women were no better than slaves and chattels, if they had not been turned into animals. Improving women’s position, through law and revolutionary mobilization, was a matter of much importance” (Khalid, 2007b, p. 74; Northrop, 2001, 2004).

If educational, scientific, and cultural institutions were attempting to foster cultural development among the Kyrgyz by cultivating more a “civilized” and modern socialist culture, the Kyrgyz themselves were understandably hesitant to simply turn their backs on their heritage. Thus, despite the fact that industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture had forced most Kyrgyz to abandon the nomadic way of life,⁸⁰ they nevertheless remained proud of their nomadic history and culture. Many Kyrgyz still remained attached to symbols like the horse, the *bozui* (the Kyrgyz yurt), and the *komuz*, a three-stringed lute. *Akyns*, bards who recited oral stories about the Kyrgyz’s past, remained popular even in official venues.

As Kurman-Ghali Karakeev pointed out, literature and other forms of art “didn’t escape the Party’s attention... The Party emphasized art as a way of promoting ideology” (Davlembaeva, 2012, p. 84). In fact, the Soviet government attempted to make use of traditional forms of artistic and cultural expression to promulgate socialist themes, for example, by encouraging artists to incorporate political or social messages into music and literature. This practice is evidence of the shortcomings of the “totalitarian” model of Soviet politics, which emphasizes “the destruction of autonomous associations and the atomization of bonds between people [and] produced a powerless, passive society that was purely an object of regime control and manipulation” (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 80). The creation of nations in the Soviet Union was not a matter of the unilateral imposition by the center of “artificial” identities. Instead, the ultimate goal of Soviet cultural

⁸⁰ The nature of livestock herding, which remained a staple of Kyrgyz economic life throughout the Soviet period, nevertheless changed significantly as a result of the economic changes wrought collectivization and industrialization. In place of relatively small-scale, independent transhumant herders, now “[l]arge sheep herds were transported to distant summer pastures (*jayloos*) by lorries and winter fodder was imported by railway from Kazakhstan” (Shigayeva, Kollmair, Niederer, & Maselli, 2007, p. 395).

propaganda was not to *erase* Kyrgyz culture, but rather to encourage its “development” according to socialist values.

In Soviet Kirghizia, this function was institutionalized by the establishment of a network of cultural “clubs,” known variously as “Red Choikhonas” (teahouses), “Red Yurts,” or “Houses of Culture” (*dom kul'tury*). During the 1920s and 1930s, these clubs were among the primary vectors through which state-sanctioned national-artistic forms were formulated and presented to the public (İğmen, 2012, p. 68). In fact, the clubs themselves often turned into focal points for the adaptation of indigenous Kyrgyz ethnic culture into Soviet Kyrgyz national culture. As Ali İğmen argues,

the nationalities [of Kirghizia] found certain symbols and emphasized their significance to represent their culture. Clubs provided the venue for displaying such representations. While looking for appropriate symbolic representations of their culture, members of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia such as [Chingiz] Aitmatov⁸¹ turned to their traditions, some long forgotten, to engender a national narrative. These rediscoveries became mainstays of Kyrgyz culture – read, performed, and appreciated in clubs, theatres, and cultural Olympiads until the end of the Soviet era.

⁸¹ Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008) was the most renowned Kyrgyz literary figure of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. His early work “combined the delicate psychological portraits of ordinary people with the magical culture, landscape, and pastoral lifestyle of traditional Kyrgyz society,” while his later oeuvre “combined the traditional images of Kyrgyz folklore with motives of classical world literature within the context of precipitous social and political cataclysms” (Abazov, 2004a, p. 59). Despite being a member of the Communist Party and the chairman of the Union of Writers of Kirghizia and the Union of Cinematographers of Kirghizia, both of which were organs of the Communist Party, Aitmatov was keenly interested in the preservation and celebration of Kyrgyz culture and heritage. In his famous novel, *I dol'she veka dlitsya den'* (*And the Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*), he introduced the idea of the *mankurts*, who were “slaves, cruelly forced by a foreign conqueror to wear constricting headgear, which caused them to lose their memories” and, indeed, their names and identities (Rivers, 2002, pp. 161-162). “*Mankurtism*” became an epithet applied to Kyrgyz and Kazakhs who were considered to have abandoned their culture. Aitmatov himself became an enduring symbol of Kyrgyz cultural heritage and a statue depicting him now stands in Ala Too Square, at the heart of Bishkek, facing the statue of Manas.

Ultimately, however, finding the correct balance between “national form” and “socialist content” often proved to be a difficult task. Following Lenin, Soviet doctrine maintained that “every culture of the past contained progressive, popular elements, which should be preserved in socialist culture as well as reactionary elements bearing the mark of the parasite classes which must be eliminated” (quoted in Bennigsen, 1975, p. 463). But what was acceptably “progressive” one day might fall out of favor with the next shift in the political winds. Marina Frolova-Walker, for example, has noted the obstacles faced by Soviet composers who were tasked with creating “national” symphonic works: “Too much of the national element could be criticized as bourgeois nationalism, too much realism⁸² was bourgeois naturalism, and too much symphonic development was bourgeois formalism” (1998, p. 362).

Similarly, while stereotyped “folk” musical forms and dances and “national” cuisines and costumes were usually viewed as acceptable forms of cultural expression, other forms of national cultural heritage, particularly in the realms of literature and oral tradition, were considered politically questionable, if not subversive. Nevertheless, as we will see in the next section, even in cases when particular traditions were denounced, censored, or banned, Soviet authorities often faced mettlesome resistance, which was underpinned by a persistent, collective counter-memory of Kyrgyzzness that, although it was not inimical to Soviet values, nevertheless, sought to retain its discursive autonomy.

⁸² In this context, “realism” refers to the genre of “socialist realism,” which, according to *Pravda*, was “the basic method of Soviet artistic literature and literary criticism,” and which demanded “truthfulness from the artist and an historically concrete portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development. Under these conditions, truthfulness and historic concreteness of artistic portrayal ought to be combined with the task of the ideological remaking and education of laboring people in the spirit of socialism” (quoted in Brooks, 1994, p. 977).

3.5 The Epic of Manas and Kyrgyz Cultural Memory

Today, there is no more important symbol of Kyrgyz national identity than the epic *Manas*. The epic, which consists of three parts – *Manas*, *Semitei*, and *Seitek* – forms the core of the Kyrgyz oral tradition, which also includes numerous “minor” epics, such as *Er Töshtük*, *Kozhozhash*, and *Er Tabyldy* (Chadwick & Zhirmunsky, 1969; van der Heide, 2008; Wasilewska, 1997). The majority of the epic is concerned with Manas’s life and heroic exploits, those of his son and grandson, Semitei and Seitek, as well as his boon companions, most notably Almambet. The epic also describes Manas’s military campaigns, primarily against the Oirots (Dzungars), the unification of the Kyrgyz people, and their eventual settling in the territory of what is now Kyrgyzstan (Ashymov, 2003, p. 138).

Since 1992 the epic has been promoted by the Kyrgyz government as the basis for Kyrgyz statehood and national identity (Akaev, 2003, pp. 11-12; Ismailova, 2004), but during the Soviet period the epic’s place in Kyrgyz culture was more precarious. On the one hand, it was considered to be part of the Kyrgyz nation’s authentic cultural patrimony, and indeed as a valuable component of the Kyrgyz artistic tradition that could be imbued with “socialist content.” Indeed, as Ali İğmen has noted, in the 1930s the Soviet state began a process of “gradual appropriation of *Manas* as a narrative representation of socialist heroism, because the legend of Manas told the story of a people who fought foreign enemies and oppressive leaders” (İğmen, 2012, p. 100).

On the other hand, however, *Manas* was also viewed as ideologically unreliable. As an oral epic, whose themes included *jihad* against infidel Oirots, and whose transmission involved a significant improvisatory component, it was viewed both as

irredeemably “backwards” and as a potentially uncontrollable and dangerous text that might serve as a conduit for pan-Turkism, pan-Islamism, and bourgeois nationalism (Prior, 2000, p. 25).⁸³ Thus, as in the case of other “national” forms of art, “[t]he line between national self-determination and bourgeois nationalism was thin and illusive, and the *Manas* epic was applauded one day, but condemned the next” (van der Heide, 2008, p. 251).

Nevertheless, by the 1930s, there was growing impetus to officially recognize *Manas* and to publish it. However, the onset of the Great Terror (1936-38), during which time accused “bourgeois nationalists” faced the prospect of being purged from the ranks of the Communist Party, attempting any serious advancement of the politically dubious *Manas* epic was infeasible. There were some suggestions in 1941 to organize a “1,100 year jubilee” for *Manas*, which was to be held in 1947, but the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union put any such plans to rest until after the war (Prior, 2000, p. 31). By the end of the 1940s, however, the question of *Manas* once again came to the fore in the national politics of the Kirghiz SSR.

Longstanding questions over the epic’s permissibility, which coincided with a broader campaign to suppress other Turkic epics as well, culminated in a heated debate in Kirghizia over whether or not *Manas* should be banned outright (Bennigsen, 1975). In the early 1950s, a bitter dispute broke out in the pages of the Russian-language newspaper, *Sovietskaya Kirgiziia* (Soviet Kirghizia), and its Kyrgyz-language counterpart, *Kyzyl Kyrgyzstan* (Red Kyrgyzstan). *Sovietskaya Kirgiziia* savaged *Manas* for its putative

⁸³ Daniel Prior also notes that the insight that the *Manas* epic, as an improvised, orally-transmitted tradition, had evolved significantly over time, “clearly was in diametrical opposition to the views of the builders of the Soviet Kirghiz nationality. In standard fashion for the day, they viewed a people’s folklore as a legacy of the remote past that was handed down orally for countless generations,” but remained fundamentally unchanged (Prior, 2000, p. 7).

bourgeois nationalist and pan-Islamist leanings, while *Kyzyl Kyrgystan* defended the epic as a fundamental part of the national cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz people, one that was fully consistent with Soviet values (ibid., p. 470).

A conference was convened in Bishkek in 1952 to resolve the question of the status of the *Manas* epic, but it ended in deadlock. Nienke van der Heide notes that “[a]t the conference, certain aspects of the *Manas* epic were condemned as bourgeois nationalist and pan-Islamist, but the necessity to preserve the epic and create a complete, written tale were underlined” (van der Heide, 2008, pp. 252-253). Nevertheless, suspicion of the epic remained, and the results of the conference highlighted the growing fissure between the Communist Party, which denounced *Manas*, and the Kyrgyz cultural and academic elite, who had been charged with elaborating the “content” of the Kyrgyz nation, and who fiercely opposed the official suppression of the epic.

The question of what to do about the epic eventually reached the highest levels of the Soviet government. Ultimately, the all-union Academy of Science of the USSR decided that the *Manas* epic would be “[o]nce and for all pitched on the garbage heap of history with other works smelling of ‘pan-Islamism, bourgeois-nationalism, military adventurism and disdain for the toiling masses’” (Bennigsen, 1975, p. 472). But the death of Stalin in 1953, only months after the decision to suppress *Manas*, put a halt to efforts to eradicate the Turkic epics. By 1956, during the more relaxed cultural atmosphere that prevailed during the “Khrushchev Thaw,” the Uzbek epic *Alpamysh* was “rehabilitated,” and along with it *Manas* and other epics that had shared a similar fate (ibid.).

The so-called “Crisis of the Turkic Epics” had passed. The epic gained official recognition, and was collected and published in a number of editions.⁸⁴ *Manas* was increasingly valorized as a fundamental building block of Kyrgyz national culture, one that encapsulated all of the attributes of the Kyrgyz people. According to one Soviet scholar,

Manas is great and monumental not only in size, but also because its contents cover all aspects of the life of the nation, from details about ordinary life to great events. *Manas* is an epic-encyclopedia, in which is reflected, in artistic form, the centuries-old history of the Kyrgyz nation, its economy, its mode of life, customs, mores, aesthetics, ethical norms, its medicinal, geographical, religious, and other ideas, its international trade relations, and much else. Precisely for this reason, the epos is rich source for the study of history, philosophy, ethnography, literary arts, psychology, and other aspects of the spiritual and social life of the Kyrgyz nation (Musaev, 1984, p. 15).

The epic was celebrated as an artistic masterpiece as well, and over the years, it was adapted into numerous plays, operas, novels, and films, as well as made available as a text. In a show of socialist enthusiasm, some *manaschys* (reciters of the epic) even included Five Year Plans into their versions of *Manas* (van der Heide, 2008, p. 301). *Manas* himself was immortalized in 1981 in a gigantic bronze statue that still stands in front of the Philharmonic in downtown Bishkek (Figure 2).

⁸⁴ Until the 1990s, published versions of *Manas* were composites, woven together out of pieces of different *manaschys*’ versions, which often varied quite dramatically. These pieces were then meticulously “cleaned from a number of nationalist elements” (van der Heide, 2008, p. 192). Demands made in the 1970s to publish unedited editions were only half answered: although the individual versions of particular *manaschys* began to appear, they “were still heavily edited versions of oral sessions, but this time the official reason was not that certain parts were ideologically incorrect, but that they were too long and repetitious” (ibid., p. 253).

However, the epic continued to occupy a somewhat ambivalent position right up until 1991. Much like nationality itself, the *Manas* epic was gradually reified and reconceptualized as a fixed text that could be compiled and published in its “complete” form. The improvised nature of the epic in its oral form meant that the actual “content” of a particular episode could vary dramatically depending on whose version one happened to hear. One *manaschy*, for example, might be especially interested in the story of



Figure 2: Manas statue in front of the Bishkek Philharmonic (photo by author).

Manas’s birth and childhood, and give a rich and detailed account of those episodes, while another, when asked to recount what he knew about Manas’s early life, might simply improvise a rough sketch based on a set of more-or-less agreed-upon generic elements.

Textual variability among different accounts of the story of Manas, born out of the act of improvisatory performance and informed by the personality and beliefs of the individual *manaschy*, was not (and still is not) rare; it is, in fact characteristic of many epic traditions. As Jan Vansina has suggested, any given oral epic is best conceived of as a “field of discourse” that represents a range of themes, elements, episodes, etc., rather than as the kind of fixed narrative familiar to those accustomed to other literary forms, such as the novel (Vansina, 1985, p. 52).

Ideologically, however, this kind of textual fluidity was viewed in a negative light in the Soviet Union, and oral traditions were considered to be the markers of a more primitive stage of social and cultural development. Thus, while famous *manaschys* like Sagymbai Orozbekov and Sayakbai Karalayev “became icons of Kyrgyz culture and traditions” (van der Heide, 2008, p. 253), they nevertheless served as uncomfortable and inconvenient reminders of the Kyrgyz people’s “pre-revolutionary life style of illiteracy and nomadism” (ibid.). Consequently, those who were committed to preserving the epic’s oral heritage were subtly devalued in favor of artists creating more “modern” expressions of *Manas*. “Prestigious Soviet awards passed [the *manaschys*] by and were instead given to Manas scholars who used the Manas theme in theatre and opera instead” (ibid.), while edited and published versions of *Manas* were treated as authentic documents of the epic’s text, free from the corruptions and mistakes introduced by individual *manaschys*.

The debates over *Manas* in the early 1950s also revealed another interesting – and less commented-upon – aspect of both the modern history of the epic and its relationship to Kyrgyz national identity, as well as the more general process of constructing nations in the Soviet Union. As we have seen, prior to *razmezhivanie* the peoples of Central Asia

were not divided along unambiguous political, linguistic, or cultural lines, and the spatial distribution of oral traditions like *Manas* did not necessarily conform to the national borders drawn by Soviet ethnographers. This presented a problem insofar as the purpose of *razmezhivanie* and *korenizatsiia* was to give form and content to discrete national groups, each of which had its own culture, language, and heritage.

But prior to *razmezhivanie* the *Manas* epic was part of a wider field of oral traditions that were in circulation throughout Central Asia. For example, as Nora Chadwick has shown, numerous Kazakh epics, such as *Er Kōkshū*, are strikingly similar to *Manas* in many respects, and share with it many of their themes and characters:

The similarity of these names to the Kirghiz heroes cannot be fortuitous. The name of the hero, along with Dshangbyrshy and Manasha, is manifestly identical with Er Kōkchō, Jamgyrchi, and Manas, while Örmön Bet must be Alaman (Alman) Bet. The hostile relations between Er Kōkchō and Jamgyrchi also reappear in the Kazakh story. In spite of obscurities and differences of detail, the relations of the three great heroes – Er Kōkshū, Manasha, and Dshangbyrshy – appear to be substantially the same as in the Kirghiz poems, where Er Kōkchō is harassed by the depredations of his neighbors Manas, on the one hand, and the powerful Jamgyrchi on the other (Chadwick & Zhirmunsky, 1969, pp. 54-55).

In fact, as van der Heide points out, prior to the Soviet period *Manas* himself was not even unambiguously Kyrgyz. His ethnicity “shifts from tale to tale, probably from narrator to narrator ... Reading the poems, it seems that *Manas*’ ethnic affiliation was subordinate to his identity as a Muslim, as a khan in Talas, and as a personality” (van der Heide, 2008, p. 235).

The imposition of sharply delimited national and cultural borders therefore produced disagreements over precisely which nationality “owned” particular traditions, including *Manas*. Thus, although *Manas* was certainly strongly identified with the Kyrgyz, its status as their *exclusive* cultural heritage was also contested by the Kazakhs, whose own epic traditions were strikingly similar. As one of my respondents, a retired academic, an *aksakal*,⁸⁵ and a scholar of the *Manas* epic, noted, it was only during the 1952 conference on the status of *Manas* in Bishkek that these questions of “ownership” were finally settled:

[Before *razmezhivanie*], there were neither administrative divisions nor borders [in Central Asia]. [After national delimitation], the leaders of the newly established countries started looking for their roots ... Uzbeks said that Tamerlane was their hero, and Tajiks said Rudaki⁸⁶ was their hero. And then the Kazakhs claimed *Manas* was *their* national hero. So there were intense disputes over *Manas* in the 1930s. They continued until the 1950s.

Earlier, in the 1940s, orientalists⁸⁷ from Moscow had come to Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz government provided them with all [necessary] materials as evidence, and invited *manaschys* [to recite the epic for them]. There was a Jewish guy among [the ethnographers]. His name was Sergei Lipkin. Moscow authorized [Lipkin and other ethnographers] to investigate the question of *Manas*. Whose epic was it? And Sergei Lipkin was able to

⁸⁵ The word *aksakal* translates literally as “white bearded.” *Aksakals* often serve in the capacity of village elders (Abazov, 2004b), and, in Kyrgyzstan, “*aksakal* courts” have been officially recognized by the state. *Aksakal* courts “judge according to moral norms that reflect the customs and traditions of the Kyrgyz people” (Beyer, 2006, p. 142).

⁸⁶ Abu Abdollah Jafar ibn Mohammad Rudaki (858 - 941) was a Samanid-era poet born near what is today Panjikent in Tajikistan. He is revered as one of the towering figures in Persian letters (Starr, 2013, pp. 225-228).

⁸⁷ It should be noted here that the word “orientalist” in this context is not being used in the Saidian sense. Rather, in the Soviet Union, “Oriental studies (or ‘Orientalology,’ *vostokovedenie*) was a huge interdisciplinary field” that “inherited the conventional definition of ‘the Orient’ from classical Oriental studies in Europe: it comprised the belt from North Africa over the Middle East, Central, South, and South East Asia to China, Japan, and Korea” (Kemper, 2011, p. 1).

compile his version of *Manas* [in Russian] according to the stories of the Kyrgyz *manaschys*. He was awarded the Stalin Prize [for his work].⁸⁸

So there were disputes. *Manaschys*, writers from St. Petersburg, and the Kazakhs all firmly held onto our *Manas*. In 1951⁸⁹ there was an all-Union conference on *Manas*. There was a Division of *Manas* in the Kyrgyz Academy of Science, and very competent scholars were working there. They wanted to prove that *Manas* belonged to the Kyrgyz, and their position was supported by the Kazakh scholar, the Honored Academician of the Soviet Union, Muhtar Auezov. He attended [the conference] and concluded that there was nothing “Kazakh” in the *Manas* epic. He said that *Manas* was a genuinely Kyrgyz hero, and that Kyrgyz *manaschys* were reproducing the epic correctly. So after that nobody else had any claim on *Manas* (K. Osmonbetov, personal communication).

This episode reveals several important points about the construction of nationality in Soviet Kirghizia. First, it demonstrates once again that the process of elaborating national culture was not merely a matter of the top-down imposition from Moscow of official discourses of nationality. In reality, local actors, including Communist Party members, academics, and journalists, were all actively involved in the process of constructing and contesting national-cultural identity. Secondly, we can see how the process of national delimitation both activated and reified national identities, but also how, once activated, culture and history themselves became sites of contestation and negotiation. It was because of the processes of *razmezhivanie* and *korenizatsiia*, and subsequently as a result of political and scholarly contestation, that the epic *Manas* was definitively identified with the Kyrgyz nation in the first place.

⁸⁸ Sergei Lipkin was subsequently disgraced in 1980, when he ran afoul of the Soviet authorities for publishing poetry in an unauthorized venue. The story of how he came to compile his version of *Manas* is described in detail in van der Heide (2008, pp. 182-187) and Lipkin (1994).

⁸⁹ The speaker seems to be slightly confused on the date of the conference, which took place in 1952, not 1951.

3.6 Counter-Memory and Tradition in Soviet Kirghizia

The complicated history of official attitudes regarding *Manas* during the Soviet period illustrates the numerous contradictions inherent in the formula of “national in form, socialist in content,” and indeed in *korenizatsiia* and Soviet nationalities policy more generally. The Kyrgyz nation, like the other nations of the Soviet Union, was conceived of as both primordial *and* constructed, as an objective entity that was nevertheless susceptible to “state-sponsored evolutionism.” Despite these contradictions, however, nationality’s discursive legitimacy began to take root almost immediately, as evidenced in the fierce political battles between the Kirghiz and Uzbek SSRs over the delimitation of borders. Moreover, as the debates over the “ownership” of the *Manas* epic demonstrates, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, nationality was entrenched enough to engender disputes not only over territory and resources, but also over the cultural “content” of national forms.

Kyrgyz resistance to efforts to devalue their nomadic heritage also demonstrates the power of pre-national symbols, historical narratives, traditions, and myths, which have collectively been labeled the “myth-symbol complex” (Armstrong, 1982; A. Smith, 1986), in the formation of modern nations. What has become known as the “ethnosymbolist” approach to understanding national identity emerged as a reaction to both the primordialist view that nations are timeless and transhistorical,⁹⁰ as well as the modernist argument that they are nothing more than a “contingent phenomenon, with

⁹⁰ Although the primordialist view that nations are essentially ancient has largely fallen out of favor among scholars, nationalists themselves usually view nations as ontologically unproblematic, and contemporary national groups are seen as the natural evolution of primordial communities of people. For nationalists, nations are a “given”: nations are rooted in history and reproduced by familial blood ties (Geertz, 1973, p. 259), and emotional attachment to them is “natural,” rather than socially conditioned (Eller & Coughlan, 1993, p. 187). Thus, as Robin Cohen notes, “The slogans ‘White is right,’ ‘For King and country,’ ‘Deutschland über alles’ and ‘black power’ seem paltry-enough ideas to an intellectual sophisticate, but they are real enough to the many people who believe in them” (Cohen, 1999, p. 9).

roots in neither human nature nor history” (A. Smith, 1986, p. 8).⁹¹ Ethnosymbolists, such as Anthony D. Smith (1986, 1991, 2009), John Armstrong (1982), and John Hutchinson (1987, 2005), acknowledge that nations *qua* nations only emerged in the eighteenth century, but they also draw attention to the importance of pre-national “myths, memories, values, traditions, and symbols” (Conversi, 2007, p. 21). According to ethnosymbolists, nations *necessarily* draw upon a pre-existing reservoir of cultural material: a “deep ethnic foundation is a prerequisite to the survival of modern nations” (ibid., p. 22).

Nations, in other words, are not merely hollow political containers that can be filled with more or less arbitrary cultural content by cynical elites seeking self-legitimation. As Anthony Smith reminds us,

[t]he ethnic past or pasts that are rediscovered [by nationalists] create the boundaries and frameworks in and through which we make sense of the [national] community and its place in the world. They also provide cultural models for shaping the nation as well as for national practices, encouraging emulation of the perceived historical canon or standard and a desire to return to the “true essence” of the community (A. Smith, 2009, p. 37).

Thus the *Manas* epic, as well as the cultural memory of Islam, anti-colonial resistance, and the nomadic way of life all constituted parts of the symbolic reservoir that shaped

⁹¹ Broadly speaking, modernist scholars of nationalism reject the idea that “nations have navels” (Gellner, 1999, p. 32). Prominent modernists, including Ernest Gellner (2006), Eric Hobsbawm (1983, 1990), and Benedict Anderson (2006) maintain that nations are a product of the eighteenth century, a natural outgrowth of the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, increasing state centralization, and the spread of literacy and the emergence of mass culture. The constructivist approach of the modernist school is evident in Anderson’s characterization of nations as “imagined communities” and Hobsbawm’s contention that nations are animated by “invented traditions.” Any resemblance between modern nations and pre-national ethnic communities, according to the modernists, is purely a matter of manipulation by elites. As Gellner argues, “The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred and patch would have served as well” (Gellner, 2006, p. 55).

Kyrgyz ethno-national identity. These myths and symbols could be readily utilized by incipient nation-builders in Soviet Kirghizia as vehicles for promoting socialist messages in local garb, but the symbols themselves were by no means arbitrary.

Some scholars have criticized ethnosymbolist scholars on the grounds that they “take the existence of ‘the people’ and ‘collective memories’ for granted. They never ask the questions of ‘which people’ and ‘whose memories’ (Özkirimli, 2003, p. 348). Siniša Malešević, for example, has wondered whether it is even appropriate to talk about the existence of a hegemonic myth-symbol complex in any given society. He suggests that ethnosymbolic models largely fail to acknowledge the possibility of alternative emergent vectors:

How many individual Slovaks regularly and unconditionally “return to an early Moravian Kingdom?” Is “Kievan Rus” claimed by every single individual who describes themselves as Ukrainian or Russian or is this claim made by some groups and individuals in the name of Ukrainian and Russians? Do these perceptions ever change? Are there any competing conceptions of Slovakness, Finnishness or Zimbabweanness? Even if the particular view of what it means to be a Slovak or Finn is temporarily dominant throughout the population it surely is dependent on the particular social and historical context (Malešević, 2006, pp. 131-132).

This critique, however, assumes that ethnosymbolism treats the myth-symbol complex as essentially static. But this is not necessarily the case: the symbols, myths, stories, and so forth that are adopted and mobilized by nationalists are always imbued with the myriad of meanings and significances that have been invested in them. These

meanings, moreover, are not stable: the significance of certain symbols, events, heroic figures, etc. are always shifting and evolving over time and place, and through different historical circumstances. Nations are always in a state of becoming, constantly being shaped and re-shaped through negotiation and contestation. Nations, as John Hutchinson (2005) has argued, are “zones of conflict.”

Thus, a nation’s myth-symbol complex can also form the basis of a powerful counter-memory that stands opposed to hegemonic narratives and discourses about the nation itself. In the Soviet Union, scholars were tasked with constructing “scientific” national histories that accorded with Soviet socialist teleology and historical materialism. But this was not a straightforward process. Soviet academics were forced to contend with the persistent counter-memory of Kyrgyz identity, one that emphasized nomadism, nature, and Islam; they did so by selectively co-opting certain aspects of Kyrgyz culture and valorizing them as part of the Kyrgyz’s “progressive heritage.”

The nomadic Kyrgyz, for example, were a largely illiterate people, and they produced few, if any, written histories. However, Kyrgyz culture places a premium on historical and genealogical memory. Even today, many Kyrgyz will attest to the importance of knowing one’s *jeti ata* (literally, seven fathers), or their patrilineal ancestors going back seven generations:

For some, knowledge of [the *jeti ata*] is popularly held as a definitive marker of Kyrgyz identity. For some, reciting the names of their ancestors helped to evoke memories and stories about them. Moral lessons contained within the genealogies serve as guiding principles in their own lives (Gullette, 2010, p. 84).

Knowledge about the *jeti ata*, moreover, constituted part of a broader corpus of cultural and collective memories, known in Kyrgyz as *sanjyra*, or the “genealogy, oral history of the provenance and beginnings of a nation, clan, tribe or family” (Aitpaeva & Egemberdieva, 2009, p. 357). As Roland Hardenberg pointed out,

[t]he time framework of a *sanjyra* is not any standard chronological periodization, but the genealogical order of a descent category: a *sanjyra* starts with an ancestor and then follows the line of his patrilineal descendants from past to present. The genealogical line is socio-centric, meaning that only those ancestors from whom the present community derives its descent is taken into consideration (Hardenberg, 2012, p. 268).

The tradition of *sanjyra* thus had the potential to undermine Soviet narratives of Kyrgyz national identity by offering radically different accounts of the Kyrgyz people, accounts that focused not upon the “progressive development” of the Kyrgyz nation from primitive herdsmen to modern proletarians, but that instead celebrated kinship ties and the heroic exploits of nomadic Muslim warriors.

Such accounts, which often weave together history, genealogy, and legend, were clearly not compatible with the project of constructing progressive, scientific national histories. The cultural memory of the Kyrgyz people’s traditional culture and way of life, whether embodied in *sanjyra* or the *Manas* epic became a pole around which a kind of passive, perhaps at times even unconscious, resistance to Sovietization coalesced. Thus, as Yael Zerubavel notes, “[t]he commemoration of the past can ... become a contested territory” (Zerubavel, 1995, p. 11).

Importantly, however, counter-memory does not always work in strict opposition to elite narratives; rather, it often (though clearly not always) operates within them and selectively co-opts them. Having largely accepted the Soviet discourse on nationality, the Kyrgyz nevertheless contested its terms – with some degree of success – by co-opting them. Kyrgyz artists, intellectuals, and ordinary people all mobilized the cultural memory of Kyrgyz traditions to “forge a new Kyrgyz community that incorporated Kyrgyz *turmush* (ordinary everyday behavior), such as baking flatbread and catching freshwater fish, with so-called modern, ideology-laded Soviet projects” (İğmen, 2012, p. 89). At the same time, the promulgation of socialist and nationalist discourses by the Soviet state also added new contours to collective interpretations and performances of Kyrgyz identity.

Similarly, the Kyrgyz defended *Manas* against efforts to have it suppressed, arguing not only that the epic was compatible with communist ideals, as one might expect, but also by claiming the epic as their *national* patrimony (and indeed, theirs alone), thereby subverting and co-opting the logic of *razmezhivanie* by claiming the right to imbue the national form with national content (albeit dressed, perhaps, in socialist garb). As Bellah et al. remind us,

[c]ommunities ... have a history – in an important sense they are constituted by their past – and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a “community of memory,” one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in doing so it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and

exemplified the meaning of the community (Bellah et al 1985, p. 153).

Thus, beginning in the Soviet period, the *Manas* epic, which had been passed down from generation to generation by *manaschys*, began to function not merely as an oral account of the Kyrgyz people's history and identity, but as the constitutive document of the Kyrgyz nation. Manas himself, who had not previously been identified as Kyrgyz at all, now “embodied and exemplified” the very definition of what it meant to be Kyrgyz.

3.7 Conclusion

The legitimation of nationality as a fundamental category of personal and communal identity that took place during the Soviet period continues to define identity discourses in independent Kyrgyzstan. When Kyrgyzstan gained its independence in 1992, the various layers of meaning that had accrued to Kyrgyz ethno-national identity during the Soviet period did not simply disappear. The Kyrgyz now reflexively thought of themselves in “national” terms, but they, like the other nations of the Soviet Union, suddenly found themselves in the position of having to sort through the question of what nationality meant in a post-Soviet context.

In Kyrgyzstan, this process entailed a certain reevaluation of the role of the *Manas* epic, for the state was no longer constrained by the necessity of conforming to the demands of Soviet socialist ideology. However, in many ways the political inflections and the new ways of interpreting the *Manas* epic that had developed during the Soviet period were as indelible as the internalization of nationality itself. As Nienke van der Heide argues,

the large-scale advancement of written versions of the tale
... changed the relationship between the epic and the

political arena. The Manas epic was accessible in fixed versions, and in this capacity it was awarded a new set of meanings that fitted the theoretical framework of the new ideology ... As such, [the epic was] brought under the scrutiny of scholars and ideologists, who assessed the tale (or a specific version) in terms of pan-Turkism, bourgeois-nationalism, clericalism and others. When these terms were abandoned, the idea that the Manas epic could be treated as an ideological charter remained (van der Heide, 2008, pp. 253-254).

Indeed, the first President of independent Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev, instrumentalized the *Manas* epic in precisely this way, seeking to use the epic to both to provide an authentically Kyrgyz “national idea” for independent Kyrgyzstan, as well as to legitimate the very idea of Kyrgyz statehood itself. Consequently, as we will see in the next chapter, *Manas* is one of the poles around which post-Soviet Kyrgyz identity has coalesced. However, the epic, like Kyrgyz national identity itself, has once again emerged as a site of contestation over what it means to be Kyrgyz.

Chapter Four: Nation and Memory

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged, because it separates, but it is actually the supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted.

- Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004, p. 297)

Without the past there is no present and there cannot be a future. I am deeply convinced of this.

- Askar Akaev (2003, p. 27)

Without knowledge of the past, the consolidation of Kyrgyz society and the development of a national ideology would be impossible.

- Kyrgyz history textbook (Osmonov, 2014, p. 5).

In the first days of June, 1990, a series of deadly inter-ethnic riots broke out in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Centered primarily on the cities of Osh and Uzgen, the violence left hundreds, perhaps thousands, dead.⁹² The proximate cause of the violence was a dispute over land. Over the previous decades, the primarily Uzbek population of these cities had come under increasing pressure from rural migrants, who were overwhelmingly Kyrgyz.⁹³ As more rural Kyrgyz migrated to the cities, land became increasingly scarce, particularly around Osh, where physical and human geography have colluded to impose

⁹² Official estimates range from around 300-600 killed (Human Rights Watch, 2010, pp. 14-15; International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 3). Unofficial estimates, however, put the number around 1,500 (Shozimov, Beshimov, & Yunusova, 2011, p. 195).

⁹³ Uzbeks in Osh and Uzgen made up 46% and 81% of the population, respectively. By contrast, the Osh oblast (district) was 60% Kyrgyz. See Tishkov (1994).

serious constraints on the ability of the city to expand to accommodate migrants.⁹⁴ Already, traditional Uzbek neighborhoods, called *mahallas*,⁹⁵ had been cleared out to make way for high-density apartment blocks, which were primarily inhabited by ethnic Kyrgyz (Liu, 2012, p. 51). So when plans were made to reallocate part of the territory of the “Lenin” *kolkhoz* (collective farm) for the construction of new apartment buildings, the predominantly Uzbek *kolkhoz* workers demonstrated; a counter-demonstration by ethnic Kyrgyz quickly followed, and tensions mounted between the two groups. By the end of the day the protests had turned violent, and dozens of people, mostly Kyrgyz, had been killed. The violence quickly spread to other nearby cities with significant Uzbek minority populations, such as Uzgen, and the killing only ended when Soviet airborne troops were deployed to restore order.

The “Osh Events,” as they have sometimes been called (Shozimov et al., 2011, p. 194), were sparked by disputes over land. On a deeper level, however, they were a manifestation of more complex problems that had been metastasizing just under the surface of official Soviet narratives about the “friendship of the peoples.” In 1989 competition for access to cultural, economic, and political resources had already resulted in bloody clashes between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks in the Ferghana Valley,⁹⁶ and in 1986 riots had broken out in the Kazakh capital, Alma-Ata, after Mikhail Gorbachev

⁹⁴ As Morgan Liu points out: “Nestled in a river valley with the topography rapidly rising to the city’s south and surrounded otherwise by collective farms and state farms, Osh has no room to grow” (Liu, 2012, p. 22).

⁹⁵ Johan Rasanayagam has described the different ways that *mahallas* function in contemporary Uzbekistan (2011, pp. 49-58). For a Soviet perspective on the social role of *mahallas*, see Poliakov (1992). See Liu (2012) for a thoughtful depiction of *mahalla* life in post-Soviet Osh.

⁹⁶ The Meskhetian Turks are a Turkic population that was deported by Stalin from the Meskhetia region of Georgia in 1944, and resettled in Central Asia, and primarily in Uzbekistan (Wimbush & Wixman, 1975). After the violence in Uzbekistan in 1989, most of the Meskhetian Turks fled to Azerbaijan, as well as to Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. Since then, they have continued to face occasional pogroms, including in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Solash, 2010).

replaced the top Communist Party official, Dinmukhamed Konayev, a Kazakh, with an ethnic Russian and Gorbachev loyalist (Kaiser & Chinn, 1995, pp. 265-266; Kuzio, 1988).

Like these events, the violence in Osh was evidence of the growing sense of ethno-national assertiveness among the titular nationalities of the republics of Central Asia. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 and the Central Asian states were “catapulted to independence” (Olcott, 1992), the new national elites (who were for the most part the same people as the old Communist elites) faced the challenge of constructing viable national identities outside of the context of Soviet ideology. In Turkmenistan, Turkmen identity became increasingly identified with a cult of personality surrounding Saparmurat Niyazov, more commonly known as Turkmenbashi (Denison, 2009). In Uzbekistan, blunt authoritarianism and a reliance on the legitimating power of spectacle, grounded in a mythology built up around the figure of Tamerlane, has been the pole around which national identity has been articulated (Adams, 2010). Tajikistan has rooted its national identity in a narrative that connects the present-day Tajik state to the Samanid rules of the tenth century (Blakkisrud & Nozimova, 2010), while Kazakhstan has wrestled with whether to define its identity in ethnic, civic, or even transnational terms (Laruelle, 2015).

Kyrgyzstan has had a rather different experience than most of its neighbors. As the region’s most democratic (and turbulent) state (Omelicheva, 2015, p. 79), it has had less success in promulgating official narratives of national identity. That being said, nation building, despite sometimes having connotations of being a “top down” enterprise, is rarely the product of elite manipulation alone: nationality must also be meaningful to

the members of the nation more broadly. However, the “meaning” of nationhood is itself never uncontested – the question of “who are we?” always has a range of possible answers. Even the most potent symbols of Kyrgyz nationhood, such as the *Manas* epic, are understood in very different ways, and the freedoms afforded to Kyrgyz citizens have created space for contestation over their meanings to an extent not possible elsewhere in Central Asia.

This chapter will examine the evolution of discourses surrounding national identity in Kyrgyzstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the vantage point of the state, this evolution has occurred in three main phases. The first phase, which corresponded to the rule of Askar Akaev, focused on the articulation of an overarching “national idea” for Kyrgyzstan. As we will see, Akaev was forced to walk a very fine line between consolidating *Kyrgyz* national identity and maintaining a semblance of inter-ethnic harmony between ethnic Kyrgyz and minority populations, such as the Uzbeks. Consequently, he advanced the concept of “Kyrgyzstan – our common home” as the country’s national idea.⁹⁷ Akaev is also remembered for his ultimately unsuccessful efforts to construct an ideology based on the *Manas* epic. Although these efforts bore little fruit during his tenure in office they nevertheless laid the groundwork for much of the Kyrgyz state’s current ideological initiatives.

The second phase corresponds to the period from the Tulip Revolution of 2005, which ousted Akaev, to the April 2010 revolution that overthrew his successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev. This period was characterized by a decline in ideological production. Notably, however, it did see a marked shift away from the ecumenical rhetoric of the

⁹⁷ Later in his tenure in office, when he was increasingly criticized for suppressing the opposition, Akaev also advanced the concept of “Kyrgyzstan: the country of human rights” as a new national idea, which was intended to supplement “Kyrgyzstan – our common home” (Akaev, 2003, p. 226).

Akaev era towards a more explicit concern with ensuring Kyrgyz predominance over what was increasingly viewed as “their” nation-state.

The naked gangsterism and ethnic chauvinism of the Bakiev era, however, proved to be a political dead end for Kyrgyzstan, which culminated in the violent downfall of Bakiev and another wave of pogroms. The third phase of ideological development that this chapter examines thus corresponds to the period after Bakiev’s downfall, including the interim presidency of Roza Otunbayeva and, especially, the tenure of current President Almazbek Atambaev, which began in 2011. This period has been characterized by a reappraisal of the ideology of the Akaev era and the renewed *étatisation* of the *Manas* epic.

4.1 Akaev, Manas, and Kyrgyz Statehood

After independence, the memory of the 1990 “Osh Events” loomed large in the politics of the nascent Kyrgyz Republic. The government, headed by Askar Akaev, who was trained as a physicist, and who had formerly been the head of the Kyrgyz National Academy of Sciences, suddenly found itself facing the challenge of consolidating a viable Kyrgyz nation-state, while at the same time placating the country’s sizeable non-Kyrgyz populations. Assurances were made to minority ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan – particularly Uzbeks and Russians, who in 1989 made up 12.9% and 21.5% of the total population of the republic, respectively – that not only would their rights be respected, but that they were an essential part of the fabric of the country itself. Consequently, the first “national idea” that Akaev articulated – “Kyrgyzstan is our common home” (“*Kyrgyzstan – nash obschii dom*”) – was explicitly civic in its orientation.

But at the same time the new government could not simply abandon the logic of national-territorial autonomy, which the new Kyrgyz state had inherited from the Soviet period, and which was premised on the idea that the republic was in effect the territorial manifestation of the titular nationality's material and historical existence. As Akaev himself wrote:

The most valuable legacy of the Kyrgyz people... is the sacred land of Ala-Too,⁹⁸ which we received from our ancestors. Our ancestors left to present and future generations the wholesomeness and royalty of these fine mountains, the Lake Issyk Kul – a magnificent pearl that has no equal in the world today, fertile valleys, and sparkling mountain streams and rivers. On this ancient land, in the twentieth century, the Kyrgyz people created their own national state. The destiny of so precious a property is in our hands (Akaev, 2003, p. 8).

President Akaev thus found himself in the unenviable position of having to steer a middle course between civic and ethnic definitions of nationality, between positioning Kyrgyzstan both as the “common home” for all of its nationalities as well as the sacred ancestral homeland of the Kyrgyz nation.

Akaev's preferred ideological vehicle was the *Manas* epic, which he valorized as “a prototype for the national Constitution, a code of laws and moral decrees, a code of honor and morals, a will for future Kyrgyz generations” (Akaev, 2003, p. 282) and the “spiritual fastening which held the Kyrgyz people together for centuries” (ibid., p. 346). In 1995 the Kyrgyz government, in cooperation with UNESCO, organized lavish

⁹⁸ That is, modern-day Kyrgyzstan.

celebrations to mark the 1000th anniversary of *Manas*⁹⁹; around the same time, at the site of the *Manastyn Kūmbözü* (the Mausoleum of Manas, Rus. – *Gumbez Manasa*), the government completed the construction of a monumental “ethno-historical complex” called *Manas Ordo* (“The Court of Manas”), about which more will be said presently.

The timing of the jubilee served to date the epic’s origins to the era of the “Great Kyrgyz Power” that overthrew the Uyghur Khanate in 995. This was a highly significant move, since it symbolically positioned the Kyrgyz Republic as the successor to the ancient Kyrgyz Empire, and imbuing it with a sense of historicity. Indeed, Akaev argued that Kyrgyzstan’s modern-day statehood was not merely a political phenomenon, but rather the natural expression of the Kyrgyz nation’s historical destiny:

It is my deep belief that statehood is not only the territory limited in space by a line that we call a border, and not only the systems of enforcement and management of the state, but also the national identity that lives in the consciousness of a people for centuries... On August 31, 1991, in an event of great historical value, the independent state of the Kyrgyz Republic was created as an equal member of the world community. This event was the fulfillment of a great dream kept alive by the Kyrgyz people for twenty-two centuries (Akaev, 2003, pp. 11-12).

Ultimately, Akaev’s ideology conceived of the *Manas* epic not merely as a piece of Kyrgyzstan’s artistic heritage, but rather as a textual and performative embodiment of both the history and spiritual legacy of the Kyrgyz nation, one that had for centuries served as a pole around which Kyrgyz national identity had coalesced.

⁹⁹ *Manas*, together with *Semetei and Seitek*, was recognized by UNESCO as Intangible World Heritage in 2013. However, *Manas* had previously been recognized in 2009, when the Chinese government nominated it as part of the intangible heritage of its Kyrgyz minority population (UNESCO, 2009). This prompted indignation in Kyrgyzstan, which saw itself as the rightful “owner” of the epic (Lillis, 2013).

In the era of nation-statehood, the epic's function was viewed in similar terms. Akaev argued that Manas himself embodied the Kyrgyz will to statehood (ibid., p. 272). Moreover, he derived from the epic the "Seven Lessons of Manas," which were intended to provide the framework of an ideology for the Kyrgyz Republic:

1. Unity [of the Kyrgyz people] and mutual support;
2. Transethnic consensus, friendship and cooperation;
3. National honor and patriotism;
4. Through hard, relentless work and knowledge comes prosperity and well-being;
5. Humanism, magnanimity, tolerance;
6. Harmony with nature; and
7. Strengthening and protecting Kyrgyz statehood (ibid., pp. 283-284).

It is not difficult to see that these "lessons," which were drawn from various episodes in *Manas*, were convenient for the Kyrgyz government's attempts to forge a stable, patriotic, multi-ethnic society. But that was likely the point: Akaev deliberately attempted to draw a direct line between the legitimacy of the contemporary Kyrgyz state and the "golden age" of the Great Kyrgyz Power and Manas himself. Now that the Kyrgyz had finally achieved their sovereignty and independence, the lessons of the epic could be codified and systematized.

More quixotically, however, Akaev also sought to ground his ideas about the historical destiny of the Kyrgyz nation and its will to statehood in the quasi-mystical theory of *passionarnost'*. The concept of *passionarnost'*, which is rather difficult to translate,¹⁰⁰ was advanced by the Soviet historian and anthropologist, Lev Gumilev, as a way of explaining the rise and fall of civilizations. As Pål Kolstø explains:

¹⁰⁰ *Passionarnost'* is sometimes rendered simply as "passionarity," which is hardly clearer.

Passionarnost' was supposed to be a measure of the collective energy of the ethnos, its inner striving towards the realisation of its coveted aims. The *passionarnost'* of the various nations waxes and wanes. At a time when some nations have reached a stage of stagnation and torpor others may be bursting with vitality and energy. During perestroika many non-Russians believed that this theory accurately described the national blossoming they were experiencing (Kolstø, 1999, p. 615).

Although even by his own admission the concept of *passionarnost'* was not widely accepted (Akaev, 2003, pp. 322-323), Akaev nevertheless found aspects of Gumilev's theory to be an attractive conceptual framework for Kyrgyz nationhood, while at the same time strategically rejecting those parts of it that, according to his own analysis, did "not pertain to modern conditions" (ibid., p. 342).

As John Heathershow and David Gullette have explained,

Akaev adopted these ideas to claim that Kyrgyz ancestors had strived and fought for statehood and how it was maintained, even when the Kyrgyz were under the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. The tactic was to link the sovereign state, as a reflection of the nation, to people today, as people can trace their ancestry back through *sanjyra* (Kyrgyz, genealogy) and directly link them to the continual process of state-building. It was an attempt to publicly create the nation's historical memory.

Sanjyra are oral histories of families that are passed down from generation to generation, and they continue to play an important role in Kyrgyz cultural memory. "The ancestors," who are often referred to collectively, serve for many Kyrgyz as exemplary figures, and *sanjyra* consequently not only serve as valuable reservoirs of information regarding how

“real Kyrgyz” lived in the past (before losing their culture and traditions during the Soviet period), but they also provide guidance for shaping modern-day behavior and mores.

For example, when I asked Zamirbek Bayaliev, a well-known contemporary *manaschy*, about the role of the ancestors, he nodded his head portentously. The ancestors, he said, left behind history, in the form of epics, proverbs, legends, as a lesson for future generations. They passed on knowledge about health practices, astrology, music, and so forth. All of this is contained in the *sanjyra*. For Bayaliev, as for many Kyrgyz, it is important to remember the ancestors and to tend to their spirits by reading the Qur’an or providing a sacrifice. In a similar fashion, reciting *Manas* honors the ancestors. As we will see in Chapter Five, moreover, the memory of Islam as practiced by the ancestors continues to shape debates over what constitutes authentic religious practice in Kyrgyzstan today.

David Gullette has argued that by enlisting the ancestors and the *Manas* epic in the service of nationalist discourses, the Akaev government was in fact instituting a form of what Michael Billig has termed banal nationalism: in which “[d]aily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged,’ in the lives of its citizenry” (Billig, 1995, p. 6). Akaev, in fact, concluded his book *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos “Manas”* with an explicit appeal to the memory of the ancestors, of statehood, and of Manas:

Aspirations for statehood and the great spirit of *Manas* were always with the Kyrgyz during their centuries-old history. I am confident that future generations will continue the efforts of their ancestors and carry the baton further.

The flow of time is unstoppable. After gaining state independence we have experienced sorrows and joys. We

lived through them together. The most important thing is that we withstood everything...

Forever with us will be the great spirit of Manas, who protected and inspired the Kyrgyz in the remote past, and will continue to be a guiding beacon, lighting their path to the future (Akaev, 2003, p. 351).

It is easy to dismiss such words as the empty rhetoric of a beleaguered and increasingly unpopular president who was desperately trying to shore up his regime by trying to instill in the population a sense of common purpose and shared sacrifice. They are, of course, precisely that. But they nevertheless provide a clear view of how memory has been mobilized by the Kyrgyz state by routinizing patriotism and loyalty to the state through its insertion into the genealogical memories of its citizens.

In the end, Akaev's deliberate appeal to Kyrgyz cultural memory, as well as the special spiritual and historical significance that he attributed to the *Manas* epic, proved difficult to reconcile with the national idea of "Kyrgyzstan – our common home." While the President continued to maintain that it was the Kyrgyz people's "sacred duty to make sure that sons of daughters of different peoples, who by the will of fate live together on Kyrgyz soil, feel themselves to be at home and among family" (ibid., p. 283), he nevertheless began from the assumption that the soil was, at last, *Kyrgyz* soil. Statehood, then, in both its spiritual and political senses, could ultimately belong only to the Kyrgyz.

4.1.1 A Trip to Manas Village

It did not take long for the inconsistencies of Akaev's ideology to become apparent. On a practical level, both political and economic patronage networks, as well as demographic trends, served to reinforce Kyrgyz dominance (Laruelle, 2012, pp. 40-41). Moreover, despite Akaev's apparently earnest desire to appease the country's minority

populations in order to prevent a mass exodus of disaffected Russians and to avoid further bloodshed between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks,¹⁰¹ the legacy and logic of Soviet nationalities policies effectively precluded the emergence of a truly civic model. That is to say, as long as the state continued to be conceptualized as the territorial and institutional expression of the titular nationality – the Kyrgyz – there would always be a profound disconnect between the rhetoric of inclusiveness and the imperatives of ethno-nationalism.

These contradictions were never satisfactorily resolved, and by the early 2000s, official interest in the ideological possibilities of *Manas* had begun to fade. The public was becoming preoccupied with the country's mounting economic woes, and was more and more indifferent to the state's various ideological initiatives. Akaev himself had come under mounting criticism due to the widespread (and largely correct) view that his administration, and indeed his entire family, was hopelessly corrupt. In this climate, the President's attempts to rally the nation rang increasingly hollow.

The “Ethnographic-Cultural Complex *Manas Aiyly*” (Figure 3), which lies near the foothills to the south of Bishkek, can in many ways be read as a kind of concrete metonym for the incoherence of Akaev-era ideological production as a whole. The complex, where the much-publicized “Manas 1000 International Festival” was held in 1995 (Hiro, 2009, p. 294), was conceived of as a sort of monumental companion in Bishkek to *Manas Ordo* in Talas. But by 1997 the site sat mostly disused, except for

¹⁰¹ Nick Megoran notes, for instance, that during the Akaev period the Kyrgyz state heavily promoted the publication of Uzbek-language textbooks and created the Uzbek Humanities-Pedagogy Faculty at Osh State University. Megoran argues that these initiatives “demonstrated a concrete commitment by the state to reproduce an educated Uzbek class within Kyrgyzstan, in particular to staff the numerous Uzbek-language schools in the south of the country and ensure the viability of Uzbek intellectual life in Kyrgyzstan” (Megoran, 2012, p. 6).

occasional official ceremonies, such as Independence Day Celebrations. Otherwise, *Manas Aiyly* was largely ignored by both the public and the state – it no longer served much purpose for either one.

While living in Bishkek, I decided to visit *Manas Aiyly*, whose name means “Manas’s Village,” for myself. I went there on August 31, 2014, Kyrgyz Independence Day, since the complex was one of the officially designated places in the capital where



Figure 3: *Manas Aiyly* (photo by author).

celebrations were being held. After a long ride through Bishkek traffic in a hot, over-packed *marshrutka*¹⁰², I was finally deposited at a stop along Prospekt Manasa.¹⁰³ Not

¹⁰² A *marshrutka* is usually a van or a mini-bus that follows a set route through the city. In some cases, they will only pick up passengers from bus stops, but in Bishkek most *marshrutki* can also be hailed like a taxi. Unlike many post-Soviet cities, Bishkek has neither a metro or a system of trams, so *marshrutki* are the most popular means of public transportation in the city: they are cheaper than taxis but faster, more frequent, and travel to more destinations than the lumbering trolleybuses that mainly stick to major thoroughfares.

knowing quite where to go, I asked one of the other recently-disembarked passengers, a young woman bringing groceries home from the bazaar. She told me that *Manas Aiyly* was close by, and that if I would agree carry her groceries until we met her husband up the road, then she would show me where it was located. It seemed a fair bargain and, picking up a bag of various vegetables, we continued on our way. As we walked, the woman asked me where I was from and what I was doing in Kyrgyzstan. I replied that I was interested in learning about Manas, and that I wanted to visit *Manas Aiyly*. She seemed a bit bemused that I would make the trip all the way from downtown just for that, and I quickly found out why.

Manas Aiyly's façade was impressive; festooned with brushed-metal yurts, ram's horns, and a falcon, the front gates seem to have been made with far larger crowds in mind than ever passed through them. But having passed through the entrance, the complex suddenly seemed rather less impressive. Judging from the condition of the place, it was clear that *Manas Aiyly* had been neglected for quite some time. The paint was peeling off of the walls, and burn marks from arc welders still scarred the concrete. Wandering around the various ramparts in the complex revealed very little else of interest besides some dismal flower gardens, baking in the afternoon's oppressive 102° heat. A concrete watchtower, adorned with the *Tamgi Manas* (symbol of Manas), overlooked the complex, but the doors were locked. As one account aptly describes it: "None of the colour and spirit of the [Manas 1000] event remain – the games on horseback, the feasts, flags and textiles – and the complex has the feel of an abandoned stage set" (Stewart & Weldon, 2008, p. 117).

¹⁰³ Prospekt Manasa (Manas Avenue), also known by its Soviet-era name, Prospekt Mira (Avenue of Peace), is one of the major thoroughfares in Bishkek, and leads out of the city towards neighboring villages and, ultimately, into the foothills.

Indeed, because it was Independence Day, a small stage had been set up in the middle of *Manas Aiyly*, flanked by two rows of yurts. Each yurt bore the name of a local



Figure 4: Tower at *Manas Aiyly* (photo by author).

school, and one woman told me that the Independence Day celebrations here were little

more than “music and games for the kids.” The events were staged primarily for the benefit of families living in the neighboring micro-district who didn’t want to make the long trek down to Ala Too Square to see President Atambaev. Rows of chairs had been set up in front of the stage, but most people lounged in the yurts, out of the sun, occasionally glancing out to see what was going on. A few children chased one another around the concrete park, the walls of which were covered with sun-bleached paintings of Manas and other heroes from the epic.

Apart from providing a convenient public space for events like this, the site seems to have no real use. The decline of *Manas Aiyly* is in some ways emblematic of the decline of Akaev’s “national ideas”: like the appeal of his lofty, spiritually-laden rhetoric emphasizing *passionarnost’* and the *Manas* epic’s Biblical significance (Akaev, 2003, p. 39), the “Ethnographic-Cultural Complex *Manas Aiyly*” is moribund and decaying. The ideology that it was once intended to serve, like the site itself, has been largely abandoned.

4.1.2 The “Tulip Revolution”

Although Akaev continued to develop his *Manas*-centric ideology until the very end – his book, *Kyrgyzskaya gosudarstvennost’ i narodniy epos “Manas” – Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos “Manas”* was originally published in 2002 and translated into English in 2003, just two years before his ouster – many people began to view his various initiatives with a jaundiced eye. Despite attempts to find grounds in the epic for civic patriotism and multi-national unity, Kyrgyzstan’s ethnic minorities found little to connect with. Worse, the epic-as-ideology failed to resonate even among many Kyrgyz, who, like everyone else, remained mostly preoccupied with the economy:

“Kyrgyz scholars and politicians might speak approvingly of the role of the Manas epic in developing ‘the universal ideas of fraternity, interaction, national pride and independence,’ but celebration of Manas ‘did not put bread on the table’” (J. Anderson, 1999, p. 61).

Meanwhile, Akaev increasingly “prioritized regime survival over the maintenance of his much-vaunted ideology” (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 423). In 1998 he exploited an apparent loophole in the Kyrgyz Constitution, allowing him to serve another term,¹⁰⁴ and presided over another questionable election in 2000, from which he emerged the winner. Moreover, Akaev, who had initially been hailed as an unstinting liberal reformer, had progressively sidelined the opposition and imposed stricter controls over media outlets that were critical towards his government. Even as early as 1995, when he was first reelected as President, the former physicist had begun to retreat into what has been characterized as “benevolent authoritarianism” (J. Anderson, 1999, p. 55). Although Akaev’s various transgressions paled in comparison to the routine abuses that occur in places like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or Russia, they nevertheless represented a disappointing departure from his early promise of being a reliable and enthusiastic democrat.¹⁰⁵

In March 2005, after years of growing discontent with Akaev’s increasingly corrupt rule, mass protests against his government broke out across the country. The spark for what became known as the “Tulip Revolution” were allegations of widespread

¹⁰⁴ According to Dilip Hiro, “[Akaev’s] supporters approached the constitutional court. It ruled in July 1998 that since the two-term limit was specified by the 1993 constitution, it could not be applied to the period that Akayev had served before 1993. Therefore, he was entitled to contest the next presidential election” (Hiro, 2009, p. 298).

¹⁰⁵ Even today, one can easily find many apologists for Akaev. The most common refrain is that “Akaev was a good guy – he was just controlled by his family, and they were all corrupt!” The almost nostalgic attitudes towards Akaev stand in stark contrast to attitudes towards Bakiev who seems to be universally reviled, at least in Bishkek.

voting fraud in the recent parliamentary elections – elections in which both Akaev’s daughter and his son wound up with parliamentary seats (Hiro, 2009, p. 304). Apart from the outrage over the elections, however, Akaev’s growing insularity, nepotism, and increasingly imperious attitude towards his critics and political opponents had already made him a target of general opprobrium.

Public opinion of President Akaev at this time was also colored by the so-called “Aksy Events” of 2002. Five unarmed protesters were killed, and dozens more wounded, during demonstrations in the city of Aksy against the President’s decision to cede small portions of Kyrgyz territory to China. Although Akaev himself had not ordered the police to fire on the protesters, his reformist image – and indeed Kyrgyzstan’s reputation as “the Switzerland of Central Asia” (R. Spector, 2004, p. 3) or “Central Asia’s Island of Democracy” (J. Anderson, 1999) – were irredeemably tarnished.

Ultimately, the memory of the Aksy Events likely played a role in how Akaev reacted to the Tulip Revolution. When faced with the prospect of employing violence to stop the growing demonstrations against his regime, he hesitated; ultimately, he chose to flee the country, first to Kazakhstan and thence to Russia, rather than fire on the protesters. The Tulip Revolution thus placed Kyrgyzstan alongside Georgia and Ukraine as one of the few post-Soviet countries to oust a corrupt and increasingly unpopular leader in a “color revolution.”¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, as is so often the case in history, subsequent events in many ways betrayed the aspirations of the revolutionaries.

¹⁰⁶ The 2003 revolution in Georgia, which ousted President Eduard Shevardnadze was dubbed the “Rose Revolution,” while the revolution in Ukraine one year later, which unseated President Leonid Kuchma, was called the “Orange Revolution.”

4.2 Bakiev and the New Kyrgyz Nationalism

By July of 2005, Kurmanbek Bakiev, a former Prime Minister in Akaev's government, who had resigned to head an opposition party, was Kyrgyzstan's new President. Initially, there were high hopes, both within Kyrgyzstan and abroad, that Bakiev would prove to be an agent of genuine reform. Despite Bakiev's oppositionist bona fides, however, his tenure in office was marked by the emergence of a rigidly authoritarian style of government patterned on Vladimir Putin's "power vertical" model of governance (Laruelle, 2012, p. 42). During Bakiev's tenure, the power of the state security services, which were now headed by Bakiev's brother, Janysh, increased dramatically, and Kyrgyzstan progressively began to resemble a police state. Whereas under Akaev journalists and members of the opposition were harassed or muzzled, now they were imprisoned or simply liquidated (Cooley, 2010, p. 301).

Moreover, Bakiev's initial promises to eliminate corruption and implement political reforms went almost completely unfulfilled. Instead, as Alexander Cooley notes,

Bakiyev and his political allies ran Kyrgyzstan like a criminal syndicate, expropriating whatever money-making assets they could seize – including the national electricity company, all major banks, and companies providing services and fuel to the [American air base at Manas Airport] – and turning them into their personal revenue sources (ibid.).

Rather than ending the practice of bribery, the Bakiev era was instead marked by deepening corruption at all levels and the wholesale pillaging of the Kyrgyz economy for the benefit of an elite clique connected to the President.

Despite the Bakiev regime's authoritarian tendencies and its reliance on the security services to crack down on dissent, it too eventually collapsed in the face of popular protests, this time provoked by a massive hike in utility rates. Unlike Akaev, however, Bakiev had no qualms about the use of force: during mass demonstrations on Ala Too Square over eighty people were killed by police and snipers positioned in the windows of the upper floors of the White House (the Presidential Administration building). In the face of the bloodshed the protesters pressed on and Bakiev fled, first to his base of power in Osh, and subsequently to Belarus.

Bakiev's tenure in office was relatively brief in comparison to that of his predecessor (to say nothing of the presidents-for-life who continue to rule over Kyrgyzstan's neighbors), and his time in power witnessed a marked decrease in ideological production. Although the Tulip Revolution made it clear that Akaev had largely failed to construct a coherent, workable national ideology, Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein have nevertheless noted that "the themes raised at various times under the Akaev administration... continued to set the agenda for ideological strategies of the main actors [in Kyrgyzstan], even after Akaev's demise in March 2005" (Murzakulova & Schoeberlein, 2009, p. 1237). Consequently, the state continued occasionally to genuflect in the direction of the *Manas* epic and the Bakiev government did produce an ideological charter, "Development through Unity" ("*Razvitie cherez edinstvo*"), but virtually nothing was done to actually implement its goals.

Although President Bakiev remained largely apathetic towards the question of formulating a new "national idea" (Marat, 2008a, p. 17), the attempts to articulate a coherent ideology did not entirely come to an end. Perhaps the most idiosyncratic

development was the emergence of “Tengrism” (Rus. - *tengrianstvo*, Kyr. – *tengrichilik*). Tengrist ideology is based in what its followers claim is based in pre-Islamic Turkic religious beliefs and traditions, as well as a respect for the natural environment.¹⁰⁷ As Erica Marat has pointed out, the movement also carries strong anti-capitalist and anti-globalist undertones (Marat, 2008b, p. 46). Tengrists argue that only by expunging Western, Russian, and Islamic influences can the Kyrgyz nation truly “purify” itself and lay the foundations for a stronger state.

At the level of the state, Tengrism’s most forceful champion was Dastan Sarygulov. Under Akaev, Sarygulov had been governor of the Talas province and chair of Kyrgyzaltyn, the state-run gold mining enterprise, but he was forced out of office for rampant corruption. Sarygulov subsequently decided to join the anti-Akaev opposition, a move that ultimately earned him a seat in Bakiev’s cabinet as State Secretary. It was in this role that he attempted to use to try to promote Tengrist ideology. But Sarygulov was once again driven out of office in 2006, and the Bakiev government never attempted to implement his ideas in any serious capacity.

Tengrism as a national ideology was thus largely stillborn, and its chief proponents never comprised more than “a small circle of personalities with eclectic careers” whose ideas have not found widespread acceptance. (Biard & Laruelle, 2010, p. 65). Ultimately, the movement’s esoteric beliefs and its ethnic exclusivism won it few converts, even among Kyrgyz. Nevertheless, the brief visibility afforded to Tengrism by dint of Sarygulov’s position in the government was indicative of a broader turn away

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that, while Tengrism in Kyrgyzstan has, unsurprisingly, taken on a strongly Kyrgyz flavor, Tengrists can be found among other Turkic peoples in the former Soviet Union as well, including Kazakhs, Buriats, and Tatars (Laruelle, 2007, p. 205). It is also important to distinguish Tengrism as a political ideology from the belief in Tengri, the god of the sky.

from the civic ecumenism of the Akaev era towards a more forceful assertion of Kyrgyz ethno-national and state sovereignty.

4.2.1 The Osh Pogroms of 2010 and Minority Fears

The 2010 revolution that unseated Kurmanbek Bakiev also unleashed a second wave of ethnic violence across Kyrgyzstan. Bakiev's politics had appealed directly to the interests (and fears) of ethnic Kyrgyz, many of whom had become increasingly resentful of Kyrgyzstan's minority populations, such as Russians and Uzbeks. Kyrgyz nationalists argued that minority groups – and the Uzbeks in particular – were depriving the titular nationality of its rightful economic opportunities and hampering the development of Kyrgyzstan as a strong nation-state (Wachtel, 2013, p. 979). As Kyrgyzstan's economy continued to collapse under Bakiev, such resentments metastasized, and in the chaos that followed the revolution, a spate of minor pogroms broke out against Russians, Meskhetian Turks, Dungans, and others.

But, as in 1990, the worst of the violence was directed against the Uzbek population in the south, particularly around the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad, where Bakiev's base of power had been. The violence resulted in “targeted burning of mahalla houses¹⁰⁸ and Uzbek businesses, 120,000 displaced across southern Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbek men stationed behind jackknifed buses and debris to block off entrances to their mahallas” (Liu, 2012, p. 8). The epicenter of the violence, Osh, “witnessed savage killings, torture and sexual assault, widespread destruction of residential, commercial and state property, mass lootings, and significant population displacements (Megoran, 2012,

¹⁰⁸ A *mahalla* is a traditional residential neighborhood, common among Uzbeks, Tajiks and Uyghurs. It is characterized by winding streets and inward-facing, multi-generational houses arranged around a central courtyard. As Morgan Liu notes, “The single-story courtyard house (*yer uy* or *maydoni uy*) is what makes mahallas distinct compared to other kinds of residential zones in Osh and other former Soviet Central Asian cities” (Liu, 2012, pp. 4-5).

p. 4). Although the proximate causes of the riots still remain unknown, the June 2010 pogroms were without a doubt the most traumatic event in Kyrgyz history since the *Urkun* of 1916.

Kyrgyzstan has not yet fully recovered from the 2010 bloodletting. Interestingly, a 2012 opinion poll conducted in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian, showed that while most people were worried about unemployment (61%), corruption (36%), and economic development (25%), ethnic relations were a relatively minor concern (4%) (IRI, 2012, p. 20). Significantly, however, war and civil war (44%), renewed instability (36%), demonstrations, coups, or revolutions (23%), a repetition of the 2010 events (18%), and the prospect of splitting the country along north/south lines (18%) ranked among the most common responses to the question: “What do you fear the most?” (ibid., p. 31).

A follow-up poll conducted in 2014 returned similar results: most people cited unemployment (55%), corruption (28%), and the slow pace of economic development (16%) as the most important issues facing the country, while ethnic relations had fallen off the list entirely (IRI, 2014). However, answers to the question “Does the state protect citizens’ rights regardless of their ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan?” revealed marked differences along ethno-national lines: 71% of Kyrgyz affirmed that “Yes, it protects on equal grounds,” while only 40% of Uzbeks, 49% of Russians, and 50% of other ethnicities, felt that the state protected minority rights (ibid., p. 17). Both of these polls suggest that, while ethnic issues *per se* are not seen as major issues, at least in comparison to the economy, for many the daily life in Kyrgyzstan is still conditioned by the memory of ethno-national violence.

Indeed, for in the opinions of many Kyrgyz, the 2010 violence was simply “the result of Kyrgyzstan having been excessively hospitable toward its largest ethnic minority, resulting in Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbeks forgetting their place in the ‘common home, thereby traitorously threatening both the republic’s statehood and nationhood” (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 418). As we will see, the government of Almazbek Atambaev has subtly capitalized on this sentiment. Although Atambaev has repeatedly spoken out against “excessive nationalism,” since 2011 the state has begun to mobilize Kyrgyz history and cultural memory in ways that are meant to consolidate the discursive dominance of ethnic Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan, while simultaneously seeking to avoid a repeat of the violence that has wracked the country twice before.

4.3 Ideological Production in Kyrgyzstan Since 2010

Either out of necessity or simply a lack of any better alternatives, the Kyrgyz state under President Almazbek Atambaev has devoted increased attention to ideology since the 2010 revolution. However, it has faced the problem of having few viable models available to it. The concept of Kyrgyzstan as “the Switzerland of Central Asia” had long since been discredited, and the corrupt authoritarianism and ethnic chauvinism of the Bakiev era was in any case revealed as a tragic dead end, one that few in Kyrgyzstan wish to return to. Similarly, the spectrum of authoritarian models demonstrated by Kyrgyzstan’s neighbors are, for numerous reasons, unattractive options for most people in the country, who still pride themselves on living in the freest country in Central Asia.

In many respects, only the Akaev era seemed to offer a suitable framework for a national ideology post-2010. However, the new government has, for the most part, taken a more systematic and practical approach to development of ideology, particularly where

the *Manas* is concerned. Today, there is a much greater focus on the cultural significance and statist messages that can be found in the epic, while the esoteric poetics of Akaev's spiritually-laden theories of *passionarnost'* and the historical destiny of the Kyrgyz people have been largely eschewed. Similarly, Akaev's concerted attempts to formulate a transcendent "national idea" have been left by the wayside. Instead, the Atambaev era has been characterized by more subtle attempts to instill in the Kyrgyz people a sense of identity, unity, and sovereignty through appeals to Kyrgyz ethnic traditions, the memory of the ancestors, and the shared experience of tragedy and sacrifice (Atambaev, 2012). *Manas*, moreover, is no longer the sole vehicle through which the state is mobilizing cultural memory but rather part of a mnemonic assemblage that also includes historical figures like Kurmanjan Datka, the martyrs of the 2010 revolution, and the flight across the mountains during the *Urkun*.

Although the country's Russian population has declined precipitously since 1989, and although "the Uzbek community has retreated from the public and political spheres" (International Crisis Group, 2015, p. 7),¹⁰⁹ President Atambaev, like Akaev before him, has found it necessary to strike a difficult balance between appeasing Kyrgyz nationalists and reassuring ethnic minorities.

To this end, he has described vehement nationalism as "a kind of disease" (Atambaev, 2012), and argued that "the main problem in Kyrgyzstan is not [ethnic] separatism, but excessive nationalism" (Konikin, 2011). In his inaugural speech, Atambaev emphasized that "only together are we Kyrgyzstan," adding that "those who

¹⁰⁹ Morgan Liu concurs: "What has happened since 2010 is that Uzbeks have mostly withdrawn into their mahallas. In public places in Osh, you see much less of a public presence of Uzbeks. And all of the activities... [within the mahalla] -- all the Islamic activities, the weddings, and so forth -- those have very much died down. It has been quiet since 2010. Uzbeks have been trying to keep a very low profile [and] to minimize problems" (Solash, 2012).

try to divide us according to nationality and region are enemies of the nation” (Orlova, 2011). More recently, Atambaev has hailed the efforts of both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks who risked their lives to protect their neighbors during the Osh pogroms. The President argued that “our national heroes are not those who call themselves patriots and incite ethnic hatred, but those who help their neighbors no matter what ethnicity they are” (RFE/RL, 2015b).

At the same time, however, Atambaev has moved to strengthen the role of the Kyrgyz language, making knowledge of Kyrgyz essentially mandatory in the public, political, and economic spheres (President.kg, 2013, pp. 15-17).¹¹⁰ Similarly, there has been no return to narratives about Kyrgyzstan being a “common home”; rather, as we will see, appeals to Kyrgyz history and memory now form the basis of official ideological initiatives. One of the stated goals of the new “Concept of National Unity and Interethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic,” for example, is the “revision of textbooks, with a focus on the study of common spiritual values, common history, culture, and traditions, citizenship, and national unity” (ibid., p. 17). However, many textbooks focus almost exclusively on the Kyrgyz and their struggle for statehood (see for example: Osmonov, 2014), while the role of Russians, Uzbeks, and others in Kyrgyzstan is largely downplayed or ignored altogether.

¹¹⁰ Although these “Kyrgyz first” language policies have been criticized by some, including the International Crisis Group (2015), as a manifestation of virulent nationalism, Nick Megoran has argued convincingly that “the historical trajectory of Kyrgyz nationalism is marked by a profound insecurity about the very survival of the country, and the fear that Kyrgyzstan is primarily endangered by the weak state of the Kyrgyz language, internal disunity, and geopolitical threats” (Megoran, 2012, p. 2). To counter this sense of existential insecurity, Megoran recommends that “Kyrgyz society should pursue the goal of making Kyrgyz the primary language of public life and inter-ethnic communication in Kyrgyzstan” (ibid., p. 31). While significant minority languages like Russian and Uzbek would be given some kind of “protected status” in certain spheres, the goal, according to Megoran, should ultimately be to promote use of Kyrgyz among all of the country’s ethnic groups.

While open hostility towards non-Kyrgyz is not prevalent today, members of minority populations, even in the diverse and cosmopolitan capital city, Bishkek, are often circumspect about the issue of nationalism. For example, Adilet,¹¹¹ who lives in Bishkek and teaches at the International University in Tokmok, became somewhat apprehensive when the subject of his ethnic identity came up during a discussion over lunch. Glancing around at the people sitting near us in Faiza, one of the most popular destinations in Bishkek for local cuisine, he told me, in a somewhat conspiratorial voice, “I don’t like to talk about this, but I am only half Kyrgyz, and I am part Uzbek. My grandfather was Uzbek, you know.” Adilet’s attitude is reminiscent of other Kyrgyz citizens with Uzbek roots, many of whom are changing their identities to downplay their ethnicity, either by changing their name or, in mixed families, by identifying with the ethnicity of a Kyrgyz parent over an Uzbek one (Eurasianet, 2014). Like others, then, Adilet remains sensitive to the politics of ethnicity, and prefers to be identified as Kyrgyz, rather than as half-Uzbek.

In another instance, Bakhtiyor,¹¹² a Dungan who owns a café near Duboviy Park, a popular meeting place in the heart of Bishkek, affirmed to me that he believed that nationalism was “of course a good thing,” since it helped to strengthen the country. But he nevertheless expressed unease about how it sometimes affected non-Kyrgyz:

Today, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationalism is making itself known... I felt it at the university. Some students formed a sort of organization. They didn’t like Russians or Uyghurs. For us [Dungans], everything was normal, but [nationalism] is still present. These are the consequences of gaining independence... Today we have to know the

¹¹¹ Not his real name.

¹¹² Not his real name.

Kyrgyz language. Now, even when you're talking to the cops, they'll only explain to you in Kyrgyz where and how you've broken the law. I usually only understand half of what they're saying, and the other part I don't understand at all. But when I try to explain myself in Russian, they become very irritated that I don't speak their language.

Both Adilet's and Bakhtiyor's stories give some indication of the complex discursive landscape surrounding issues of ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan today: the rhetoric of a "common home" has been abandoned, and the wounds of 2010 have not yet healed. While the President has taken a stand against "excessive nationalism," the country appears to be becoming progressively more "Kyrgyz" by the day.

This fact is attributable in no small part to Kyrgyzstan's changing demographics: in 1989, ethnic Kyrgyz constituted only 52% of their own republic; by 2009 that proportion had risen to 70%. Meanwhile, the proportion of Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Jews, etc., most of whom had settled in the country during the Soviet period, has declined precipitously, from about 35% to 8.5% of the population, in the same period of time. Only the Uzbek population has remained relatively stable, at roughly 14% of the total (Wachtel, 2013, pp. 972-974). Kyrgyzstan, therefore, "has shifted from being a multi-ethnic state with large communities of minorities to a state demographically dominated by Kyrgyz and containing only one significant minority population" (*ibid.*, p. 974). Yet, as the events of 2010 made clear, unchecked Kyrgyz chauvinism represents a danger, not just for the country's ethnic minorities, but also to the country itself: another wave of pogroms could easily lead to state collapse. Consequently, Atambaev's strategy has been to call for "unity" and excoriate "excessive nationalism," while at the same time using the symbols of Kyrgyz ethnic identity as poles around which to consolidate patriotism and statehood (Atambaev, 2011; Trilling, 2011).

The intricate contours of this policy were evident during Atambaev's 2012 trip to Osh, where the President argued that corruption, excessive nationalism, and *mankurtism* are the three primary "obstacles" facing Kyrgyzstan today (Atambaev, 2012). Atambaev's choice to single out these phenomena is significant. No one disputes that corruption at all levels of society continues to be one of the most intractable problems facing the country. Likewise, there are widespread fears that a repeat of the 2010 events might tear apart the country, so his inclusion of "excessive nationalism" was not unexpected. Atambaev's mention of *mankurtism*, however, was more intriguing.

The term *mankurtism* itself was coined by the revered Kyrgyz author, Chingiz Aitmatov, in his book *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*. A *mankurt*, according to Aitmatov, "did not know who he had been, whence and from what tribe he had come, did not know his name, could not remember his childhood, father, or mother – in short, he could not recognize himself as a human being" (Aitmatov, 1983, p. 126). Both during and after the Soviet period, the figure of the *mankurt* was widely interpreted as a thinly-veiled allegory for Russified Kyrgyz, who, in adopting the modern Soviet way of life, had "forgotten who they were."¹¹³ Atambaev's invocation of the concept signaled the Kyrgyz state's renewed interest in the preservation and development of Kyrgyz national culture and identity.

Especially in a weak state like Kyrgyzstan, which faces a host of seemingly more pressing issues, the President's declaration that the state must devote itself to combating *mankurtism*, an idea drawn from a surrealist Soviet-era novel, might appear to be a rather idiosyncratic policy decision. However, by drawing attention to *mankurtism*, Atambaev was signaling the state's intention to actively link the future of Kyrgyzstan with the

¹¹³ Concerns about *mankurtism* have manifested in Kazakhstan as well. See Rivers (2002).

cultural memory of Kyrgyz nationhood. After all, the figure of the *mankurt* has become emblematic of the Kyrgyz people's lost heritage, lost traditions, lost memory, and lost identity. It is through an appeal to this loss – and, by extension, the necessity of officially curated remembrance – that the Kyrgyz state's present approach to nation building should be understood.

4.4 Memory and Ideology

On August 31, 2014 – Kyrgyz Independence Day – Kyrgyz television stations were filled with patriotic programming: melodramatic pop songs sung by men wearing ornate kalpaks and women in flowing dresses; game shows featuring children wearing traditional Kyrgyz costumes, competing against one another to answer trivia questions about the *Manas* epic; recitals by *manaschys*, inevitably sitting cross-legged on the ground, somewhere high among the snowy peaks of the Ala Too Mountains. Interspersed between each segment were dramatic, slow-motion clips of the Kyrgyz flag billowing in the breeze.

Notable among all of this patriotic programming, however, was a Soviet-era film called *Castles on the Sand* (*Zamki na peske*, 1967), which was shown in its entirety. The movie, which was filmed in black-and-white, and whose soundtrack mostly consists of jazzy incidental music, is an impressionistic, loosely-plotted depiction of a day on the beach at a Soviet resort at Issyk Kul Lake.

This old, deliberately-paced Soviet art film felt strangely out of place among the patriotic pop songs and slickly-produced videos of *manaschy* recitals that otherwise dominated the airwaves on Independence Day. But the film's purpose soon became clearer. The protagonist of the film is a young Kyrgyz boy, who spends his time building



Figure 5: Promotional poster for *Kurmanjan Datka* (photo by author).

elaborate sand castles on the beach. But crowds of Russian tourists begin to give him advice on how he should go about building his creations tourists, and they eventually push him aside so that they can pose for pictures in front of them. Over the course of the film, the boy's face gradually becomes more confused and exasperated, as the tourists take over the beach to build their own sand castles. According to Gulnara Abikeeva,

the whole point [of the movie] is the confrontation between authentic Kyrgyz culture, as represented by the small boy, and the implanted, forcibly disseminated Soviet culture represented by the holiday-makers... The film opens with images of the boy's beaming face, but at the end he is shown with his back turned, standing next to his demolished castles (Abikeeva, 2009).

The film's plaintive nationalist message was subtle enough that it managed to earn a Grand Prix at the Krakow Film Festival in 1968 (ibid.). In hindsight however, and juxtaposed with the other Independence Day programming, *Castles on the Sand* is an implicit warning against *mankurtism*, and serves to remind Kyrgyz that they must be diligent, lest their culture and achievements are once again trampled underfoot and pushed aside, like the boy and his sand castles.

But *Castles on the Sand* was not the only film concerned with memory that was showing on Independence Day: August 31 was also the world premier of the most expensive blockbuster film ever produced in Kyrgyzstan, *Kurmanjan Datka* (Figure 5). Released to great fanfare, the film is a patriotic biopic about the nineteenth century "Queen of the Mountains" who, in order to preserve her people, made peace with the Russian Empire, only to see her sons executed by tsarist military officers. The movie,

which opened in every movie theatre in Bishkek, was a hit, and posters advertising its impending release were ubiquitous for weeks ahead of the date.

Not coincidentally, *Kurmanjan Datka* was also bankrolled by the Kyrgyz government, and both President Atambaev and representatives from the *Zhogorku Kenesh* (the Kyrgyz parliament) were involved in its production (Ibraimov, 2014). As a result, the film has been widely interpreted as “not just a movie but a government-sponsored attempt to instill a sense of patriotism in a people beleaguered by low living standards and a self-serving, smaller-than-life political class” (ibid.). The story of the heroine, who unified her people and then accepted the deaths of her sons for the sake of the nation, makes not only for a dramatic and gripping plotline, but also serves as a model of behavior for present-day Kyrgyz, who have suffered through social collapse and revolution; the film’s implied promise, of course, is that their sacrifices, like those of Kurmanjan Datka, will not be in vain.

From the very start, *Kurmanjan Datka* was envisioned in didactic and mnemonic terms. As a spokesperson for Aitysh, the studio that co-produced the film, lamented:

Unfortunately, young people in today’s Kyrgyzstan don’t know much about our history ... The film is a visual legacy for the next generation, an attempt to arouse a spirit of patriotism among the young Kyrgyz, preserve the history, and perpetuate the names of national heroes (ibid.).

But *Kurmanjan Datka* was also intended to do more than merely dramatize Kyrgyz history for the benefit of the younger generation. The film made available a nationalist/patriotic narrative and a set of symbols that could be readily consumed and internalized by the public; Kurmanjan Datka herself was presented as a metonym for the whole Kyrgyz nation, evoking the memory of sacrifice in the service of national unity.

As Edil Baisalov, a Kyrgyz politician and nationalist activist, has argued,

Kurmanzhan Datka and future films should serve, first of all, the cause of awakening national self-awareness, finding answers to the very real question of who we are, identity formation, and strengthening unity and the sense of belonging to the history of our nation (Baisalov, 2014).

Kurmanjan Datka can thus be seen a means of responding to the perceived problem of *mankurtism*. More broadly, the film represents an attempt to foster a sense of unity and common purpose among the Kyrgyz people and to help them make sense of statehood and what it means to be Kyrgyz. Collective memory, as Yael Zerubavel notes, “can transform historical events into *political myths* that function as a lens through which group members perceive the present and prepare for the future” (Zerubavel, 1995, p. 9).

In a similar fashion, the Kyrgyz state has begun to mobilize the *Urkun* for similar purposes. For example, on May 27, 2015 President Atambaev issued a decree that declared:

The national-liberation uprising of the Kyrgyz people and the subsequent tragedy of 1916, preserved in the memory of the nation as the *Urkun* (the Great Exodus), occupy a special place in the history of Kyrgyzstan.

...

In order to further the successful advancement of the Kyrgyz Republic on the path of strengthening the state and the unity of the nation, to eliminate “blank spots” in the country’s history, and for the purposes of civic education and patriotism, I decree:

1. To consider it the sacred duty of the people of Kyrgyzstan to perpetuate the memory of those killed during

the *Urkun* and to define the worthy place the national-liberation uprising of 1916 in the history of the country and its role in the revival of the Kyrgyz state (Atambaev, 2015).

The decree goes on to recommend that the state erect a memorial to those who died during the *Urkun*, to promote increased scholarly attention to the 1916 events, and to “[e]ncourage initiatives in civil society and the media to promote ideas to strengthen the unity of the people of Kyrgyzstan, citizenship, and patriotism” (ibid.).

After years of relative neglect during the Bakiev era, the political and ideological utility of *Manas* is also being reassessed. While lip service is still paid to the epic’s more ecumenical values, there is greater focus than in the past on the specifically ethnic aspects of the epic. Today, more than ever, the epic is venerated for what it says about the Kyrgyz people, their past, and, by extension, their present and future. As Andrew Wachtel notes:

While mainstream politicians, including the current president, continue to insist that *Manas* is simultaneously national and international, thereby implying that the Manasification of the country does not equate with its Kyrgyzification, popular opinion recognizes that *Manas* is first and foremost a Kyrgyz symbol... *Manas* is primarily presented in Kyrgyzstan, and understood by the Kyrgyz, as the figure who unified the 40 Kyrgyz tribes and created a state of and for the Kyrgyz (Wachtel, 2013, p. 977).

The question remains, however: why would the state return to an ideology that largely failed in the past? The simplest answer, of course, is that the government simply had no better ideas. This explanation makes a certain amount of sense, since *Manas* is recognized as the hero of the Kyrgyz people, and the epic remains a treasured part of

Kyrgyz culture, so the state seized upon these ready-made symbols at a time when the country was desperately in need of icons around which to rally. As Andrew Wachtel has noted,

[I]t is hard to escape the veritable Manas mania that has seized Kyrgyzstan since the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiev ... After 2010 ... when there were real fears that the country might break apart because of intra-Kyrgyz rivalries, the central government began an ever more active campaign to Manasify the country in a clear attempt to cement Kyrgyz national unity (Wachtel, 2013, pp. 976-977).

What this account neglects, however, is that the renewed ideologization of *Manas* is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it fits into broader trends of ideological production focused around cultural memory.

We have already seen, for example, how *Kurmanjan Datka* was consciously intended to circulate certain nationalist and patriotic tropes, and how the state has invoked the tragedy *Urkun* as a way of cultivating a sense of shared sacrifice. Similarly, the *Manas* epic has been promoted as the wellspring of Kyrgyz culture and a source of unity, a narrative that resonates among many Kyrgyz. As Cholponbek Kaparbek uulu,¹¹⁴ the head of *Ak Shumkar Kut*, a nationalist youth organization with ties to the Kyrgyz government, told me:

[The epic] is our history. That is why we have to recognize *Manas* as a treasure that contains the traditions, customs, history, and values of our nation. Even though it has been adapted to the demands of the present day,

¹¹⁴ “Uulu” and “kyzy” are suffixes that mean “son of” and “daughter of”, respectively, in Kyrgyz.

it is necessary to understand that the epic *Manas* is the proof of the history and origin of the Kyrgyz nation.

Similarly, Doolot Sydykov, a prominent contemporary *manaschy* who produces shows for Kyrgyz public television, maintains that knowledge of the epic and other Kyrgyz traditions is crucial for rebuilding Kyrgyz society. This is why he takes pride in being involved in the production of television programs like “Aiköl Aalamy” (“Magnanimous Universe”) and “Madaniyat Maidany” (“Culture Square”), which focus on the *Manas* epic and on Kyrgyz culture more generally. Moreover, Sydykov argues, *Manas* is not just an epic, it is also a means of protecting and uniting the Kyrgyz people:

If we hadn't followed the lessons of *Manas* in the past, then we might not be a united people today. You see, when we forgot [the lessons of] *Manas*, we had revolts [between the different Kyrgyz tribes]. But since the Kyrgyz always recited the *Manas* epic, they still survive.

Official interest in *Manas* has meant that the epic itself has increasingly become the site of state intervention and regulation. In 2011, for example, the Kyrgyz parliament passed a law “On the Preservation, Development, and Popularization of the Epic Trilogy *Manas*” (Jogorku Kenesh, 2011). From the outset the law makes clear the epic's connection to the political and ideological concerns of the Kyrgyz government:

The epic trilogy *Manas* tells the story of the deeds of the legendary hero, Magnanimous Manas, his son Semitei, and his grandson Seitek, which were carried out in the name of the defense of Kyrgyz land from foreign invaders, the unification of the nation into a single entity, of their struggle against internal enemies, and in the name of securing the freedom and independence of the Kyrgyz nation and its spiritual, moral, cultural, national, and other human values.

This paragraph is striking in that it clearly outlines the connection between the *Manas* epic and certain critical areas of state policy: defense against foreign invasion (perhaps, as in the 1999 “Batken events,” by Islamic extremists), the need to be vigilant against “internal enemies” that might cause renewed instability and precipitate a collapse of national unity, the preservation of the sovereignty of the Kyrgyz Republic, and combatting *mankurtism* by safeguarding the “spiritual, moral, cultural, national and other human values” of the Kyrgyz nation.

The law, moreover, declares the epic to be the “intellectual property of the Kyrgyz nation and the Kyrgyz Republic, and brings the epic under the purview of the state by making the government responsible for “public relations in the sphere of preservation, development, popularization, and state protection of the epic trilogy *Manas*” (ibid.). In addition to mandating the study of the epic schools, the law also provides for the state’s regulatory jurisdiction over the use of the term “Manas” in “objects under state, municipal, private, and other forms of ownership... in accordance with procedures established by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic” (ibid.). Another new law, promulgated in April 2015 establishes December 4 as an official holiday dedicated to the *Manas* epic (Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice, 2015).

The “return” to the ideology of *Manas*, then, bears only superficial similarities to the ways in which the epic was mobilized in the past. Although the veneration of “the ancestors” is still a major theme in national discourses, today, there is little official attention paid to the mystical and esoteric elements of Akaev’s ideology, such as the notion of *passionarnost*. Indeed Atambaev himself, before becoming President, was quoted as saying that “[a]ll this foolishness, such as the seven commandments of Manas,

which the [Akaev] regime was constantly harping on about, is a load of rubbish” (see: Murzakulova & Schoeberlein, 2009, pp. 1237-1238). Rather, today there seems to be greater focus on how the epic can be systematized as a coherent ideology of state sovereignty and national unity, as opposed to a list of vague precepts like the “Seven Lessons of Manas.”

The state has thus devoted more attention than in the past to increasing knowledge of Kyrgyz national traditions and working to consolidate a sense of national identity among the country’s youth. Cholponbek Kaparbek uulu, the head of *Ak Shumkar Kut*, believes it is necessary to educate children, not only in subjects like science, mathematics, and foreign languages,¹¹⁵ but also in the “traditions and customs of the ancestors.” Similarly, according to Almaz,¹¹⁶ a member of *Ak Shumkar Kut* who also works in the Ministry of Education:

It would not be mistaken to say that *Manas* has played a huge role in shaping the ideology of the Kyrgyz Republic. We can learn from the epic about our customs and traditions, and the best qualities of our ancestors. All these can be an example for us, and we can use the epic as an ideology... We shouldn’t just hang the seven precepts of Manas on the wall, but it should work as a system ... Why didn’t other systems work in the past? Because we were not able to integrate certain practices, which were used by our ancestors, into law. But if we integrated them, there would be huge changes [in the country].

Many of the changes that Almaz envisions involve the indoctrination of youth according to ideological principles drawn from the *Manas* epic. In his opinion, this task could be

¹¹⁵ According to Cholponbek Kaparbek uulu, *Ak Shumkar Kut* recognizes the necessity, in the modern world, of knowledge of foreign languages, particularly Russian and English, but believes that every Kyrgyz person should speak Kyrgyz as their first language (personal communication).

¹¹⁶ Not his real name.

carried out by officially supported mass youth organizations, much like those that existed during the Soviet period:¹¹⁷

It would be good if we worked with the secondary schools regarding the *Manas* epic. Instead of *Pioneer* and *Oktyabrėnok*,¹¹⁸ would could use the names of Manas, Semetei, and Seitek... We should establish groups carrying the name of Manas starting in secondary schools. If the Ministry of Youth coordinated the activities of the youth according to the precepts of Manas, they could use [the examples of] the epic heroes for educational or mentoring purposes. The ideology of the epic heroes of *Manas* is a treasure for us. If it is God's will, we will work on this. There is something in *Manas* that can wake the Kyrgyz up. Education depends on ideology. We need to establish groups starting from kindergarten.

In a similar vein, the government's official "National Program for the Preservation, Study, and Popularization of the Epic *Manas* for the Period 2012-2017" envisions "the creation of a series of animated films and computer games" based on *Manas* and other Kyrgyz epics, as well as their adaptation into versions suitable for young children (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2012).

Such plans have thus far not advanced beyond the realm of ideas. However, another major educational initiative aimed at teaching students about the importance of *Manas* has already been implemented. In 2011, *Manasovedenie* (Kyr. *Manastaanuu*), or "Manas studies," became a mandated component of curricula of both schools and

¹¹⁷ In the USSR, "As... children progress from the Octobrists to the Pioneers and the Komsomol, political socialization proceeds in a series of well-defined stages. From a mere character education in the primary school, socialization in Soviet youth organizations evolves into an increasingly sophisticated Marxist-Leninist doctrine which requires the pupil to be completely devoted to the communist regime" (Zajda, 1980, p. 176). Advancement through the different envisioned mass youth organizations based on promoting the ideals of *Manas* would likely follow a similar trajectory.

¹¹⁸ The Young Pioneers (officially, the "Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization") was a youth organization for children between ten and fifteen years old, while the Little Octobrists (Rus. *Oktyabryata*) was a sister organization for children aged seven to nine. Little Octobrists would graduate into the Young Pioneers, and thence into the *Komsomol*, the "All-Union Leninist Young Communist League."

universities. Textbooks on *Manasovedenie* typically include chapters covering the basic narrative of *Manas*, discussions of the history of the study of the epic, and biographies of renowned *manaschys* like Sayakbay Karalaev, and Sagymbay Orozbekov. Textbooks also focus on specific themes, such as the role of women in the epic, or the significance of the horse in Kyrgyz culture.

However, the most significant theme that is emphasized in *Manasovedenie* is the unity of the Kyrgyz people. Akaev had also written about the importance of unity, and made it the first of his “Seven Lessons of Manas.” But in characteristic fashion, Akaev’s conception of unity was romantic and metaphysical, intimately tied to *passionarnost’* and the historical destiny of the Kyrgyz people:

The purpose for all of the achievements of Manas was the unity of his people. When this goal was finally achieved, the star of the Kyrgyz people had risen. With quarrels and domestic conflicts, Manas’s dream was destroyed. The Kyrgyz people had failed and their star died. However, though the mist of the centuries came the voices of the wise and perspicacious Bakai¹¹⁹ whom, as if just for us, warned against discord and domestic conflict (Akaev, 2003, p. 283).

Contemporary *Manasovedenie*, by contrast, explain the importance of the theme of unity in *Manas* to the modern nation-state of Kyrgyzstan in a more straightforward way:

The dream of unifying the people permeates the whole ideational pathos of the epic *Manas*. The basic idea of the epic is the struggle for independence, for the unification of the Kyrgyz people and tribes, for an independent, bequeathed homeland – Talas and Ala Too. The idea of

¹¹⁹ Bakai was Manas’s most trusted adviser, highly esteemed for his counsel and wisdom.

unity finds new meaning and resonates with the problems of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, while it is undertaking the enormous task of building an independent democratic state (Imanaliev et al., 2011)

In many instances, specific passages from *Manas* are explained as having relevance to contemporary political and social issues, such as national unity. The authors of one textbook, for example, draw attention to the following passage, in which a kinsman of Manas warns his sons, who had previously conspired against the hero, to lend him their support in the future:

*If Manas falls, support
him unflinchingly;
If his strength leaves him,
Guard him;
If he starts to bend,
Give him support;
If he begins to tire,
Be his substitute;
If he falls to his knees, hold him up.*

Manas, here, serves in effect as a metonym for the Kyrgyz nation-state, which requires tireless efforts on the part of its citizens to vouchsafe its independence and support the cause of national unity: according to the textbook, “These surprisingly significant lines are as guidance for posterity, for those who have the arduous mission of creating and unifying a young, independent state” (ibid., p. 107).

If Manas has been drafted by the state (and others) into narratives about the unity of the Kyrgyz people, it is nevertheless important to recognize that symbols and memory are often the sites of struggle and resistance. That is to say that *the* collective memory is perhaps better understood as a *multiplicity* of memories that may bear a certain “family

resemblance,” in the Wittgensteinian sense,¹²⁰ but always contain significant variance, not only in the details, but in interpretations of the meaning of the past itself – a certain slippage between different mnemonic discourses. In this regard, then, the state does not – and cannot – exert uncontested hegemony over the discourse on national identity. There will always be competing interpretations of the very myths and symbols that the state employs to legitimate itself.

Manas is one such site of contestation. For some Kyrgyz, the epic is merely a story, one that may possess a great deal of artistic and cultural merit, but is not necessarily based on historical fact. Likewise, for many ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan, the epic, as a tradition that is closely associated with the Kyrgyz, has no particular emotional spiritual significance. However, as we will see in the next section, among many Kyrgyz *Manas* carries a series of intensely spiritual meanings that depart considerably from the narratives of statehood and unity favored by the Kyrgyz government. Such meanings, however, should not necessarily be understood as being oppositional. Rather, they reveal the fractal character of national identity by illustrating how even the symbols that are most central to official discourses of national identity are rarely as monolithic as they are presented.

4.4.1 *Nurassyl eje's Story*

It was a damp, cloudy afternoon in early November, and I was standing outside an empty café on the outskirts of Duboviy Park¹²¹ in central Bishkek. I was waiting for Nurassyl eje,¹²² a short, round woman of 60 years. When she arrived, she was dressed

¹²⁰ Wittgenstein described “family resemblance” as “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 32e).

¹²¹ The name means “Oak Park.”

¹²² Not her real name.

rather plainly in a lavender-colored shawl, a red and black polka-dotted shirt, and a gray-lavender jacket. Rather than the more fashionable and brightly colored Turkish styles worn by many younger women, her headscarf was worn in a more typically Kyrgyz style. Despite her age, and the fact that she was carrying a number of large bags, she was rather spritely, smiling and laughing, and seemed quite eager to talk with me.

We entered the café and ordered some black tea. When the teapot arrived, I poured Nurassyl eje a cup, and she began to tell me about herself and the remarkable spiritual journey she embarked on at the age of forty-five. She had been raised in a small village in the Panfilovski Region of Kyrgyzstan, near the Kazakh border. She had fallen very ill on several occasions, once when she was five or six, once more when she was twenty, and most recently – and most seriously – at the age of forty-five:

This time it was severe. I became severely sick. But we had to go to Talas for Manas ata's *toi*.¹²³ It was very difficult for me – I just wanted to lie down, but I could not. I had terrible pains, and was very afraid. My heart was beating very hard, as if something gripped me by the throat. I wanted to lie down, but I felt as if a snake wrapped itself around me and squeezed me. I had to go outside ...

As a result of this sudden affliction, Nurassyl eje was rendered unable to walk, and her daughter decided to take her to visit a traditional healer.¹²⁴ After this, her symptoms subsided enough that she was able to travel to Talas. But she still felt gravely ill.

Arriving to Talas weak and suffering from a high fever, she was not able to attend the *toi*:

¹²³ A *toi* is a celebration. In this instance, the *toi* was a religious ceremony at which people read Qur'an and made sacrifices in honor of Manas.

¹²⁴ The field of traditional Kyrgyz medicine is a vast one, and a full account of it and the issues and controversies that surround it is far beyond the scope of this work. In its broadest contours it is closely associated with herbalism, spiritual power, exorcism, and *Kyrgyzchilik* (see: Adylov, 2007; Tulebaeva, 2009). Traditional healing is also very much connected with the practice of visiting *mazars*.

On the way to Talas I was thinking about Sypatai ata.¹²⁵ I was thinking about collecting enough money to make a sacrifice, for reading the Qur'an for his spirit. When we arrived to Talas, the others celebrated: they ate and drank. But I was hurrying and was thinking only about getting to Manas ata. I was really intending to get there and read Qur'an. A whole day of the *toi* passed, and it was really difficult. I was not able to dance, sing, or even eat. I had a high temperature and I wanted to rest, but I couldn't. I made ablutions several times. And when I was very tired, I asked Manas ata's spirit to help me to have rest and to sleep. I told him that I would get up early in the morning and go to him, and when I told him that he let me lie down and sleep. When I told him that, he let me lie down and sleep ... he let me have a rest.

So, as promised, at 8:00 am the next morning, Nurassyl eje went to the *Manastyn Kümbözü*, to pray and to perform ablutions. There, she encountered a *moldo*,¹²⁶ who diagnosed her problem immediately: her *kasiyet*¹²⁷ was disrupted. The *moldo* prayed for her, gave her some treatments to help purify her, and told her to return home.

According to Nurassyl eje, it became clear that this episode, and indeed the maladies that she had suffered as a child, were not ordinary illnesses – they were actually *ayans* – visions or premonitions.¹²⁸ According to Kyrgyz tradition, people who ignore their *ayans* often become gravely ill – either physically or mentally, or both – and only by answering their calling, to become a healer, to play *komuz*, or to recite the *Manas* epic, for example, can they finally cure their afflictions (O. Choiunbaev, personal

¹²⁵ Sypatai ata, also known as Sypatai Baatyr, was a Kazakh warrior of the nineteenth century, who allied himself with Kyrgyz tribesmen and fought against the Khanate of Khoqand.

¹²⁶ The Kyrgyz word for “mullah.”

¹²⁷ A kind of sacred spiritual energy, “an extraordinary gift that has been given to a person, land, or animal, from above” (Aitpaeva & Egemberdieva, 2009, p. 350).

¹²⁸ According to one account, there are two kinds of *ayans*: the first kind are dreams; the second, more powerful kind, is experienced in waking life, and can take the form of an illness or an encounter with a legendary figure like Manas (Ulan Ismailov, quoted in: Aitpaeva & Egemberdieva, 2009, p. 61).



Figure 6: Nurassyl eje (photo by author).

communication). In Nurassyl eje's case, the illnesses that she suffered throughout her life were summons for her to become a traditional healer and to help people:

I was told to clean my house of all evil things, and I threw everything away. I gathered up new clothes, and went back to Talas. I felt like I was in a maze – a totally changed person. Once we got to Talas, I went to a holy place, the *mazar* called Zulpukor.¹²⁹ After that, I read from the Qur'an, and went back to Manas ata. When I got there, I saw forty

¹²⁹ Zulpukor is in the village of Aral, which is a few miles down the road from Talas.

moldos! I greeted them all, and asked them for ablutions. I gave *bata* [blessings] for about an hour. I did it with the support of Manas ata... While I was there, I met Mukan *moldo*. We whipped one another [with a flail] – he hit me and I hit him.¹³⁰ I also met a fortune-teller named Maryam. I stayed there [at *Manastyn Kūmbözü*] for forty days, and I made a sacrifice. This all helped to purify me.

[*Manastyn Kūmbözü*] is a very holy place ... I once referred to it as a “health resort,” and for saying that they punished me for a whole day. Anyways, [at *Manastyn Kūmbözü*], you fall into different trances. The spirits can be seen. Good and bad things often blend together. I also went back to the mausoleum of Zulpukor, and they gave me the dress of Kanikei apa.¹³¹ They also gave me a knife, a whip, and *subha*.¹³² They insisted that I tell their futures with the gifts that had been bestowed upon me. Then I found these stones.¹³³ I began to wear the *elechek*...¹³⁴ I saw Aichurek¹³⁵ in my dreams: she was walking in the Ala Too Mountains.

According to Nurassyl eje, during her time at *Manastyn Kūmbözü*, her ailments completely and permanently disappeared. She attributes her apparently miraculous recovery to the fact that she finally answered the call of her *ayan*.

On another occasion, Nurassyl eje’s husband wanted to invite a *batachy*¹³⁶ named Zhaparkul, whom he had met at the Baytik Batyr *mazar*, to stay at their home. She agreed, and Zhaparkul lived with them for ten days, during which time Nurassyl eje

¹³⁰ Lashing a person’s back with a small leather flail is a traditional way of purging what is called “black *kassiyet*” – or evil energy.

¹³¹ Kanikei was the wife of Manas, and the “dress of Kanikei apa” is a type of white clothing that signifies that its wearer possesses strong *kasiet*.

¹³² Prayer beads.

¹³³ In addition to her usual healing implements, Nurassyl eje also carried with her numerous stones that she had collected. One was a stone that she found in a holy spring. According to her the stone had eyes and a mouth like a human face and, if viewed from another angle, also resembled a sheep’s skull. She also had 41 tiny pebbles in a small satchel, which she says can give her *ayans* to help her see the future.

¹³⁴ A tall, cylindrical headdress often worn by Kyrgyz women.

¹³⁵ Aichurek was the wife of Manas’s son, Semetei.

¹³⁶ A holy person who gives blessings.



Figure 7: Zulpukor *mazar* (photo by author).

cooked food for him and washed his clothes. Before leaving, however Zhaparkul blessed her, and her ability to cure diseases subsequently increased. Zhaparkul was from Talas, and Nurassyl eje believes that Manas was working through him, testing her generosity and kindness. Because she displayed these virtues, she received a powerful blessing.

Nurassyl eje's story of illness, intercession, and recovery is not unique. As Ormush Choiunbaev, the Director of *Manas Ordo* pointed out to me:

When *manaschys* recite *Manas*, they don't simply retell it. They would get sick and suffer from diseases. When they denied [their calling to] recit[e] *Manas*, their children and family members got sick. But when they started reciting *Manas*, their families started to recover.

Indeed, many *manaschys* report having dreams as children in which Manas, his companions, or renowned *manaschys* appeared and commanded them to begin performing the epic. “Real *manaschy*” (Kyr. *chynygy manaschy*) moreover, can recite the epic without ever having studied it:

The tellers only begin to recite after receiving *ayan*, signs in a dream or a supranational vision. According to *aksakal*,¹³⁷ many future *manaschy*, although talented improvisers, did not dare to recite “Manas” until they received a vocation from the heavens and the blessing of the spirits. Those who dared risked the wrath of not only their audience but also of the spirits of “Manas,” as reciting the epos is not only considered a special skill but also brings with it the power to heal listeners as the words evoke the spirits of the ancestors to help their descendants. (Aitpaeva & Egemberdieva, 2009, p. 43).

For example, Doolot Sydykov, whose grandfathers were both *manaschy*, only began reciting *Manas* at the age of twelve after seeing Sayakbay Karalayev, Manas, and Semetei in a series of *ayans* – first in dreams and later as waking visions. Similarly, Zamirbek Bayaliev, another notable *manaschy*, told me that he began to recite when he was fifteen, after receiving an *ayan* and seeing visions of *baatyr*s. Two years later, he performed a *tülöö*,¹³⁸ for which he received *bata*. After that, he began to recite *Manas* openly, whereas previously, he had only performed alone, while in the fields. To do otherwise would have risked drawing the ire of the spirits of the *Manas* epic.

¹³⁷ Literally, “white beard.” Refers to a wise elder.

¹³⁸ A ritual ceremony involving in which a person sacrifices an animal and prepares a meal for his or her relatives and neighbors.

In fact, many *manaschys* report going into a kind of “trance” state when they are reciting the epic. In some sense, the word “recite” is not entirely appropriate, since *manaschys* often become completely caught up in their performance – sometimes with eyes tightly closed, sometimes smiling and gesturing, sometimes looking “beyond” the room, as if reminiscing about people that they have met in the past, as if to convey the reality of what they are describing. When Rysbai Isakov, one of the most prominent contemporary *manaschys*, performed a portion from the epic for me, he chanted for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, unable to stop himself, growing louder and louder, before finally ending in a sort of ecstatic crescendo. When he finally ended, he passed his hands across his face and uttered “omin” (“amen”).

What these various accounts reveal is that Manas, as an individual, is encountered by many Kyrgyz as a far more real and immediate presence than the heroic state-founder that is venerated in official discourses. In certain instances, Manas himself is even said to intervene on behalf of the Kyrgyz people as a whole:

We still feel Manas ata’s saintly power. In 1991 there was an earthquake, and clairvoyants claimed that they saw Manas ata’s spirt and that he protected people. His power is great. The places he walked in are *mazars* today, and people go there to pray (Z. Bayaliev, personal communication).

Similarly, Nurassyl eje told me about a highly evocative dream she had, in which Manas stood in judgment over the Kyrgyz people, lamenting the sad state they find themselves in today:

I saw Manas ata in my dreams. He was among the clouds... then I saw water. On one side [of the water] there were only Kazakh people, and on the other side, only Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz people were wearing black clothes, and were drunk, but the Kazakhs were in white, and they were all

riding horses. And there was a place where people could make sacrifices, and where they prepared meats. And I shouted to the Kyrgyz people: “look at the Kazakhs! They prepare food and ride their horses! Please, be quiet! Look! We have nothing! We do not have cattle; we do not have meat. Manas ata is looking at us – please, do not drink alcohol!” But no one paid attention to me.

Such accounts unmask a profound rupture in official narratives about the role of *Manas* in contemporary Kyrgyz society. In the experience of many Kyrgyz, the epic is not merely a repository of information about Kyrgyz culture and traditions, nor a historical document that legitimates the existence of a Kyrgyz nation-state and provides lessons about unity. The epic also exists in a transcendental register, while the spirits of Manas himself, as well as his forty companions, the great *manaschys*, and various *baatyrs* and heroes, are, in a very real sense, very present in the lives of many Kyrgyz, visiting people in dreams and in *ayans*, warning them of danger, granting them the power to heal others, and awakening their spiritual and artistic powers.

Thus, for many Kyrgyz, the state’s renewed interest in promoting *Manas* is welcome, but ultimately secondary to the epic’s real – that is, spiritual – significance. As Zamirbek Bayaliev explains:

Only recently has the state started paying attention to Manas. We [*manaschys*] were just reciting Manas for seven days and seven nights at a celebration [at Lake Issyk Kul] in honor of Sayakbay Karalayev. They [the state] organize such events. But in general, local people and money from the public support us. The state doesn’t pay us a salary. We don’t receive public funding, and the state has not established an official department [to support *manaschys*].

However, he adds:

Since the gift of *manaschylik* has been given to me from above, it doesn't matter whether the state grants its support or not. I have to recite *Manas*. It demands to be released – otherwise, I get sick. This spiritual gift [*kasiet*] requires it from me.

Despite attempts to “nationalize” the epic, then, there remains a surplus of meaning invested in *Manas* that has resisted *étatisation*: the spirits that Nurassyl eje encountered during her ordeal, who tested her and who helped her through her illness, bear little in common with the image of Manas and the ancestors that has been fashioned by the government through its rhetoric of statehood and unity, and the *ayans* that compel *manaschys* to recite *Manas* have a significance beyond that which is invested in the epic by the state.

The role that *Manas* plays in Kyrgyz society today is clearly complex. On the one hand, the state has mobilized the epic as a key component of a broader project of commemoration, consolidating of national identity and, ultimately, stabilizing a country that has endured two revolutions in the past decade. On the other hand, as we have seen, for many Kyrgyz the significance of the *Manas* epic possesses a sacred quality that transcends the logic of the nation-state. As Tilek Asanov, a *manaschy*, puts it: “*Manas* is an endless world, which cannot be described and understood through words” (Aitpaeva & Egemberdieva, 2009, p. 53).

It is important, however, to avoid the temptation to view the sacred narratives surrounding the epic as amounting to a “counter-memory” (Foucault, 1984, p. 93) that resists and subverts official discourses. Quite the opposite, in fact, is often true: the *Manas* epic serves as a nexus of state ideology, notions of national identity, and the experience of the transcendental, rather than a prism. For example, Zamirbek Bayaliev

echoes official discourses when he claims that “Manas was not just a *baatyr* [warrior], but he was a wise leader and a saint... the *Manas* epic has the power to save and unite the Kyrgyz people.” Similarly, according to Rysbai Isakov, “if you are a patriot and you have love for your Motherland in your heart, the inspiration [to recite *Manas*] comes of its own accord.” Doolot Sydykov, for his part, was typically direct:

The person who considers himself a real Kyrgyz should respect the Kyrgyz people, love the nation with all his heart, protect his people, and keep Kyrgyz customs and traditions alive for the next generations. Today, Kyrgyz shouldn't say “what did the state do for me?” but should instead think “what did I do for the state?”

But it was Nurassyl eje who offered what I thought to be the clearest explanation of how many Kyrgyz people understand the relationship between the state and the sacred. In her view, if *Kyrgyzchilik*, the special spiritual character of the Kyrgyz people, has the potential to help resolve life's everyday problems – sorting out marital difficulties, ensuring healthy pregnancies, curing illnesses, and so forth – then perhaps it also has the power to put right the problems, such as corruption, instability, interethnic violence, and a crumbling economy, that afflict the nation as a whole: “If Manas ata is elevated,” she says, “the nation will be elevated.”¹³⁹ But today, people don't fully understand that.”

4.5 Places of Memory

Cultural memory is often grounded, in a very literal sense, in what Pierre Nora (1989) has called *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), “where memories converge, condense, conflict, and define relationships between past, present and future” (Davis & Starn, 1989, p. 3). Many such *lieux de mémoire* existed in Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet period. The majority of such sites were monuments honoring soldiers and local

¹³⁹ “Манас ата көтөрүлсө, эл көтөрүлөт.”

communists who had fought to establish Soviet power in the region, Marxist-Leninist heroes, or the sacrifices made by the Kyrgyz people during the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany.

In addition to the requisite eternal flame, one of the most prominent of these monuments is the statue of General Ivan Panfilov, who, according to Soviet mythology, led a heroic group of 28 men during the defense of Moscow. Although recent archival research has exposed much of the story of “the twenty-eight” as a “fabrication” (Statiev, 2012, p. 792), “ownership” of the story of the “Panfilov Division” was a source of inter-republican contestation during the Soviet period (Florin, 2015, pp. 51-52). The exploits of Panfilov’s men remain a source of national pride to this day, and flowers are traditionally laid at the monument to the division on the anniversary of the end of the war (J. Anderson, 1999, p. 14; Kabar, 2015; Kazinform, 2015). By instilling a sense of pride in the shared sacrifice of Soviet citizens in the struggle against fascism, the purpose of these and similar monuments throughout the Soviet Union was to create a sense of patriotism and loyalty to the state.

The independent Kyrgyz Republic has also worked to reinforce narratives of national solidarity and sacrifice by locating (or establishing) its own *lieux de mémoire*. In Bishkek, Lenin, Marx, Maxim Gorky, and General Panfilov have for the most part not met the same fate as in other post-Soviet states, but they have now been joined by statues of Kurmanjan Datka, Jusup Balasagun¹⁴⁰ and Chingiz Aitmatov. Monuments commemorating the soldiers who died fighting against the Islamic Movement of

¹⁴⁰ Jusup Balasagun was a poet in the eleventh century. Balasagun was not ethnically Kyrgyz, but, as his name suggests, he hailed from the Karakhanid capital, Balasagun, which is in modern-day Kyrgyzstan (See above, Chapter 2). He has been “claimed” by Kyrgyzstan, and his image appears on Kyrgyz currency. His statue stands in front of the Kyrgyz National University, which also bears his name.

Uzbekistan in 1999, as well as those who were killed during the uprising against Bakiev, have also been erected. The symbolic landscape of the city now punctuated by sites whose purpose it is to establish mediated (by the state) relationships between the public and particular historical persons or events.

This process has been particularly evident in the succession of statues that have occupied Ala Too Square, the central plaza in Bishkek. Following research on the "political semiotics of urban landscapes" (Diener & Hagen, 2013, p. 490), the statues that have dominated Ala Too Square can be read as embodiments of the ideological evolution of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. For example, the statue of Lenin, which stood watch over the square since 1985, gesturing grandly towards the mountains south of the city, was not immediately dismantled after the collapse of the USSR. Surprisingly, it remained standing until 2003. The statue's longevity, and the fact that it was not torn down, but simply relocated, can be said to reflect Kyrgyzstan's ambivalent and circumspect attitude towards its Soviet past: "Kyrgyzstan's desire to promote civic identity and avoid overly ethno-centric allusions went hand-in-hand with tranquility of mind concerning former Soviet symbols. It was the last state in Central Asia to concern itself with effacing Soviet memory from everyday places" (Laruelle, 2012, p. 40).¹⁴¹

Following his quiet relocation (the statue was moved in the early hours of the morning, when there would be few people around), Lenin's commanding position on Ala Too Square was to be occupied by another monument, called *Erkindik*, which in many ways was intended to reflect the inclusive spirit of Akaev's slogan, "Kyrgyzstan – our common home." Although *Erkindik* features some nods to traditional Kyrgyz symbols,

¹⁴¹ As it happens, Lenin was only relocated to the other side of the State Historical Museum, where it now faces the *Zhogorku Kenesh*. A statue of Marx and Engels stands just a block away, at the entrance to Duboviy Park. Even now, the "effacement" of the Soviet past in Kyrgyzstan has been muted, at best.

including a *tyndyk* (the hole in the top of a yurt) and allusions to the goddess Umai ene (Cummings, 2013, p. 609), both its name, which means “freedom,” and the depiction of a woman reaching towards the heavens were suggestive of the civic ecumenism that Akaev in many ways staked his legitimacy upon.

As a stark reminder that symbols are never univocal, however, the statue also evoked the stench of nepotism that lingered through the President’s final years in office: the face of the woman depicted on the *Erkindik* monument was said to be uncannily reminiscent of that of his wife, Mairam Akaeva (Diener & Hagen, 2013, p. 499). As Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen note, moreover, “Portraying a woman seated atop a globe and holding the central ring of a traditional yurt (*tunduk*), the statue was argued by some to be an ill omen. According to patriarchal cultural traditions, women are generally forbidden from touching that part of the yurt” (Diener & Hagen, 2013, pp. 498-499). This interpretation was confirmed when I inquired about the fate of the *Erkindik* statue, which has since been replaced. One Bishkek resident told me that the statue was to blame for Kyrgyzstan’s two revolutions, since putting a statue of a woman in the capital city’s central square brought bad luck to the country. When I inquired about the current location of the statue, no one I with whom I spoke had any idea where it had gone, and no one much cared. In March, 2015 it emerged that the statue was rather unceremoniously dumped in a city-owned warehouse, pending a decision regarding its future (Timofeenko, 2015).

During the five years of Bakiev’s rule – a fallow period for ideological production in Kyrgyzstan – the *Erkindik* statue remained in place. In 2011, however, not long after Bakiev was overthrown, *Erkindik* was itself removed, and a grandiose statue of “Manas

the Great of Spirit” (Kyr. – *Aiköl Manas*) was put in its place. Occupying what was formerly the place of Lenin and *Erkindik*, the monument of Manas clearly represented much more than a simple aesthetic choice or a patriotic (if predictable) decision to celebrate the great Kyrgyz hero. As Diener and Hagen note, "the Manas statue was intended to bolster the legitimacy of the state by alluding to Kyrgyz unity" (ibid.). More than a mere allusion, however, the new monument announced, in what is perhaps the most ideologically significant and symbolically laden space in the Kyrgyz Republic, the *étatisation* of the Kyrgyz myth-symbol complex.

Of course, there were other statues of Manas in Bishkek before 2011 – most notably the one standing just a few blocks away, in front of the State Philharmonic at the intersection of Chui Prospekti and Prospekt Manasa. This monument, however, which also depicts Manas’s wife Kanikei and his adviser Bakai, is flanked by larger-than-life busts of famous *manaschys*, and can be read primarily as a statement of the epic’s artistic prestige. This interpretation is in keeping with the fact that it was erected in 1995, as part of the government’s celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of the epic itself. By contrast, ensconcing Manas in Ala Too Square, the most emotionally and politically charged space in the Kyrgyz capital, in the very spot once occupied by Lenin, represented a clearly ideological statement.

After all, Ala Too Square, like Red Square in Moscow and other “monumental spaces” in the former Soviet Union, was intended not merely as a public gathering place: it was also an explicitly ideological space. Bruce O’Neill, drawing on Lefevbre (1991), has argued that “[t]he dialectical relationship between socio-political and spatial organizations allows one to argue that autocratic governments produce autocratic spaces,

and in turn that autocratic spaces actively substantiate the governance of their producers” (O'Neill, 2009, p. 99). Monumental spaces like Red Square and Ala-Too Square were thus intended to be spaces in which state power could be performed and glorified, spaces where the triumphs of socialism would be manifest, on a breathtaking scale, on the landscape.

The ideological and didactic functions of monumental spaces did not change after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Diana Ter-Ghazaryan points out that the urban landscapes of capital cities in the former Soviet Union, “are full of symbols and symbolic spaces which are inscribed with meaning by the nation’s ruling elites, and at the same time are read and imbued with various meanings by the popular imagination” (Ter-Ghazaryan, 2013, pp. 572-573).¹⁴² Indeed, as the epicenter of two revolutions and the site of shocking violence in 2010, Ala Too Square’s symbolic importance has only intensified since 1991.

It is thus mistaken to declare that the replacement of *Erkindik* by Manas was nothing more than “a curious move bordering on absurdity” (Shishkin, 2013, p. 6). What transpires in Ala Too Square has political, social, and symbolic significance for the entire country. Early in 2012, a huge statue of Manas was erected in Osh. Although President Atambaev attended the unveiling of the monument with words about unity (Ivashchenko, 2012), the decision to place an unmistakably *Kyrgyz* symbol in the Uzbek-dominated city of Osh, which was only beginning to recover from the violence of 2010, was emblematic of the state’s goal of further entrenching *Kyrgyz* dominance.

¹⁴² This, of course, is not a phenomenon that is limited to post-Soviet cities. Jeffrey Meyer, for example, has described the “symmetries and axial boulevards, shrines, and monumental architecture whose underlying purpose is to give a transcendent meaning to [Washington, D.C.]” (J. Meyer, 2001, p. 8) and David Harvey (1979) has analyzed the multiplicity of meanings that have been invested in the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur in Paris.

4.5.1 *Manas Ordo*

Apart from Ala Too Square, perhaps the most ideologically important space in Kyrgyzstan is the “Kyrgyz National Complex *Manas Ordo*.” Situated near the city of



Figure 8: *Manas Ordo* (photo by author).

Talas, *Manas Ordo* is almost 200 miles (by road) from Bishkek. Reaching the site from any other part of Kyrgyzstan is difficult indeed: one can take a train from Bishkek to the city of Taraz in Kazakhstan, and thence by road to Talas, but most people travel there by automobile. From Bishkek, which is relatively close, this means a six-hour drive (at best) through rugged mountain passes, along narrow and treacherous roads that are almost always clogged with far more traffic than they were designed to ever accommodate. From other parts of Kyrgyzstan, reaching *Manas Ordo* is an even more arduous journey. *Manas*

Ordo thus seems in some ways an unlikely location for the state to construct what can only be described as a monumental ideological space.

But from the perspective of cultural memory, the Talas Valley carries a significance that far outweighs its geographical remoteness. After all, Manas himself is said to have lived here, and it is here that he is reputedly buried, in the *Manastyn Kümbözü*. Indeed, “[t]he entire valley of Talas evokes national memories of the events recorded in the great epic poem about Manas, about his glorious retainers – forty heroes ... and about his son Semitei and his wife Kanikei” (Masson & Pugachenkova, 1950, pp. 7-8). Taken in this context, Akaev’s decision to construct *Manas Ordo* in such a remote place as Talas is more comprehensible: as we will see, it serves to ground the legendary, the historical, the spiritual, and the state, in much the same way as Ala Too Square substantiated the political legitimacy of first the Soviet and now the sovereign Kyrgyz states. Although constructed with money from the central government, *Manas Ordo* had originally been under the control of the Talas Oblast (Provincial) administration. However, a 2001 Presidential Decree nationalized the site

[i]n order to further strengthen national consciousness, and to actively promote the development and enrichment of the spiritual and cultural values and traditions, as well as the unity and inter-ethnic harmony of the Kyrgyz people, and to intensify the promotion of the spiritual and historical heritage of the epic *Manas* as an integral part of world culture (Akaev, 2001).

As a carefully curated monumental space that posits a particular account of Kyrgyz history, *Manas Ordo* concretizes the mythic and connects it with the political legitimacy of the Kyrgyz nation and state.

The road to *Manas Ordo* is marked by a large sign along the highway, next to which stands a stone pillar, topped with a metal falcon, the *ak shumkar*, which is also found in the Kyrgyz national seal. At the end of the poplar-lined avenue that leads into the complex is the entrance to *Manas Ordo*, crowned by arches resembling yurts, with war banners blowing in the wind. Beyond these arches is the “Bridge of *Kyrk Choro*,”¹⁴³ which is flanked by towering metal spears. Just past the bridge and to the left is a hippodrome, used on holidays for exhibitions of traditional Kyrgyz mounted sports. On the day of my visit, a thick fog gradually settled in over the entire Talas Valley, and the hippodrome became largely obscured from view; one could nevertheless hear the sound of hooves galloping somewhere across the field.

The complex itself consists of several structures, including an administrative office, a *Manasovedenie* center, a guest house, a *tülöökhana* (house of sacrifice), and, of course, the Mausoleum of Manas. Beyond the bridge, at the end of a long path stands the red-domed historical museum. Directly adjacent to the museum is an ornate wooden throne, which bears a peculiar symbol, called the *Tamgi Manas*, which signifies the heavens, the earth, and Manas as the connection between them (I. Imanaliev, personal communication). Likewise, above the museum’s ornately carved wooden doors is a bronze seal decorated with an engraving of a mountain inside a *tyndyk*, surrounded by a ring of stylized tigers. The mountains symbolize the country of Kyrgyzstan, while the *tyndyk* represents the Kyrgyz nation and their nomadic heritage. The tiger motif is associated with Manas, who in the epic is likened to a tiger.

¹⁴³ “*Kyrk Choro*” means “forty knights” in Kyrgyz, a reference to Manas’s forty companions. It is also the name of a relatively new nationalist political party with ties to the state security services (Lelik, 2015b). This party has become notorious since 2010 for its vigilantism and open homophobia (Chynybaeva & Najibullah, 2015).

The main floor of the museum is largely devoted to explaining the history and significance of the *Manas* epic itself. On prominent display are the various printed editions of the *Manas* epic, including versions printed in the Soviet Union, a mammoth combined version published after independence, which also includes the texts of *Semetei* and *Seitek*, hand-written notes from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, often in the Arabic script used at the time, and printed editions of the Kyrgyz “little epics,” such as *Er Toshtuk*, *Semitei* and *Seitek*. Another exhibit features various artistic depictions of *Manas*, including Theodor Herzen’s famous drawings of *Manas*, more contemporary paintings inspired by the epic, and images taken from the various film, stage, and operatic adaptations of the epic. Nearby display cases contain suits of armor and weaponry, other artifacts related to the nomadic way of life, and reproductions of Mahmud Kashgari’s famous map of the Turkic world. The walls of the room consist of dramatic black-and-white photographs of the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and the Mausoleum of *Manas* before it was restored.

Importantly, much of the first floor is also given over to objects related to the lives of famous *manaschys*, especially Sayakbay Karalayev and Sagymbay Orozbekov. These exhibits included their old Soviet-era identity documents, newspaper stories about the *manaschys*, musical instruments or clothing that they had used or worn, the rugs they sat on while reciting, and so forth. Nearby, there are photographs and information about notable contemporary *manaschys*, including Rysbai Isakov, Doolot Sydykov, and Zamir Bayaliev. The purpose of these displays is in part to create a sense of artistic connection between contemporary *manaschys* and the universally acknowledged masters of the past.

Symbolically, the exhibits also connect the Kyrgyz of today with their ancestors through the medium of the *Manas* epic, which is conceptualized not as an inert text, but as a living tradition that has been carried on in the memories and through the voices of the Kyrgyz people for millennia. This fits with what Paul Connerton has written about the “sedimentation” of history in the body – postures, gestures, habits, and so forth that reflect deeply-ingrained socio-cultural practices and beliefs (1989, p. 72). From this perspective, the *Manas* epic is not only a mnemonic device because of what it says about Kyrgyz history and culture, but also because it represents a kind of bodily discipline that is reproduced in successive generations of *manaschys*.¹⁴⁴

Ascending to the second floor, one is greeted by two lifelike wax statues of Sayakbay Karalayev and Sagymbay Orozbekov in mid-recital.¹⁴⁵ All around these statues, as if conjured by the *manaschys*’ performances, are gigantic murals depicting Manas, his companions, and his army, as well as ornate dioramas presenting notable scenes from the epic. In keeping with the commonly repeated assertion that the *Manas* epic is the “encyclopedia of the Kyrgyz people,” many of the scenes also depict different aspects of traditional Kyrgyz culture, such as wrestling, nomadic life, and funeral rites. Interspersed among these displays are further examples of wooden and leather handicrafts from various eras and more weapons and armor.

¹⁴⁴ The transmission of bodily practices, as Connerton notes, is by no means universal or even. He points, for instance, to the elaboration of table manners among members of the French upper classes in the eighteenth century, as an example of how markers of group membership can be selectively propagated (Connerton, 1989, pp. 82-83). In a similar fashion, there are certain qualities that mark a person as being a “true *manaschy*” – having received an *ayan*, after which one miraculously gained the ability to recite the epic, the possession of *kasiet*, the ability to enthrall audiences and make the epic come to life through the act of performance, and so forth.

¹⁴⁵ These sculptures are realistic enough that my guide pointed to the statue of Sayakbay Karalaevev, which held a handkerchief in its right hand. He remarked that this was quite faithful to reality, since Karalayev indeed often used a handkerchief to wipe spittle off of his mouth while he was reciting.

If much is made of the epic's artistic merits, the overall effect of the museum is nevertheless to present *Manas* first and foremost as an object of national and cultural significance. There is, after all, nothing especially notable about many of the published editions that are on display: most are by no means rare, and are readily available in libraries in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere; Herzen's paintings, likewise, have been reproduced in print. Live and broadcast performances, operas, and other dramatized renditions of *Manas* are, likewise, fairly commonplace (van der Heide, 2008, p. 156). But through the act of selection, by being deliberately placed in proximity to other objects and interpreted by curators, the exhibits in the museum acquire a significance that is more than the sum of their parts – the texts, in other words, become objectified and the objects become textualized (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 31).

The exhibits in the museum take on a didactic meaning that transcends their mundane reality, and point to the absolute centrality of the *Manas* epic, reproduced from ancient times down to the present through the voices of *manaschys*, to conceptions of what it means to be Kyrgyz. As Karen Till points out, “As a type of place, museums represent the nation through the cultural objects that have been collected, classified, sorted, and exhibited” (Till, 2008, p. 293). Consequently, although the museum at *Manas Ordo* is officially named the “Museum of the Manas Epos,” its larger purpose is to present a coherent and curated narrative about Kyrgyz history and identity by means of the selective contextualization of the objects displayed inside.

Perhaps the most interesting display, however, is in many ways the least prepossessing: a large, flat stone, split into several pieces. At first, I was unsure of what to make of this exhibit, but my companion explained that it was, in effect, a highly

stylized depiction of the disunity of the Kyrgyz people after the collapse of the Kyrgyz Empire, with each fragment of the stone representing a separate Kyrgyz tribe (I. Imanaliev, personal communication). And yet, the viewer can also interpret the exhibit in a different light: rather than depicting the sundering of the Kyrgyz people, one can instead view the piece as depicting the process of unification. Implicitly, the sense of order that emerges when the exhibit is viewed in this way can be interpreted as reinforcing the state's narrative of unity and stability in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, a narrative that is not coincidentally also centered on Manas.

The symbolic “centering” of Manas is reproduced elsewhere at *Manas Ordo* as well. To the west of the historical museum stands a large plaza, at the center of which stands a statue of Manas himself, gazing down at visitors from atop a towering pillar, the corpse of a dragon at his feet. The hero stands surrounded by monuments to his forty companions, each of whom is identified by name and depicted in characteristic pose. In warmer seasons, a sea of red and white flowers rings the entire plaza, though on the day of my visit the fields were covered with a thin layer of snow and frost.

As a deliberately planned monumental space, the plaza is of course not symbolically barren: from the air, it resembles a *tyndyk*, the hole in the top of a yurt, which also doubles as a Kyrgyz national symbol. Manas stands at the very center. The symbol of the *tyndyk* is replicated on the Kyrgyz national flag, which stands at the pinnacle of a nearby prominence known as the Watch Hill of Manas (Kyr. *Karool Dobo*). Manas's companions symbolize the state's conception of the Kyrgyz nation – a unified people who, despite their differences, have been brought together by Manas. The imposing statue of Manas, which stands, both physically and figuratively, both at the

center and high above the rest, has a dual meaning: like the museum exhibit described above, the monument places Manas at the center of the Kyrgyz nation; moreover, it



Figure 9: The Mausoleum of Manas (photo by author).

personifies the state, which has assumed the mantle of political and moral legitimacy from Manas himself. The slain dragon, meanwhile, represents the hardships that modern-day Kyrgyzstan faces: like Manas’s vanquished foes, these challenges will be overcome.

The “centering” of Manas, however, also operates in a profoundly different register. Yi-fu Tuan (1978, pp. 84-86) once noted that the root of the word “sacred” carries a sense of demarcation and differentiation from the profane, but the line that divides the two is sometimes indistinct at best. Such is the case at *Manas Ordo*. Manas himself, after all, is said to rest in the *Manastyn Kūmbözü* – the Mausoleum of Manas – which lies just three hundred meters from the statue plaza. Consequently, despite the fact

that *Manas Ordo* is a place that is clearly connected with statist and patriotic discourses, it is also a profoundly sacred place for many Kyrgyz.

Nestled among a grove of trees at the foot of the Watch Hill of Manas, the mausoleum stands apart from the rest of the *Manas Ordo* complex, adjacent to an old cemetery. Constructed primarily out of brick, the *Manastyn Kümbözü*, is a surprisingly small structure, measuring roughly 8 x 8 x 11 meters. The interior is typical of similar burial structures in the region, consisting of a single room with a brick floor. Scholars believe that the structure likely dates from the fourteenth or the fifteenth century C.E. (Pomaskin, 1972, pp. 6-8).¹⁴⁶ Immediately adjacent to the mausoleum are two medium-sized boulders, called *Manastyn Chakmak Tashu* and *Tölgö Tashu*,¹⁴⁷ which are also considered to be sacred. A sign warns people to respect their holiness and not to take away pieces of them.

Although *Manastyn Kümbözü*, as the resting place of the unifier of the Kyrgyz people and the founder of the Kyrgyz state, is permeated with national(ist) significance, it also serves as a kind of spiritual “center” for many Kyrgyz. As a traditional healer, a man from Osh whom I encountered at the Baytik Baatyr *mazar* near Bishkek, told me, the light of Allah (Kyr.: *nur*) shines on *Manastyn Kümbözü*, and all the ancestors of Manas, as well as Manas himself, bless the pilgrims who visit there (Kasymbek,¹⁴⁸ personal communication). Thus, though it is described as “a site of republican and even wider importance” (Aitpaeva, Egemberdieva, & Toktogulova, 2007, p. 27), the mausoleum has

¹⁴⁶ Curiously, above the entrance there is an inscription, in Arabic, which says that the grave belongs to one Kyanizyak Xatun, the virtuous and chaste daughter of Emir Abuk. Legend, however, has it that Kanikei, one of Manas’s wives, deliberately placed the inscription on the mausoleum, in order to mislead the hero’s enemies and forestall the possibility that they might defile his tomb (ibid., p. 11). Kyanizyak Xatun, according to this story, was another of Manas’s brides, who, because she was not a Muslim, was initially prevented from marrying Manas (Masson & Pugachenkova, 1950, pp. 9-10).

¹⁴⁷ Manas’s Fortune Stones

¹⁴⁸ Not his real name.

the status of a *mazar*, or a holy place, and is an important pilgrimage destination for many Kyrgyz.

According to Samarbek Ütürov, a guardian at the mausoleum, between 200 and 300 people visit the mausoleum each day (Aitpaeva et al., 2007, p. 204).¹⁴⁹ The site is closely connected with the power to cure illness, to tell the future, or the miraculous ability to recite the *Manas* epic or master the *komuz*.¹⁵⁰ Thus, many pilgrims, such as Nurassyl eje, come there to find cures for their ailments or are responding to *ayans* summoning them to the *mazar*; others come simply to offer sacrifices or to read the Qur'an for the souls of their ancestors. Regardless of their reasons for coming to the mausoleum, the things they do there are, in their understanding, inseparable from their identities as Kyrgyz. As one caretaker put it, “[it] seems to have been absorbed into our blood” (Aitpaeva et al., 2007, p. 146). Importantly, this identity is defined not in terms of the state, but rather in terms of their spiritual beliefs and their relationship with their deceased ancestors, including Manas.

Nevertheless, the *Manastyn Kūmbözū* has not entirely resisted *étatisation*, for *mazars* like the Mausoleum of Manas have become objects of state intervention. According to a law promulgated by the government of the Talas region, for example:

Sacred sites or mazars and their surrounding environments cannot be [the] private property of any man, organization, or religious union.

Sacred sites or mazars, after having been legalized as cultural and historical heritage, become [the] property of the Kyrgyz Republic (Aitpaeva et al., 2007, pp. 217-222).

¹⁴⁹ On the day of my visit, however, there was virtually no one else around, although this may have been due to the weather, which was quite cold and damp.

¹⁵⁰ A traditional Kyrgyz musical instrument, resembling a three-stringed lute.

Consequently, the *Manastyn Kūmbözü*, another nearby *mazar* complex, known as the “Springs of Kanikei,” as well as other important sacred sites in the region, are state property, and their guardians, called *shaykhs*, are government employees.

The statute, moreover, regulates visitation to *mazars*, guaranteeing access of the public to them: “The prohibition of visiting... sacred sites or mazars is prosecuted by the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic” (ibid., p. 221). However, the statute also codifies what is considered to be proper behavior for pilgrims. Thus, under pain of prosecution, visitors are prohibited from wearing inappropriate clothing, creating unsanitary conditions, disrespecting *shaykhs*, other visitors, or “the sacredness of the land,” playing loud music, or bringing weapons or alcohol onto the grounds of *mazars* (ibid., p. 222).

Manas Ordo thus serves as a prism through which different conceptions of Kyrgyz national identity, which are sometimes obscured beneath the rhetoric of nationhood, are made manifest. The *Manastyn Kūmbözü* is, for many Kyrgyz, an intensely sacred place, where national identity is performed through prayers, sacrifice, healing, and divine intercession, and where Manas himself can be encountered. At the same time, through its selective representations of the epic and of Kyrgyz history, *Manas Ordo* both invokes the cultural memory of Kyrgyz nationhood and advances a narrative in which the state is presented as the steward of the *Manas* epic and the inheritor of the political legacy of Manas himself. This claim is grounded, literally, in the tomb of the hero who unified the nation.

A visit to *Manas Ordo* is thus a kind of pilgrimage, one that is simultaneously spiritual and political: visitors are acutely aware that they are in an intensely *holy* space, but one in which the presence of the state never too distant. As one enters the complex,

just on the other side of the “Bridge of *Kyrk Choro*,” there is a prominent sign bearing an excerpt from the 2011 law “On the Epos *Manas*.” The sign reads:

Citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as persons on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic, are obliged to refer respectfully to the epic trilogy *Manas*, as a subject of special pride for the people of the Kyrgyz Republic. Respect for the *Manas* epic is the patriotic duty of every citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic.

A pilgrimage, spiritual or national, to *Manas Ordo* thus situates visitors both with respect to the sacred epic and to the state: respect for *Manas*, with all of its cultural, historical, and spiritual significance is, finally, the *patriotic duty* of all citizens.

4.6 Conclusion

Since independence, ideological production in Kyrgyzstan has followed a convoluted path. From the Akaev era, when Kyrgyzstan was conceived of as the “common home” of all of its various nationalities, to the ethnic chauvinism of the Bakiev era, which finally exploded in a revolutionary bloodbath, to the present day, when the state militates against “excessive nationalism” while decrying *mankurtism* and actively mobilizing Kyrgyz myths and symbols, national discourses in Kyrgyzstan have evolved dramatically since independence.

The common thread that runs through each of these different stages, though, has been an appeal to cultural memory. Akaev’s version of a “national idea” veered between civic ecumenism and a nationalist ideology that was rooted in a narrative, however vague, of Kyrgyz nationhood and statehood. During Bakiev’s time, what few efforts there were to formulate a coherent national ideology relied on the ethnocentric tropes of ultimately stillborn movements like Tengrism. Today, the state is once again making use

of metonymic figures like Manas and Kurmanjan Datka, as well as of the trauma of the *Urkun*, to systematically outline the contours Kyrgyz national identity.

Not surprisingly, the *Manas* epic has played a critical role in these discourses. Even during the Soviet period, *Manas* was considered to be a vital component of Kyrgyz national identity. Despite being the object of suspicion, the epic was recognized as a key contribution from the Kyrgyz to Soviet material and artistic culture, and it was eventually adapted into operas, films, and plays. Moreover, respected *manaschy* like Sagymbay Orozbekov and Sayakbay Karalaev were sponsored by the Soviet government, and their versions of *Manas*, despite being heavily edited, enjoyed wide publication.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the role of *Manas* in Kyrgyz national discourses has only increased. President Akaev attempted to use the epic as the basis of a comprehensive ideology, one that in his words would “light[] the way to the future” (Akaev, 2003, p. 5). His time in office was marked by huge state expenditures on the construction monumental spaces dedicated to Manas, such as *Manas Aiyly* and *Manas Ordo*; the organization of lavish celebrations to mark the 1000th anniversary of the epic; and even the formulation of the “Seven Lessons of Manas,” which were intended to serve as both a national code of ethics as well as guideline for social relations. But Akaev’s attempts to create a “national idea” based on the *Manas* epic largely failed. Despite the president’s rhetoric of inclusiveness and civic patriotism, the *Manas* ideology was by necessity more closely associated with – and meaningful to – ethnic Kyrgyz than with any of the country’s ethnic minorities. For other groups, *Manas* had limited appeal, at best.¹⁵¹ Hence, there was a tension, which was never resolved, between what Akaev

¹⁵¹ A young man of mixed Georgian/Russian birth, who lives in Bishkek, told me that he felt that Western scholars were mostly interested in *Manas* and Kyrgyz culture because they were “exotic.” In his view, the

claimed was the epic's universal values and its particularist appeal to Kyrgyz cultural memory.

The current revival of the *Manas* ideology, after the unhappy interlude of the Bakiev era, seems to be qualitatively different than past attempts to mobilize the epic, but its ultimate success or failure remains to be seen. Although President Atambaev calls “excessive nationalism” one of the major threats to the country, there has been no corresponding return to the spirit of “Kyrgyzstan – our common home.” Rather, as we have seen, Atambaev has argued that one of the primary challenges facing Kyrgyzstan today is the problem of *mankurtism*, or the loss of a specifically Kyrgyz national identity. Consequently, the government has embarked on a number of projects, including bankrolling the *Kurmanjan Datka* film, commemorating the *Urkun*, and reinvigorating the *Manas* ideology and bringing the epic under state regulation, which are designed to mobilize and channel Kyrgyz cultural memory in particular directions. The long term goal seems to be the fostering among the Kyrgyz a sense of common roots, common history, common sacrifice, and, ultimately, common destiny.¹⁵²

Some scholars have suggested that the focus on *Manas* in Kyrgyz national discourses is meant to “compensate for the absence of any historically proven dynasties or founders” (Laruelle, 2012, p. 40), and much is made of his “mythical” status (Lowe, 2003, p. 116). Such verdicts, however, largely miss the point: for many Kyrgyz, *Manas* not only *exists*, but he can be and has been encountered as a living presence in their lives.

Manas epic was of no genuine literary worth, at least as compared to the works of Shakespeare or the Georgian national epic, Rustaveli's “The Knight in the Leopard Skin, and it certainly had no emotional or national significance for him (V. Baratashvili, personal communication).

¹⁵² The retreat of the Uzbeks, the country's only sizeable minority at this point, has made it easier to press ahead with these efforts. Indeed, Atambaev seems to enjoy a great deal of support from ethnic Uzbeks, who feel that the President's outspoken opposition to “extreme nationalism” has helped to stabilize their situation (Lillis, 2015).

The choice to construct an ideology around Manas, then, is not simply the outcome of having a “dearth of usable national history with which to construct a new identity” (Huskey, 2004, p. 112), forcing the state to “dragoon” the epic into the service of ideology (Shishkin, 2013, p. 6).

However, as Yael Zerubavel has argued, “The power of collective memory does not lie in its accurate, systematic, or sophisticated mapping of the past, but in establishing basic images that articulate and reinforce a particular ideological stance (Zerubavel, 1995, p. 8). That is to say, *Manas* has become the focus of ideological production in Kyrgyzstan precisely *because* it is understood not only as national history, but because, as an oral epic, it is experienced as a potent means of performing and embodying national identity and transmitting it, particularly through the voices of *manaschys*, from one generation to another. The Kyrgyz government’s renewed interest in *Manas*, as well as the increasing attention being paid to historical events, such as the *Urkun*, and to the biographies of figures like Kurmanjan Datka, can all be seen as components of a broader effort to construct and legitimate an ideology of patriotism and national unity through the mobilization of collective memories of Kyrgyz tragedy, heroism, and perseverance.

But the collective memory is rarely univocal: the replacement of the *Erkinik* statue in Ala Too Square provoked controversy, as did similar proposals to re-name Ala Too Square to Manas Square (NewEurasia, 2011). Likewise, Kyrgyz national identity is remembered and defined in both patriotic and spiritual terms, while *Manas Ordo* is simultaneously a statist monument and a sacred space.

Despite the prismatic nature of memory and national identity, which becomes clear in the different ways that spaces are used and understood, the Mausoleum of Manas

is not necessarily what Stephen Legg has called a “site of counter-memory,” where “dominant processes of ordering and memory formation [are] challenged, mobilizing a counter-historical narrative” (Legg, 2005, p. 183). This is to say that few who visit *Manas Ordo* for the purposes of curing their illnesses would deny the importance of Manas as a political leader, and the *mazar* caretakers who previously worked for free, are happy receive a salary from the state.

Quite often, then, the divergent discourses that emerge out of the mobilization of memory exist simultaneously, inhabiting and animating the same places and, perhaps, the same people. We will follow this thread into the next chapter, which explores the relationship between religion and national identity. In particular, we will examine the ways in which different interpretations of Islam are reconciled with conceptions of what it means to be Kyrgyz.

Chapter Five: The State and the Sacred

“We read namaz, read Qur’an, make ablutions. We are afraid of doing evil things. But they say that we pray to stones or fire!”

- Nurassyl eje

“Islam is flourishing. But we haven’t eaten its fruits yet.”

- Ibrahim moldo

“You often hear people saying 'if you want to learn, if you want to obtain Islamic knowledge, then you have to go to Uzbekistan. If you want to learn zikhr, go to Tajikistan. If you want to learn ihlas – sincerity – that's Kyrgyzstan.’”

- Emil Nasritdinov

As described in Chapter 4, national identity is, despite its normative hegemony, by no means a stable category: the meanings and significances attached to any nation’s given myth-symbol complex are rarely, if ever, shared among all members of that nation. Furthermore, while states are frequently the most powerful (though by no means the only) force in shaping national identity, their discursive hegemony is rarely complete. Consequently, the meanings ascribed to the myth-symbol complex are challenged, and reevaluated, resulting both in a condition of polyvocality as well as the tendency to evolve over time. Thus, as we saw in the case of the *Manas* epic, the state’s preferred narrative, which focuses on state-building and national unity, also coexists with different understandings, which prioritize the epic’s transcendental aspects.

Similarly, there are many different ways in which Kyrgyz understand the relationship between Islam and their national identity. Unfortunately, our understanding of the vitality and dynamism of the religious sphere in Kyrgyzstan today suffers from a problematic approach to Islam, which often falls prey to oversimplification. As a result, the relationship between the two is frequently misconstrued. It is often asserted, for example, that “to be Central Asian means to be Muslim” (see for example: Khalid, 2007b, p. 107; McBrien, 2009, p. S131; Omelicheva, 2011b, p. 246; Radford, 2015, p. 55). The precise meaning of this equation, however, if it is not elided completely, is often explained in terms that largely treat “Muslim” as a fundamentally areligious category that is essentially synonymous with national identity. But if “Muslim” and “Kyrgyz” are treated as effectively synonymous, what we are left with is a tautology.

On the other hand, other approaches emphasize the growing “religiosity” of the Kyrgyz population, by which is meant an increase in the number of people who are adopting more purist, textually-grounded interpretations of Islam. This trend is often interpreted as representing a threat to “traditional” understandings of the role of religion vis-à-vis national identity (see for example: McBrien, 2006; McBrien, 2009). What such accounts sometimes fail to acknowledge, however, is that “religiosity” itself is often explicitly interpreted by practitioners in ethno-national terms – specifically, as a way of reclaiming what is thought to be the “real” Islam of the ancestors.

As a means of addressing these kinds of problems, this chapter will interpret the ways in which people conceptualize and perform their understandings of what it means to be Kyrgyz Muslims as grounded theologies. As we recall from Chapter One, grounded theologies are theological because they “involve some view of the transcendent,” and are

grounded “insofar as they inform immanent processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formations of political boundaries” (Tse, 2014, p. 202). Once we understand the process of articulating and performing the relationship between Islam and national identity in these terms, we quickly encounter the “surprisingly liberating possibilities enabled when religions intersect with other social factors to create new modern subjectivities” (ibid., p. 210).

Importantly, a grounded theology approach also allows us to understand the nation-state itself as a theological actor rather than a purely secular-political entity. However, if we can begin to understand national identity as being in some way “theologically constituted” (Tse, 2014, p. 203), this does not mean that we should necessarily follow in the footsteps of David Sopher in declaring nationalism to be a “quasi-religion” (Sopher, 1967, p. 113) or, like Anthony D. Smith, seek out “the fundamental sacred sources of national identity” (A. Smith, 2003, p. 5). Rather, we should instead seek to uncover the “hybridity between the presumably religious and the secular modern” (Tse, 2014, p. 214), including the ways in which the nation-state and the religious sphere act upon and mutually constitute one another.

The focus of this chapter is therefore on how adherents of different grounded theologies conceptualize the relationship between Islam and Kyrgyz national identity, and, more broadly, the role of religion in the public sphere more broadly in markedly different ways. Importantly, these grounded theologies all operate, out of necessity, within the boundaries of a particular theological discourse – “traditional Kyrgyz Islam,” because transgressing these boundaries risks being marked as “extremist.” As we will see, however, the meaning of what constitutes “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” is by no means

stable, despite efforts by the state and official religious authorities to establish it as a normative practice.

The chapter begins by providing a brief account of the so-called “Islamic revival” (sometimes called the “Islamic resurgence” or “Islamic renaissance”) in Central Asia. This “revival,” as well as the reactions to it by Central Asian elites, have exerted a powerful influence on the ways in which the religious sphere has been approached by regional states, including Kyrgyzstan. In particular, fears regarding Islamic extremism have induced Central Asian governments to become active participants in the religious sphere. As we will see, some scholars have characterized these interventions as being largely “instrumental” in nature; however, for reasons that will be discussed, this explanation is ultimately unsatisfying.

The chapter then turns to a discussion of what is sometimes called the “national-religious symbiosis” in Central Asia. The basic idea that undergirds this theory, that religion and national identity are so deeply intertwined as to be almost indistinguishable, is not necessarily objectionable, and indeed this is how many Central Asians understand the relationship between the two. Analytically speaking, however, the “national-religious symbiosis” explanation relies on a number of problematic assumptions that fundamentally misconstrue the phenomenon it purports to explain. The most fundamental problem is that the “national-religious symbiosis” paradigm frequently describes Islam in terms of having become a “desacralized” or “secularized” component of national identity. In the end, however, we find that we learn very little about Islam as such if viewed through this lens, since such inquiries tend instead to lead back to an examination of nationality.

Next, the chapter examines the state and the country's "official" Islamic institutions, which together have sought to articulate the shape and content of what is sometimes referred to as "traditional Kyrgyz Islam." As we will see, although "traditional Kyrgyz Islam" is in many respects a normative discourse intended to stymie the growth of "extremist" groups and encourage pious Kyrgyz to engage with their religion in ways that reinforce the legitimacy of the state, it is by no means theologically or spiritually barren. Grounded, as it is, in the Hanafi *madhab* and Maturidism, "traditional Kyrgyz Islam" is explicitly positioned as doctrinally "correct," while nevertheless remaining tolerant of Kyrgyz customs and traditions. What is more, the discourse of "traditional Kyrgyz Islam" in many respects establishes the boundaries of acceptable religious belief and practice in Kyrgyzstan. As a champion of "traditional Kyrgyz Islam," then, the state must be viewed as being implicated in the religious sphere in ways that are far more nuanced than is sometimes acknowledged.

The next three sections each examine a different way in which the relationship between Islam and Kyrgyz national identity have been expressed as a grounded theology. The first is the phenomenon of so-called "cultural Muslims." Many accounts of the "national-religious symbiosis" in Central Asia emphasize the supposed "secularization" of Islam during the Soviet period, and its subsequent identification with national identity. The result, it is argued, was the emergence of a large class of "cultural Muslims," who, as a result of Soviet-enforced secularization, were largely ignorant of Islam, and yet still considered themselves to be Muslims. What is usually missed, however, is that, while Islam does not provide the central narrative of the lives of many "cultural Muslims," neither is religion merely a dormant aspect of their identity. As we will see, it is more

interesting to view “cultural Muslims” as adhering to a perspective nevertheless retains a theological orientation.

From there, the chapter turns to a consideration of those who might be called “purist,” “universalist,” or “conscious” Muslims. Such people are often characterized by an especially pronounced concern with “correct” ritual and doctrine, and are therefore often described as being more “religious” than other Kyrgyz. Purists often assert that Islam and national identity “are separate questions,” and, maintaining that “Islam is the same for everyone, frequently reject a number of Kyrgyz religious customs as “un-Islamic.” Interestingly, however, many purists nevertheless find creative ways of grounding their own national identity in Islamic discourses and, ultimately, unifying them on the plane of cultural memory.

Finally, the chapter looks at those who might be called “traditionalist Muslims.” While purist Muslims (and scholars) sometimes dismiss these people as “shamanists” or worse, traditionalists nevertheless consider themselves to be Muslims. Many of the traditions commonly practiced by traditionalists, such as the practice of *ziyarat* (pilgrimage to *mazars*, or sacred sites), are criticized as un-Islamic by purists, and even, at times, by the “official” religious authorities in Kyrgyzstan. Despite this condemnation, however, traditionalists understand these religious traditions – even if those traditions might appear to be heterodox from a purist point of view – as being inseparably associated with Islam, while simultaneously asserting that Kyrgyz traditionalism represent a legitimate and locally authoritative Islamic perspective.

The chapter ends by considering how scholars might begin to reinterpret the concept of a national-religious symbiosis. If such a thing as a national-religious

symbiosis exists, then it must be understood in terms of how that symbiosis is conceptualized and performed by members of society who might understand it in dramatically different ways. I argue that viewing the national-religious symbiosis through the lens of grounded theologies has the potential to shed new light on the complex and often ineffable relationship between Islam and national identity in contemporary Central Asia by drawing attention to its explicitly theological aspects, which are often ignored.

5.1: Religious Revival

For many observers, one of the most striking developments in Kyrgyz society since the 1990s has been the growth of interest in Islam and the increasingly visible participation of Muslims in the public sphere. In 1999, one visitor to Kyrgyzstan wrote, “At first glance, there is no obvious sign that Islam is the official religion of the Kyrgyz. When you walk in the street of the capital, you feel only the cold breeze of ‘Scientific Atheism’ blowing in your face” (Gardaz, 1999, p. 276). Today, however, even in Kyrgyzstan’s cosmopolitan capital city, Bishkek, it is common to encounter women wearing headscarves and bearded men, vendors selling Islamic literature on the streets and in the bazaars, and stores advertising their *halal* products. Now, one can do business at any of the several Islamic banks in downtown Bishkek, and universities, government offices, and even bazaars have set aside spaces for *namazkhana*, or prayer rooms. On Friday afternoons, the streets around the Bishkek Central Mosque are even more choked with traffic than usual, and *marshrutki* whose routes take them past the mosque are inevitably filled with people, mostly men, going to attend services. On these days, the mosque itself is usually filled beyond capacity, and during warmer seasons hundreds of

men lay their prayer rugs on the ground in the courtyard in rows, and perform *namaz*¹⁵³ in the open air.

One can also find more quotidian reminders of Islam's presence in Kyrgyz



Figure 10: *Namazkhana* in Osh Bazaar (photo by author).

society: the Islamic amulets and rosaries hanging from the rear-view mirrors of many taxis, *marshrutki*, and private automobiles; the prayers murmured by beggars when passersby give them a few *soms*¹⁵⁴; the “*omins*,”¹⁵⁵ coupled with a brief passing of the hands over the face, that are uttered after meals. Although alcohol is available in almost every store and restaurant, pork products are almost completely absent, save at those establishments that cater to foreigners, or which are owned by members of the local

¹⁵³ Prayer ritual.

¹⁵⁴ The *som* is the basic unit of Kyrgyz currency.

¹⁵⁵ “Amen.”

Russian or Ukrainian communities. When people meet one another, they will often exchange the customary Islamic greetings of “*assalam alaykum*” or “*salamatsyzby*,” which translates literally as “peace unto you” in Kyrgyz.

Since 2014, Kyrgyz Muslims have also been able to read *Umma* (<http://www.ummamag.kg/ru>), which describes itself as an “Islamic magazine.”¹⁵⁶ *Umma*, whose slogan is “Unity. Education. Creation,” is geared towards Kyrgyzstan’s religious youth, and features slick production, glossy pictures of happy Kyrgyz Muslim families. According to its editors,

The magazine is called "Ummah" [sic], since all of us, regardless of nationality, gender, or age is part of the community of our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). That is why the magazine focuses on familiarity with the culture, traditions and achievements of the different peoples living in Kyrgyzstan and beyond. We hope that the magazine will satisfy the needs of modern Muslims and respond to topical issues related to new challenges and threats, as well as providing accurate information about Islam, its history and character, revealing its true essence. We have tried to show the beauty and wisdom of Islam, the masterpiece of the values reflected in the fortress of faith, good deeds and lofty sentiments of both our predecessors and of today’s Muslims alike (Umma Editorial Board, 2015).

¹⁵⁶ *Umma* is published primarily in Russian. However, other similar websites and magazines, such as *Islam Zholu* (“The Path of Islam” - <http://www.islamjolu.kg/>) are published in Kyrgyz.



Figure 11: New, Turkish-funded mosque near Bishkek city center (photo by author).

Thus, along with articles on topics like “Feminism in Islam,” “23 Interesting Facts about the Prophet Muhammad,” and “Intellectual Islam – the Main Weapon against Extremism and Violence,” the magazine also contains stories about notable Muslims like Malala Yousafzai, interviews with popular religious figures like Kadyr Malikov, as well as answers to questions about religion.

In addition to Islam’s unavoidable social presence in Kyrgyzstan, there have also been substantial investments from Turkey, from Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as from a host of Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other religious groups (Bakyt, personal communication). In addition to providing Qur’ans and other religious literature, this money has funded the construction and operation of

countless mosques and medresehs throughout the country, and also provides salaries to many imams (Ibrahim *moldo*, personal communication). One new mosque, which is being built close to downtown Bishkek and financed with Turkish money, will reputedly



Figure 12: "Dungan Mosque" in Karakol (photo by author).

provide space for 15,000 people. Another large mosque, which is being erected adjacent to the Kyrgyz-Turkish "Manas" University in the south of the city, appears to be scarcely smaller.

Similarly, in the small city of Karakol, on the far eastern shores of Lake Issyk Kul, a sizeable new mosque is under construction near the city center. This building will provide significantly more space than Karakol's famous "Dungan Mosque" (Figure 12), which currently serves as the city's primary house of worship. The proliferation of

religious structures is evident while traveling anywhere in the country: virtually every town will have at least one new mosque, if not more.¹⁵⁷

More will be said about these developments in Chapter Six, but for now, it is enough to note that the purpose of these buildings is not merely symbolic: they are also being built to accommodate the growing number of people who are regularly attending religious services. As such, they serve as concrete evidence of the growing importance of Islam in Kyrgyz society. Although this interest in Islam has accelerated since Kyrgyz independence, it actually began during the Soviet period, as part of a broader “Islamic revival” in Soviet Central Asia, and indeed among Soviet Muslims more broadly. Although it is useful for labeling a particular moment in the history of Soviet Islam, the term “Islamic revival” itself can be seen as something of a misnomer. That is to say, like religion in the rest of the ostensibly “secularized” world,¹⁵⁸ Islam in the Soviet Union quite plainly never went away. Even though the Soviet state closed, demolished, or converted the majority of mosques into other purposes,¹⁵⁹ Muslims continued to practice their religion.¹⁶⁰ The author of one official report dating from 1957, for example,

¹⁵⁷ In fact, the scale of this phenomenon is such that some people have begun to complain that the money being allocated for the construction of so many religious buildings is wasteful: in many cases even villages that do not even have a single school will still have at least one mosque (D. Sydykov, personal communication).

¹⁵⁸ See Chapter One.

¹⁵⁹ Religious buildings were often rededicated for scientific purposes – a major church in Odesa, Ukraine, for example, was turned into a planetarium – or into headquarters for anti-religious groups like the League of Militant Atheists. A nineteenth century Orthodox Church in Karakol served in turns as a gymnasium, a school, and as a storage place for coal, while in the city of Osh, numerous mosques and medresehs were demolished to make space for movie theatres and hotels (Liu, 2012, p. 111). Sites with major historical importance, such as the Registan complex in Samarkand, were “museumized,” as tourist attractions. The purpose was intended to drain sacred sites of their sacred content and present them as showpieces that illustrated the progressive development of Muslim peoples toward the socialist “radiant future.” Such structures were presented as remnants of a bygone era – historically significant, perhaps, but long since surpassed by Soviet-style modernity (Louw, 2007, p. 53).

¹⁶⁰ In part, this was because Islam requires neither an ordained “clergy,” in the Christian sense, nor a sanctified house of worship. Thus, when religious figures were imprisoned or liquidated, and when mosques were closed or destroyed, the locus of worship simply shifted elsewhere.

expressed frustration at the fact that Muslims continued to gather in cemeteries, former mosques, and even in open-air spaces to mark Islamic holidays such as Uraza-Bayram (Eid al-Fitr) and Kurban-Bayram (Eid al-Adha) (Materialy Soveta po delam religioznykh kul'tov, 2011). In a similar fashion, Solomon's Throne, the large mountain in the center of the city of Osh, continued to be a popular pilgrimage destination for Muslims for whom Soviet border controls made it impossible to make the *hajj* to Mecca, despite efforts to discourage the practice (Ro'i, 2000).

During the Second World War, moreover, the Soviet government had found it necessary to adopt a more pragmatic stance towards religion than it had previously.¹⁶¹ Consequently, rather than continuing in its efforts to violently eradicate religion, the Soviet government instead sought to co-opt and control the religious sphere, while at the same time continuing to spread anti-religious propaganda.¹⁶² These initiatives resulted in the creation of four so-called “Spiritual Directorates,” also called Muftiyats, whose purpose it was to administer Muslim life in the Soviet Union. Each Muftiyat had its own geographical purview – one each for Russia and Siberia, Transcaucasia, the North Caucasus and Dagestan, and Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The Central Asian body, based in Tashkent, was known as the *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana* (Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan), or SADUM.

¹⁶¹ This positional shift is explicable by the government's very real need to bolster a spirit of patriotism and sacrifice during the war with Germany. However, it may also have been intended to avoid a repeat of the 1916 revolt by mollifying potentially restive populations.

¹⁶² It should be noted, however, that, while the worst of the repressions ended in 1941, successive Soviet governments nevertheless embarked on several waves of religious repressions, notably under Khrushchev, during the later years of the Brezhnev era, and under Gorbachev. Unlike during the Stalin era, these repressions were not characterized by mass executions, but rather by harassment, imprisonment, and psychiatric abuse.

Despite this apparent concession, the Muftiyats, which were expected to serve the interests of the state, did not enjoy real independence. But the Spiritual Directorates attempted, as much as was practicable, to harmonize religious practices with Soviet ideals in ways that were considered to be consistent with Islamic doctrine. One SADUM *fatwa*, for example, attempted to discourage worker absenteeism and the ritual slaughter of livestock during religious holidays (which, of course, were not officially recognized). The same *fatwa* also explained that, in a socialist society, it was not necessary for Muslims to pay *fitr*, a kind of charitable donation (*zakat*) for the poor, at the end of Ramadan, “insofar as poverty had been eliminated in the Soviet Union “and whoever works honestly is not in need of *fitr*” (Ro'i, 2000, pp. 140-141).

Such rulings have led some scholars to characterize the Soviet-era Muftiyats as nothing more than the “unquestioning lickspittles” of the Soviet government (Ro'i, 1995, p. 10). Others, however, have pointed out that, within the strictures imposed on them by the Soviet state, the Muftiyats largely succeeded in advancing the interests of the Muslim community. The Central Asian Muftiyat, for example, “used its power to regulate the number of mosques to provide gradually for the opening of new ones” (Babadjanov, Malikov, & Nazarov, 2011, p. 301). Moreover, capitalizing on the fact that the Soviet government hoped to use the existence of the Spiritual Directorates as a Cold War tool to foster pro-Soviet opinion in other Muslim-majority countries (Ro'i, 2000, p. 113), the Spiritual Directorates were able to arrange foreign exchange programs with the Soviet Union’s Arab allies, which, as we have seen, proved to be an effective vector for the spread of new currents of Islamic thought among Soviet Muslims (T. Bayzhanov,

personal communication). In some cases, the Muftiyats were even able to arrange for a very limited number of Soviet citizens to perform the *hajj* (Khalid, 2007b, p. 110).

Despite the creation of the Muftiyats, active participation in religious life was stigmatized during the Soviet Union and, as a consequence, the importance of the home and the family for the transmission of Islamic values across generations and the performance of Islamic rituals acquired an enhanced significance. In this regard, the “domestication” of Islam was similar to experience of Orthodox Christians in Georgia and elsewhere, who carried on their religious lives privately, despite state restrictions (see: Dragadze, 1993). Bruce Privratsky, for example, recounts how pious Muslims would often slip away from their jobs, going to the home of a nearby friend in order to perform *namaz* during the work day (Privratsky, 2001, p. 85). Likewise, ordinary people who were recognized for their superior knowledge of Islam would often serve as mullahs (*Kyr. moldo*) for their local communities, officiating weddings, funerals, and other religiously significant ceremonies.

Thus, even in the face of official condemnation and pervasive anti-religious propaganda, Johan Rasanayagam points out that observant Muslims still “performed the Islamic ritual prescriptions, such as prayer and fasting, even during the Soviet period, but they had done so discreetly, at home rather than in public spaces such as a mosque, and... they had learnt about Islam informally, usually from relatives (Rasanayagam, 2011, p. 68). Many of the people with whom I spoke in Kyrgyzstan told similar stories: even with the eradication of religion from the public sphere, their grandparents, and in some cases even their parents, continued to practice Islam privately and sincerely throughout their whole lives. As Kubat Osmonbetov, a retired geologist and *aksakal*, told me:

The Soviet ideology worked to eliminate religions. But people always believe in something. It is human nature. I was born and raised in a village [in 1935]. I didn't see an automobile until 1944 – I was nine years old. There was no electricity. Hunger and cold – these things I saw. And after I started school, my mother died. My father remarried, and, in order to forestall conflict between me and my stepmother, my father gave me a horse and a rifle. There were no [Young] Pioneer camps in those days. And my grandfather was quite educated. He could read Arabic. He was a preacher of the Arabic ideology.¹⁶³ So after the fourth grade, my father sent me to spend vacations with my grandfather. I observed the way he lived and how he pastured cattle. There was no television and no Internet at that time. So we talked a lot. When we were moving from one place to another [with the livestock] he talked a lot about Islam. So I gained an understanding about Islam.

In many respects, then, Kubat Osmonbetov's experiences are not atypical. His first exposure to Islam was through his family, and religion remained an important aspect of his identity throughout his life, even as he pursued a scientific career.

If the family was usually the primary site of religious socialization and education in the Soviet Union, however, in many cases children were also sent to study religion more formally, both in official and, more often, unofficial capacities. Ibrahim *moldo*,¹⁶⁴ for example, is today a *moldo* in the city of Karakol. However, he was born in the Osh oblast in the late 1950s, and it was there that he he received his first instruction in religion:

IBRAHIM *MOLDO*: When I was eleven years old, my father sent me to study with a mullah. This would have been 1969.

¹⁶³ That is, Islam.

¹⁶⁴ Not his real name.

VMA: There was official atheism at that time. How did he manage to send you to a mullah?

IBRAHIM *MOLDO*: It happened! There was only one medreseh in all of Central Asia at that time. It was in Bukhara.¹⁶⁵ Mullahs who graduated from Bukhara taught us later. There were secret medresehs.¹⁶⁶

Ibrahim subsequently studied under two other teachers before being appointed by the Spiritual Administration in Tashkent to serve as a *moldo* in a rural village in southern Kyrgyzstan. In fact, despite his “unofficial” religious education, he served as the *moldo* for a local community with the knowledge of the Soviet Islamic authorities:

There was just one Mufti in Central Asia, located in Tashkent, during the Soviet times. This Mufti was well-informed, and he knew who was working in Kyrgyz villages. *Moldos* were appointed with the approval of this Mufti. I worked as a *moldo* for ten years during the Soviet period. I worked in the town of Kadamzhai.

Ibrahim *moldo*'s experience, moreover, was by no means unique: many people like him, who obtained “unofficial” religious educations, quite frequently served in an “official” capacity as local representatives of the Spiritual Directorate in Tashkent. One notable example of this phenomenon was Muhammadjan Hindustani, one of the major “unofficial” theologians of the Soviet era. Hindustani occasionally worked as an imam at a registered mosque in Tajikistan while clandestinely operating a *hujra* and composing a six volume commentary on the Qur'an (Khalid, 2007b, p. 113).

¹⁶⁵ He is referring to the Mir-i 'Arab medreseh, which was constructed in 1540, and operated until its closure by the Bolsheviks in 1920. It was reopened in 1945, and was the only officially sanctioned medreseh in the Soviet Union. In 1971, the Tashkent Islamic University was opened in Tashkent. The curricula, particularly in the case of the Islamic University, were heavily weighted toward non-religious subjects (Muminov, Gafurov, & Shigabdinov, 2010, pp. 267-268). Many of the students

¹⁶⁶ These “secret medresehs” were sometimes known as *hujra*, meaning “cell” or “room.” The name referred to a room in a medreseh where a student would study Islamic texts; in the Soviet context, however, it referred to a loose network of unofficial Islamic schools modeled on the pre-revolutionary Islamic education system (Muminov, 2007, p. 258n219).

What examples like these demonstrate is that, although religious discourses were almost completely excluded from the public sphere, religious life nevertheless continued: people still went on pilgrimages, offered sacrifices, prayed, studied the Qur'an, obtained, where possible, Islamic educations, and participated in life-cycle rituals, including funerals, marriages, circumcisions, and so forth. On a personal, spiritual, cultural, and even social level, then, Islam clearly never ceased being a central part of many Central Asians' lives. An informal geography thus persisted through the Soviet period, in which both institutions like Ibrahim *molto*'s "secret medresehs," as well as countless individuals like Kubat Osmonbetov's grandfather, remained vital sites for the reproduction and transfer of religious knowledge across generations.

The "Islamic revival," then, in many ways meant that the kinds of activities that were already occurring clandestinely began to take place more openly. Indeed, although its most dramatic effects became evident only after the collapse of the USSR, the seeds of the "revival" can actually be dated to as early as the 1970s, when Soviet Muslims began to enjoy increased opportunities to study abroad in Soviet-allied countries like Egypt. In many cases, these students, often "returned with their suitcases bulging with religious and religious-political literature published in the Arabic countries" (Babadjanov et al., 2011, p. 307). For Soviet Muslim communities, whose exposure to contemporary streams of Islamic thought was limited by political restrictions, these smuggled books and pamphlets proved electrifying, and the works of such thinkers as Abul A'ala Mawdudi, Hassan al-Banna, and others introduced new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between religion and politics and sparked real debates among Soviet Muslims regarding correct

doctrine and practice (Babadjanov, 2001; Babadjanov et al., 2011, pp. 304-315; Babadjanov, Muminov, & Olcott, 2004; Babadjanov, Muminov, & von Kügelgen, 2007).

Despite these early beginnings among Central Asian theologians, the real beginning of the “revival” is customarily dated to the *glasnost* period, when, as Ibrahim *moldo* noted: “There wasn’t much pressure in [rural areas] at that time.” Indeed, along with more general restrictions on free speech, strict state control over religion began to weaken during the waning years of the Soviet Union, and religious discourses – often explicitly political – once again began to attract a mass appeal.

However, the resurgence of religion was not the intended result of benign liberalizing policies formulated in Moscow. Rather, it was an unforeseen – and unwelcome – side-effect of policies that were instead meant to address the political and economic crises that were crippling the Soviet system. As Mehrdad Haghayeghi has noted:

Intended to remedy an entirely different set of political ills in the country, *glasnost* provided the [Central Asian Republics] with an officially sanctioned vehicle for expression of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, environmental, and religious grievances that had not been addressed openly in recent decades ... Rapidly ... religious concerns over the lack of public prayer accommodations, and lack of Islamic education began to be heard frequently in all Muslim republics (Haghayeghi, 1994, pp. 249-250).

Indeed, despite the slackening of anti-religious repression, the re-emergence of religion was received by the state as a threatening – and indeed potentially counter-revolutionary – phenomenon, one that threatened to reverse decades of social progress. Thus, shortly

before the collapse of the USSR, a Soviet ethnographer working in Central Asia complained:

Traditionalists can only interpret our inactivity in this regard to mean the weakness of Soviet rule. The legalization of all the activities of traditionalist institutions, such as mazars and underground maktab¹⁶⁷, is a reality. Increasingly, traditionalism is demanding the status of a system beyond state control, one that takes no account of society's needs. Also dangerous is the fact that many party members are infected by traditionalist ideology (Poliakov, 1992, p. 143).

The Islamic revival of the 1980s was thus in many ways a reflection of the growing unwillingness – or inability – on the part of the Soviet state to do anything to prevent it. As Michael Rywkin prophetically noted in 1990:

In the religious realm, concessions have been granted only recently: the return of an ancient copy of the Holy Koran, replacement of the hopelessly compromised Grand Mufti of Tashkent, the curtailment of anti-Islamic propaganda, and the reopening of mosques. Clearly national and religious forces in Central Asia have been slow in asserting themselves, but their arrival on the scene in full force would seem only a matter of time, unless the entire process of restructuring is brought to an abrupt halt as it was in China's Tiananmen Square (Rywkin, 1990, pp. 152-153).

As it happened, of course, the “abrupt halt” did indeed come to pass, albeit in a radically different fashion than at Tiananmen Square: rather than being crushed by the state, the various social forces that were challenging the legitimacy of Soviet power, which

¹⁶⁷ Islamic schools.

included nationalism, religion, and liberalism, coupled with economic collapse and political sclerosis, resulted in the Soviet Union itself coming undone. With the sudden disappearance of the Communist regime, Kyrgyzstan, as in the rest of Central Asia, faced a “catapult to independence” (Olcott, 1992). No less dramatic than the political upheavals that followed in the wake of the Soviet collapse was the fundamental transformation of the religious landscape.

5.1.1: Fears of Terror

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave the Central Asian republics the opportunity to formulate their own independent policies vis-à-vis the religious sphere. However, many of these policies were powerfully shaped by growing fears of instability caused by religious radicalism. In part, such fears were an outgrowth of suspicions regarding “Muslim fanatics” that had been cultivated among Soviet political and intellectual elites (Jansen & Kemper, 2011). As a consequence, the anxieties of the post-Soviet political leadership in Central Asia have often been expressed as concerns about what is often referred to as “Islamic fundamentalism, “extremism,” “Salafism,” or “Wahhabism” (Knysh, 2004).¹⁶⁸ Such attitudes, moreover, were exacerbated by the Tajik Civil War, for which at least a share of the blame has often, if unfairly, been laid on the shoulders of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP).¹⁶⁹ According to one account, for example:

¹⁶⁸ Although “Wahhabi” refers specifically to followers of the puritanical doctrines laid out by the eighteenth century jurist, Muhammad Bin abd al-Wahhab (Moussalli, 2009, pp. 4-11), Alexander Knysh notes that, throughout the post-Soviet space, the term is often used in a rather inexact way to refer to any Muslim group or individual who appears to be particularly conservative, radical, or political: “The ‘Wahhabis,’ who are often described as *salafis*, are also referred to by their opponents as ‘fundamentalists,’ ‘Islamists,’ ‘Islamic radicals,’ ‘Islamic militants,’ ‘puritans of Islam,’ or simply ‘Islamic terrorists’” (Knysh, 2004, p. 8). See also: S. Abashin (2006); Bobrovnikov (2006); McBrien and Pelkmans (2008); Rasanayagam (2006).

¹⁶⁹ This blame, however, is largely misplaced. As Muriel Atkin has pointed out, “the IRP repudiated the stereotypical anti-Westernism of Islamic radicals and joined with the secular opposition parties in supporting popular sovereignty, civil liberties, and economic reform” (Atkin, 1997, p. 286).

The domestic threat to the secular regimes by Islamic radicals was revealed in Tajikistan at the end of the 1980s, but many thought that this threat was the exception rather than the rule, was specific to Tajikistan, and would not spread to neighboring states ... In fact, the actions of the Tajik Islamists and their opposition to the secular rulers contributed to the outbreak of a bloody civil war from which the presidents of all the Central Asian states drew lessons (Malashenko, 2001, pp. 51-52).

More recently, the violent activities committed by radical Islamic groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have also contributed to a growing sense of apprehension regarding perceived threat that extremist Muslims are said to pose to regional stability. In 1999, for example, the IMU was accused of a series of apartment bombings in Tashkent; it also undertook a small-scale “invasion” of southern Kyrgyzstan, which caused panic throughout the region about the potential for a widespread Islamic insurgency. While no such uprising ever took place, the “discourse of danger” (Heathershaw & Megoran, 2011; Megoran, 2005, 2008) surrounding Islam in Central Asia has resulted in even non-violent political Islamic groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir,¹⁷⁰ being outlawed by every state in the region.

These kinds of fears, however, have been accompanied by a more realistic appraisal of the political-religious landscape: that is, there is widespread recognition among Central Asian elites that any attempts to revive Soviet-style restrictions on religious practice would be both practically and politically impossible. Instead, alongside

¹⁷⁰ Hizb ut-Tahrir, founded in Jerusalem in 1953, is a transnational organization that advocates for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate by non-violent means (Ayoob, 2008, pp. 138-142). It is banned as an extremist organization throughout Central Asia and in Russia. For more information on Hizb ut-Tahrir and its activities in Central Asia, see Karagiannis (2010).

regulation and repression, the discourse of national identity – or, more specifically, “national tradition” – has at times been used as a way of shaping religious discourses. As we will see, these efforts have sometimes been described as being purely “instrumental” in nature, but, perhaps more importantly, they have also effectively constituted secular Central Asian governments as theological actors, blurring the lines between the state and the sacred.

5.1.2: Regulation and “Extremism” in Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, the state has distinguished itself by its relatively lenient attitude towards the religious sphere, especially as compared to its neighbors. The Kyrgyz Constitution expressly forbids the formation of religiously-based political parties, while a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom notes that the government has imposed “burdensome registration requirements for religious organizations” (USCIRF, 2015, p. 199). However, the kind of stultifying repression that is found in other Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan¹⁷¹ or Turkmenistan,¹⁷² has been largely absent.

Nevertheless, fears of “Islamic radicalism” have been growing among many people in Kyrgyzstan. The aforementioned IMU “invasion” of southern Kyrgyzstan shocked the Akaev government, and convinced many that Islamic extremism posed a serious threat to the regime in Bishkek. These fears were heightened by sporadic violence in the country, including an unexplained bombing near the Bishkek Sports Palace in 2010, which was blamed on Islamic extremists despite the lack of evidence or claims of

¹⁷¹ As Johan Rasanayagam notes, in Uzbekistan “[t]he wearing of religious clothing in public, except by officially recognized functionaries, is banned, as is the private teaching of religion outside officially registered institutions, proselytism, and any kind of missionary activity. Anything interpreted by the government as antistate propaganda or destabilizing ideas, as well as the storage or distribution of what it considers extremist literature and other material, is also banned” (Rasanayagam, 2011, p. 131).

¹⁷² In Turkmenistan, “[w]hat emerged was a state-imposed version of Islam centered on the god-like figure of Niyazov-Turkmenbashi. The leader went so far as to cast himself as a new Prophet, and set his own book, the *Ruhnama* (‘book of the soul’), almost on a par with the Quran” (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009, p. 1532).

responsibility (Trilling, 2010). More recently, an Islamic State recruitment video specifically targeted at Kyrgyz Muslims (Paraszczuk, 2015) appeared only a few days after Kyrgyz security forces were involved in an operation that killed six suspected members of the Islamic State (RFE/RL, 2015a), alarming many in the country.

In response to concerns about extremism, the Kyrgyz government has taken an aggressive stance towards suspected radicals. According to Zamirbek Turnsunbekov, a senior analyst at the State Commission for Religious Affairs,

[The state pays close attention to Islam] because Islam constitutes a significant threat to the state. It threatens to cause the disappearance of the state itself. There is no threat from other religions. Radical Islam threatens to cause the Kyrgyz language and traditional styles of dress to vanish. Some radical Islamists use Arabic words while speaking in Kyrgyz. This [state of affairs] might lead to the loss of Kyrgyz national identity. This is why the state began to pay attention: the growing popularity of Islam goes against Kyrgyz culture.

Such concerns have been translated into government action: in the summer of 2015 a former Kyrgyz lawmaker, Kunakunov Maksat Kasymjan-uulu, was arrested on charges that he was funneling money to the Islamic State (RFE/RL, 2015a). 2015 also witnessed the denouement of a widely publicized trial against Rashot Kamalov, a popular imam from southern Kyrgyzstan. Despite concerns that the charges rested on somewhat tenuous evidence, Kamalov was nevertheless convicted of being a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir and for preaching for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate (Leonard, 2015). President Atambaev himself has weighed in on religious questions, for example fulminating against the supposed “Arab” influences behind the recent trend towards more modest styles of clothing among young women. “They force our girls to dress in black instead of light and

colorful clothing,” said Atambaev. “This is what widows usually wear here” (Rickleton, 2014).

Despite these persistent (and growing) fears of what is often called “radical extremism,”¹⁷³ however, the state’s relatively liberal attitudes have resulted in the religious sphere in Kyrgyzstan, more so than in any neighboring country, emerging as a remarkably vital area of dialogue and debate, and not only over the boundaries of what constitutes “extremism.” In fact, as we will see, people are debating the very meaning of what it is to be both a Kyrgyz and a Muslim, and these debates are actively shaping the public sphere in Kyrgyzstan today.

5.2: The Instrumentalization Hypothesis

As described in Chapter Three, Soviet nationalities policies conceptualized nations as a collection of objective traits, which included language, costume, way of life (settled versus nomadic, for example), traditions and customs, and so forth. Although early Soviet understandings of nationality in some ways resembled a constructivist approach, which emphasizes the malleability and historical contingency of national identity, later theoretical approaches, to say nothing of popular understandings, viewed nations as essentially timeless and primordial. However, given the aggressively materialist and atheist character of Soviet socialist ideology, religion was not typically included among the “authentic” traits of any given nation, at least in any theologically or spiritually meaningful sense.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ When I interviewed an official from the State Commission for Religious Affairs, he spoke almost exclusively in Kyrgyz, but repeatedly employed the English phrase “radical extremism,” untranslated.

¹⁷⁴ Religion, as a category, was used in isolated instances to distinguish one group from another. This, for example, was the case with the Adjars, who are largely indistinguishable from the Georgians apart from the fact that they are Muslims, while most Georgians were Orthodox.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the newly independent republics that emerged from its wreckage were faced with the dual challenges of building the legitimacy of the state and cultivating national identity as a new normative discourse to replace socialist internationalism. However, while discourses surrounding national identity have largely continued to reproduce the primordialist approach established during the Soviet period – one Kyrgyz scholar, for example, has lamented the “crisis of methodology” in the post-Soviet academy, which in his view remains grounded in “Soviet logic” (R. Rahimov, personal communication) – they have also been freed from the ideological constraints imposed by Soviet socialism.

As a consequence, Russian and Soviet imperialism have been thoroughly discredited, both political and academically, which stands as a marked difference from the old rhetoric of “the friendship of the peoples.” Along with this reappraisal of the past, another one of the most important areas of inquiry opened up since the Soviet collapse has been the historical and spiritual connections between culture, nationality, and religion. Consequently, the recovery of a formerly suppressed religious heritage has played an important role in nationalist discourses throughout the former Soviet space.

While none of the former Soviet republics have adopted an official religion, Orthodox Christianity and Islam (and, in some places, Buddhism, Greek and Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism)¹⁷⁵ have nevertheless been valorized as important aspects of pre-Soviet ethnic identity (Kolstø, 2000, pp. 53-80; Olcott, 2014, p. 2). In the post-Soviet context, however, religious authority has often acquired a new significance, one

¹⁷⁵ Buddhism has become a distinctive maker of the ethnic identity of the Kalmyk people in Russia, for example. Similarly, many Volga Germans maintained a connection to their Lutheran faith throughout the Soviet period, and both the Orthodox and Catholic faiths have assumed an important role in Ukrainian nationalist discourses since the Soviet collapse.

that has tended to conform to contemporary political and ethno-national borders. As one observer explains, for example, “the ‘Russian Orthodox’ identity moved from its old imperial and meta-ethnic meaning to a more exclusive and ethnically bound one” (Agadjanian, 2001, p. 481). A similar shift occurred in Central Asia, where Central Asian elites have sought to reposition the region’s shared Islamic heritage as a vital, albeit long neglected, component of *national* identity, the recovery of which was enabled by the collapse of official atheism.

The leaders of the Central Asian states have thus sought to position themselves as guardians of their nations’ Islamic heritage, in some cases going so far as to swear their oaths of office on the Qur’an or performing the *hajj* to Mecca. According to Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, for example:

The revival of the spiritual-religious foundation of our society, the Islamic culture that contains the centuries-old experience of the moral consolidation of our people, is an important step on the path to self-identification and the restitution of historical memory and cultural-historical integrity (Karimov, 1998, p. 89).

However, some scholars have interpreted the “claiming” of Islam as national heritage largely as a matter of political manipulation (Luong, 2004, pp. 17-20). According to what might be called the “instrumentalization hypothesis,” Central Asian elites have cynically mobilized Islamic symbols and rhetoric primarily for the purposes of state legitimation. As one observer argues: “[T]he [Kyrgyz] state began to see Islam as an instrument it could use to strengthen its power, and the Muslim community as embodying a potentially powerful mechanism that it could use to mobilize the population to solve specific political problems” (Seifert & Usabaliyev, 2010, p. 161). Another scholar more reasonably

suggests that “[i]n the ongoing process of building national identities, Central Asian authorities recognize and emphasize some religious elements by elevating them to markers of identity and state, but also subordinating them to the goals of the state” (Peyrouse, 2007, p. 102). The instrumentalization hypothesis thus holds that, by yoking political legitimacy and national identity to the collective memory of religious community, the new nation-states of Central Asia, as well as the elites who govern them, endow themselves with the imprimatur of cultural authenticity and moral authority.

The instrumentalization hypothesis, of course, is not wholly incorrect, and indeed some support for it is provided by the attitudes and actions of the Central Asian elites themselves. As we saw in Chapter One, both tsarist and Soviet discourses on Islam relied on Orientalist tropes of Otherness, decadence, and fanaticism; thus, as a result of their socialization into the Soviet political-ideological system, Central Asian elites internalized these assumptions. Consequently, their attitudes towards Islam have been characterized by a certain wariness and ambivalence and, as we have seen, while religion has been heralded as a fundamental part of national identity, the religious sphere in all of the Central Asian states has also been subject to significant scrutiny and regulation, if not outright repression. Therefore, as Pauline Jones Luong argues, “Although the exact mix of tradition and modernity in their rhetoric and actions varies from case to case, the legitimation strategies of all five Central Asian leaders exploit tradition to mask more modern forms of authoritarian rule” (Luong, 2004, p. 19).

While the instrumentalization hypothesis does have some basis, however, it is ultimately inadequate, since it effectively disregards the ways in which the state and the sacred are in many respects mutually constitutive. As Talal Asad has argued:

Given that the modern nation-state seeks to regulate all aspects of individual life – even the most intimate, such as birth and death – no one, religious or otherwise, can avoid encountering its ambitious powers. It is not only that the state intervenes directly in the social body for purposes of reform; it is that all social activity requires the consent of the law, and therefore of the nation-state. The way social spaces are defined, ordered, and regulated makes them all equally political (Asad, 1999, p. 191).

At the same time, however, the very kinds of interventions that Asad describes are not necessarily unidirectional: state interventions into the religious sphere cannot help but mean that the religious sphere itself will act back upon the state.

From this perspective, this kind of state interventions can be seen in a radically different light, one significantly more consequential, theologically speaking, than the instrumentalization hypothesis would suggest. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the state's involvement in religious questions often goes far beyond the mere regulation by secular authorities of the activities of religious organizations, or even the monitoring (and sometimes repression) of extremist groups. Ultimately, the state has implicated itself in what are ultimately theological debates regarding “correct” doctrine and practice, and these interventions have in turn exerted a powerful influence on broader discourses surrounding identity. Before turning our attention to the nature of these interventions, however, it is necessary to examine another of the prevalent accounts of the nature of the relationship between religion and national in Central Asia: the “national-religious symbiosis.”

5.3: The “National-Religious Symbiosis”

Lily Kong once pointed out that “race, class, and gender are invariably invoked and studied as ways by which societies are fractured, [while] religion is forgotten or conflated with race” (Kong, 2010, p. 212). Unfortunately, much the same can be written about the ways in which scholars have traditionally apprehended the relationship between Islam and national identity in Central Asia. 93% of the population in Turkmenistan; 96% in Uzbekistan; 84% in Tajikistan; 86% in Kyrgyzstan; and 54% in Kazakhstan identify themselves as Muslims (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2009, pp. 28-29).¹⁷⁶ Consequently, an Islamic identity is often posited as being one of the essential, defining elements of nationality in Central Asia. As David Montgomery points out, “Acknowledging Central Asians as Muslim is so much a practice of common parlance that noun comfortably becomes adjective: *Muslim* Central Asia” (Montgomery, 2014, p. 23). Indeed, the identification of ethno-national identity with Islam is considered to be so ingrained that conversion to other religions is sometimes described as a “strike at the very heart of Kyrgyz ethnic identity” (Radford, 2014, p. 15). Another observer, meanwhile, has suggested the existence of a “national-religious symbiosis” in Central Asia “a merging or overlapping of ethnic and religious sentiments and loyalties that reappears in all aspects of Central Asian existence” (Rywkin, 1990, p. 84).

Unfortunately, despite the significance attached to the national-religious symbiosis by social scientists, what this phenomenon actually entails usually remains frustratingly vague. In fact, it quickly becomes apparent that any concept of Islam as being connected with the transcendent is largely elided. Instead, priority of place is

¹⁷⁶ The relatively low numbers in Kazakhstan are largely due to the large number of Europeans, particularly Russians, in the country’s population.

afforded to nationality, while religion is considered “as something secondary, a possible attribute of the essential reality of national or ethnic self-consciousness” (DeWeese, 2002, pp. 324-325). So, while there is little doubt that many Central Asians see national identity and religion as closely connected, the nature of this relationship is seldom explored to any satisfaction.

One observer, for example has suggested that “[t]he Muslims of the region think of Islam as being a part of their social identity in a way similar to how they conceive of their ethnicity, family and mother tongue” (Gunn, 2003, p. 391). Others have argued that, during the Soviet period, Islam for most people was effectively desacralized and, ultimately, “localized and rendered synonymous with custom and tradition” (Khalid, 2007b, p. 82). What remained were a handful of folkloric rituals, mostly relating to life-cycle events, whose religious “meaning” had long since faded. As a result of decades of Soviet ideology and anti-religious propaganda, these rituals gradually came to be seen as “national customs” with little spiritual significance. Although participation in these rites, it is sometimes argued, constituted an important mark of sociality (Khalid, 2007b, pp. 98-102), they are usually described as having little or nothing to do with religion or spirituality.

From the “national-religious symbiosis” perspective, Islam becomes totally subsumed by nationality, while the word “Muslim” is usually used in the sense of a kind of pan-national Central Asian identity. As Michael Rywkin stated, in a chapter on the “national-religious symbiosis” in his book *Moscow’s Muslim Challenge*, for example: “Even the term ‘Muslim’ used throughout this book (and by other authors as well) is not

a perfect label; it is just the best possible common denominator for the various Central Asian nationalities” (Rywkin, 1990, p. 84). Similarly, David Radford has argued that

what it means “to be Muslim” has been largely, though not entirely, understood to be a marker of ethnicity and national traditions rather than a reflection of an individual person’s adherence to Islamic religious belief and practice (Radford, 2015, p. 55).

For many proponents of the “national-religious symbiosis” theory, Islam appears as little more than a collection of miscellaneous cultural remnants from the pre-modern era. These remnants are considered important to identity construction insofar as they are viewed as important aspects of nationality, and thus as a source of commonality and community, which also differentiates Central Asians from Slavs and other Europeans (Khalid, 2007b, p. 107; Ro'i, 2000, pp. 688-689; Rywkin, 1990, p. 84).

Explanations like this, however, deny the important ways in which Islamic rites mediate the spiritual and the transcendental in the everyday lives of Muslims. As Devin DeWeese points out, putatively “national” traditions are virtually incomprehensible when divorced from their religious roots, because these traditions were theologically constituted in the first place:

The point is not just that religious affiliation was a prime marker of communal identity, but that basic communal identities, including familial and local and even so-called “ethnic” and “national,” were themselves framed in terms whose fundamental meanings could not be understood without recourse to “religious” worldviews and practices (DeWeese, 2002, p. 325)

The imposition of a “national” grid over these communal identities and worldviews, of course, was an important inflection point in their historical evolution, but it did not unmoor them entirely from their origins. Treating the concept of “Muslim” as essentially synonymous with national identity is thus unhelpful, since it accomplishes little more than recursively directing us back to the study of nationality if we hope to learn something about how people understand Islam.

The tantalizing tautological simplicity of the idiom “to be Kyrgyz means to be Muslim” thus turns out to be rather illusory. The collapsing of religion and nationality into a single category effectively obscures the phenomenon it purports to explain. Overemphasis on the “national-religious symbiosis,” at least as it has commonly been explained, effectively renders both Islam and national identity conceptually inert and largely incapable of change or internal dynamism: nationality continues to be described in the primordial and material terms that became dominant during the Soviet period, while religion is reduced to a static component of national identity, a collection of desacralized “traditions” that are as disconnected from their religious origins as they are lacking in conscious reflection on their significance.

At the same time, however, we cannot disregard entirely the internalization of national identity altogether: if, as DeWeese notes, “Islam – as a focus of communal affiliation, as a lifestyle and set of practices, and as a worldview – had been an integral part of the lives of Central Asian peoples long before they were divided into ‘nations’ in the 1920s” (DeWeese, 2002, p. 326), then the discourse of national identity has likewise assumed a normative role. We do not have to subscribe to “the whole view of the nation as an ethnically and linguistically based unit that moves coherently through history”

(ibid., p. 325) to recognize that the *idea* of nationality has become one of the primary coordinates according to which the vast majority of Central Asians articulate their sense of identity.

The process of internalizing nationality, however, produced new kinds of subjectivities, which were inevitably bound up with older ways of conceptualizing personal and communal identity. By turning our attention to what David Montgomery has called “the rough ground” (Montgomery, 2014)¹⁷⁷ we can begin to understand the ways in which contemporary discourses surrounding both Islam and nationality converge and interact. These interactions, moreover, are instrumental in the ongoing constitution of Kyrgyz society itself.

5.4: State Interventions and “Traditional Kyrgyz Islam”

Like other former Soviet Republics, Kyrgyzstan is an officially secular state. Therefore, although Muslims constitute the vast majority of the country’s population, Islam does not enjoy the status of an official religion.¹⁷⁸ However, the state has not refrained from actively inserting itself into religious matters. The Kyrgyz Constitution, for example, expressly forbids the formation of religiously-based political parties, as well as banning the spread of “religious hatred,” which is often interpreted as any religious views that threatens the state or social stability (Konstitutsiia Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2010). The Kyrgyz government also has a bureaucracy devoted to formulating policy vis-

¹⁷⁷ Montgomery is explicitly drawing on Wittgenstein, who, in describing the problems inherent in relying too heavily on idealized models, wrote: “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 46e)

¹⁷⁸ “Traditional Kyrgyz Islam” and Orthodox Christianity do, however, have the status of “traditional religions.” “Non-traditional religions” are defined as “the new religious movements and cults that have emerged, and continue to emerge, since the 1960s and 1970s” (Kontseptsii gosudarstvennoi politiki, 2006, p. 1). In practice, “non-traditional” religious groups are often faced with more intense scrutiny and tougher regulation by the state than are the “traditional” religions.

à-vis the religious sphere: the organization called the State Commission for Religious Affairs (*Gosudarstvennaya komissiiia po delam religii*, or GKDR)¹⁷⁹ is tasked with the registration and regulation of religious organizations, as well as with monitoring religious sermons and publications for evidence of extremist content.

The Kyrgyz state has also intervened in the religious sphere in more far-reaching and theologically significant ways. As we have seen fears of Islamic extremism have not been absent in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, like other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan has positioned Islam as a part of the cultural heritage of the nation. As a consequence, the dual imperatives of preserving state sovereignty and nation-building have guided Kyrgyzstan's official policies vis-à-vis religion. According to the *Conception of State Policy in the Religious Sphere, 2014-2020*¹⁸⁰:

The Kyrgyz Republic is a sovereign state. State policy concerning religion and religious organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic is aimed at the development and strengthening of Kyrgyz statehood, the preservation of state sovereignty and the unity of the nation.

While maintaining a neutral stance towards religious institutions, assuming certain religious, cultural and national particularities, the state will implement its policy by respecting traditional moral values, and will create conditions for the consolidation and development of the spiritual potential and cultural heritage of the people of Kyrgyzstan (ibid., p. 5).

¹⁷⁹ The State Commission for Religious Affairs should not be confused with the Muftiyat. The former is a secular organization and an official organ of the government, tasked with registering religious organizations and regulating the religious sphere. The latter is a religious board and is formally independent from the state. Although currently the Muftiyat and the State Commission for Religious Affairs appear to have relatively warm relations, this has not always been the case.

¹⁸⁰ *Kontseptsiiia gosudarstvennoi politiki Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki v religioznoi sphere na 2014-2020 gody*

Although the state claims to maintain a “neutral stance” towards the religious sphere, since the Bakiev era there have been ongoing attempts to formulate a normative definition of what constitutes acceptable Islamic discourse and practice in Kyrgyzstan. Under Atambaev, these efforts have been redoubled. Today, the state and its proxies (such as the Muftiyat, which will be discussed presently), advocate a return to what is often referred to as “traditional Kyrgyz Islam.” The *Conception of State Policy in the Religious Sphere* provides a sense of what this means in practice. “Traditional Kyrgyz Islam,” according to the government, “does not place in opposition Islamic beliefs and national traditions and customs, and has an ideological basis for the development of partnership with the state (ibid., p. 10). Therefore,

the state will create conditions for the strengthening and development of a traditional and moderate form of Sunni Islam on the basis of the Hanafi religio-legal school and the Maturidi creed.¹⁸¹ This school, which is shared by the majority of the citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic, has a historically proven capacity for tolerance, good-neighborliness, and respect in conditions of ethnic and religious diversity (Kontseptsiiia gosudarstvennoi politiki, 2014, p. 17).

Kadyr Malikov, a Kyrgyz theologian and religion analyst, who has worked with the government to develop the idea of a “national” form of Islam argues:

¹⁸¹ The Hanafi school is one of the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and the one that is most widespread in Central Asia. As a rule, Hanafism allows for more consideration of local customs and practices, as well as advocating political quietism, than some other schools. Maturidism is a doctrine that grew out of the teachings of Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi, a tenth century philosopher from Samarkand. Maturidism “accords human free will the logic of its consequences, that is, the just are saved on that account, whereas with Al-Ash’ari [another philosopher] God’s will is unfathomable...” (Glassé, 1989, p. 262).

Traditional Kyrgyz Islam is our national identity combined with the basic rules or aims of Islam, [such as] to believe in one God. All the basic Islamic rules are very close or identical to our traditions. For example, to respect our parents; regarding family life; regarding relationships between people ... social life, you know? It's the same. So traditional Islam is our culture – not compromised by Arabic culture, but nevertheless with an Islamic basis.

As Malikov suggests, then, the discourse of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” is in many respects intended to establish a normative definition of Islam against which “foreign” (and therefore dangerous) deviations can be measured: while the former is characterized by its cooperation with the state and its connection with Kyrgyz national culture, the latter, which is sometimes coded as “Arabic” or “Pakistani,” is described, not only as fundamentally alien and hostile, but also as a threat to Kyrgyz national identity.¹⁸² Zamirbek Tursunbekov from the GKDR, for example, hinted at the anxieties that underpin the state’s interest in promoting adherence to a politically quietist “traditional Kyrgyz Islam”: “Maturidism is traditional Islam,” he argues. “It says that Islam and the state should live in harmony and that there is no necessity to build a caliphate.”

The Kyrgyz government, insofar as it has committed itself to ensuring its own survival and consolidating Kyrgyz national identity, has thus found itself in the position of intervening in questions of religious doctrine: not only does the state police the boundaries of religious “extremism,” but it also has played a fundamental role in codifying the theological positions that constitute “traditional Kyrgyz Islam.” Such policies clearly extend well beyond the mere “instrumentalization” of religious identity,

¹⁸² Malikov’s vocal opposition to extremism has come at a personal price: in November of 2015, he was assaulted outside his home by knife-wielding attackers. Malikov survived the stabbing, and four men suspected of working with the Islamic State were arrested in connection with the incident (RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service, 2015).

and in fact recall Saba Mahmood's suggestion that even secular nation-states "have had to act as de facto theologians" (2007, pp. 326-327). By explicitly positioning itself as a defender of a "traditional Kyrgyz Islam" rooted in Hanafism and Maturidism, the government has in effect taken a position regarding the proper relationship between Islam and Kyrgyz national identity. Whether or not such a position is ultimately dictated by *raisons d'etat* is largely irrelevant, insofar as it reveals the state's role as a theological actor.

5.4.1: *The Muftiyat*

As we have seen, state intervention in the religious sphere has resulted its engagement with what are ultimately theological questions regarding what constitutes proper belief and practice; however, in practical terms its ability to intervene is constrained. As a legally secular entity, the Kyrgyz government faces restrictions on the extent to which it can directly involve itself in the religious sphere: the State Commission for Religious Affairs, while it has the power to regulate religious organizations and formulate state policy vis-à-vis religion, cannot, for example, issue *fatwas*. Thus, while the state has an "enforced claim to constitute legitimate social identities and arenas" (Asad, 1999, p. 191), it does not possess religious authority as such.

As a consequence, the Kyrgyz government has traditionally relied on the *Kyrgyzstan Musulmandaryndyn Din Bashkarmalygy* (Muslim Spiritual Authority of Kyrgyzstan), otherwise known as the Muftiyat, to help legitimate the concept of "traditional Kyrgyz Islam." When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, SADUM splintered into separate national Muftiyats (Kazakhstan had already established its own institutions in 1990), and the Kyrgyz Muftiyat is one of the institutions that emerged from

that split. Like its institutional predecessor, the Kyrgyz Muftiyat serves as the “official” organization representing the Muslim community in Kyrgyzstan.

Importantly, the Kyrgyz Muftiyat is legally separate from the state: not only does it pursue a largely independent policy, it also derives its funding from the Muslim



Figure 13: Bishkek Central Mosque (photo by author).

community rather than the government (Isci, 2010, p. 80). Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz government has not hesitated to involve itself in the Muftiyat’s affairs. As Baris Isci has pointed out, however, “[t]his is not to say that the Board is the tool of the state. Compared to other Central Asia Muslim boards, the Kyrgyzstani Board enjoys independence and regulates its own affairs” (Isci, 2010, pp. 77-78). Nevertheless, Isci also concedes that, “in certain matters, [the Muftiyat] aligns with the state and takes action accordingly” (ibid.), usually regarding matters related to the evaluation and appointment of imams (to

ensure their compliance with approved doctrines) and the formulation of other policies intended to combat extremism.

However, the Muftiyat's primary mission is the cultivation, strengthening, and spiritual oversight of Kyrgyzstan's Muslim community. As the country's "official" Islamic body,¹⁸³ the Muftiyat issues *fatwas*, regulates the *haji*, verifies that the curricula in medresehs meet standards, and ensures that imams are properly educated in Islamic doctrine. However, the state, including the security apparatus, is not entirely absent from these functions. As one report notes:

Since October 2014, the Muftiate ... has required all imams to pass tests on Sharia law and Arabic. The tests are conducted by a special committee comprising Muftiate representatives, officials from the secular State Agency on Religious Affairs and members of Kyrgyzstan's Security Council, which is chaired by the president (Eurasianet, 2015).

Zamirbek Tursunbekov, justifies this oversight, contending that it was necessary "to train imams to preach traditional norms of Islam" (ibid.) in order to forestall the growth of "radical extremism."

The Muftiyat also views the work of ensuring that Kyrgyz Muslims have "correct" knowledge about Islam as one of its most important jobs. As one Kyrgyz scholar suggests:

The Muslim community needs clearly formulated rules and unambiguous legal, ethical, and ideological dividing lines drawn with due account for the specifics of the Hanafi

¹⁸³ Sunni Islam has no "clergy," nor any centralized religious hierarchy. The Soviet creation of the Spiritual Directorates and their designate as the only legitimate religious body in the country thus represented a novel development in Islamic practice. That model has been carried over to the post-Soviet era.

madhhab; much depends on the level of knowledge, theoretical background, and qualification of the clergy (Kurbanova, 2014).

To achieve the desired level of education and awareness among the general public, the Muftiyat, in addition to teaching courses on Qur’anic studies, also publishes and distributes a wide range of Islamic literature, much of which is devoted to outlining the basics of “correct” ritual practice and explaining the answers to common questions about religion. For example, the preface of one commonly available pamphlet, called “The Five Times Daily Prayer” (*Pyatkratnyi Namaz*), reassures readers:

In this little book, which you hold in your hands, are collected texts, together with photographs for easy study of the five daily *namaz*. Also you may acquaint yourself with the requirements for readers of *namaz*, for Friday *namaz*, *khutbah*¹⁸⁴ *namaz*, ten Suras and *nafl namaz*.¹⁸⁵

By request of readers [we have also included] the importance of reading the Qur’an for the deceased, a few important excerpts from the Sura “Tabarak” from the holy Qur’an, and also a *khutbah* that may be used to consecrate a marriage.

Similar books and pamphlets address topics, such as funerals, marriage, and child-rearing, and are meant for people seeking “Islamic” answers to life’s everyday issues.¹⁸⁶

The publication and endorsement of this type of literature, as well as efforts to ensure that *imams* throughout Kyrgyzstan are equipped with sufficient knowledge to “preach traditional norms of Islam” (Eurasianet, 2015) and the Muftiyat’s decision to weigh in

¹⁸⁴ *Khutbah* is a regular sermon.

¹⁸⁵ *Nafl* or *nafl namaz* are prayers that are not obligatory.

¹⁸⁶ The vast majority of these books are in Kyrgyz or Uzbek. One vendor selling Islamic literature in Bishkek’s Osh Bazaar carried dozens of different titles, but only had three in Russian.

publicly on contentious issues like veiling (Shenkkkan, 2011), are components of a broader effort to foster the development of a normative interpretation of Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

Like the state, the Muftiyat also supports “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” as a theological antidote to the views of “foreign” extremists. For the state, as we have seen, these “Wahhabis” are a source of political and social instability and are viewed as a threat to Kyrgyz national identity. The Muftiyat, meanwhile, considers the “Wahhabis” to be a competing pole of religious authority that could potentially erode its own influence and call into question its role as the primary source of “correct” knowledge of Islam in Kyrgyz society. Thus, as Baris Isci points out, the normative discourse of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam”

is intended not just to define the Board’s own principles. It is also aimed to standardize the way Islam is being propagated in the country and exclude those that do not conform. The inclusion of the Sunni denomination and the Hanafi madhhab is intended to delegitimize groups or individuals labeled by various actors as the “Wahhabis,” who supposedly reject different maddhabs [sic] and place themselves beyond the bounds of the Sunni community of Central Asia (Isci, 2010, p. 78).

Interestingly, the perceived danger of “Wahhabism” is also linked to the ethno-national dimension of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam.” Drawing on the logic of primordialist Soviet approaches to nationality, explanations of these traditions emphasize the supposedly “relaxed,” if not “superficial” character of Islam among the Kyrgyz. As former President Akaev argued, for example, “Here in Kyrgyzstan Islam was assimilated in a rather untraditional form. What we see here are the outward trappings of Islam



Figure 14: Islamic literature for sale at Osh Bazaar (photo by author).

without the exalted religious fanaticism and ideology” (McBrien & Pelkmans, 2008, p. 91). However, Kyrgyz Muslims who study religion in places like Saudi Arabia are often subject to scrutiny, the suspicion being that they may have imbibed “foreign” religious

ideas (Kurbanova, 2014). Within Kyrgyzstan itself, “fanaticism” and “radicalism” are often associated with the Uzbeks (Tromble, 2014). As we saw earlier, the State Commission for Religion Affairs sees “extremism” not only as a threat to the state, but also as a force that undermines Kyrgyz national identity. The “Wahhabis” tend to take an uncompromising stance on many important aspects of Kyrgyz religious life: Kadyr Malikov, for example, points out that “Salafis” and “Wahhabis” forbid pilgrimage to sacred sites. “I think this is not a good thing,” he says, “and not [doctrinally] correct.”

Similarly Almaz, the propagandist we met in Chapter Four argues, “There are five *farz*,¹⁸⁷ and you need to perform them. But at the same time you need to preserve your ethnic identity, national language, traditional costumes and cuisine. At the moment, for example, there is a tendency to give Arabic names to newborns. But there are so many good Kyrgyz names! In this regard, we are losing ground.” Almaz says that he supports efforts by the state to regulate the religious sphere to protect Kyrgyz national identity. “The state,” he says, “in order to preserve Kyrgyz identity and ethnic character, should formulate correct policies.” However, he also notes that “the Muftiyat has more power than any [government] ministry” to prevent extremism.

The discourse of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” thus reveals how the secular nation-state – and consequently modern conceptions of Kyrgyz national identity – are in fact tied to questions of theology. As a result Kyrgyz society itself, and the discourses that constitute it, cannot be entirely divorced from the concerns of the religious sphere. However, as with prismatic nature of the *Manas* epic, which reveals a plethora of ideological and spiritual potentials, “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” is by no means a stable signifier, and its shape, substance, and meaning are constantly being debated and

¹⁸⁷ The “Five Pillars of Islam.”

creatively (re)defined. It is in this zone of discursive flux – the “rough ground” – that different, but simultaneously *Kyrgyz Muslim* subjectivities *as such* are daily contemplated and lived.

This chapter now turns to an examination of some of these diverse subjectivities, which will broadly be referred to as “cultural Muslims,” “purist Muslims,” and “traditionalist Muslims.”¹⁸⁸ Each of these categories can be said to exist within the boundaries of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam,” at least insofar as they are not considered to be “extremist” by the state; and yet, members of these different groups hold often radically different beliefs, not only about what constitutes “correct” doctrine and practice, but how to conceptualize the relationship between Islam and being Kyrgyz.

5.5: A Merely “Cultural” Islam?

One common trope throughout much of the scholarly literature on religion in the former Soviet Union holds that seventy years under Communist rule resulted in the “secularization” of Islam in Central Asia. Indeed, one observer has argued that

even if at first a departure from religion was imposed upon [Central Asians] by force, in the course of time, this population became basically secularized from conviction, education, and/or force of habit. This did not mean that it renounced its Muslim identity, seeing no contradiction in declaring itself at one and the same time Muslim and atheist or non-believing. Some believers, too, adopted a position that was basically secular. Their knowledge of Islam was reduced to a very few practices, and even here it was superficial, and their religious views were far

¹⁸⁸ It should be noted at the outset that these categories are used here for analytical purposes only. None of the people I interviewed used these terms, and most simply referred to themselves as “Muslim.”

removed... from any genuine religious dogma (Ro'i, 1995, p. 15).

Thus, as William Rowe has noted, “[t]here has been an aspersion cast on the religiosity of the people of Central Asia because they lived within the Soviet Union and in many ways changed culturally and religiously” (Rowe, 2007, p. 159). While the term “Muslim” survived, it is argued, it was largely deprived of any “genuine” religious meaning.

This point of view has carried over into the post-Soviet era. In some cases, for example, we find scholars employ arbitrary metrics, such as the ability to translate the *shahada* (“There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet”) from Arabic, or the frequency of prayers or mosque visitation (Lubin, 1995, p. 56), to gauge levels of genuine “Islamic awareness” among Central Asian Muslims. The conclusion drawn from these sorts of tests is often that “adherence to Islam may be seen today more in cultural or traditional terms than purely religious ones” (*ibid.*, p. 62). “Cultural Muslims” are therefore often described as being characterized by their lack of any “genuine knowledge” of, or even interest in, Islam and the performance of unreflected-upon rituals simply out of habit. Thus, as one Uzbek schoolteacher interviewed by Adeeb Khalid argued, “Of course, I don’t believe in this stuff, but Islam was the religion of my forefathers, and they were not wrong either” (Khalid, 2007b, p. 121).

The “real” significance of Islam is thus considered to be lost upon cultural Muslims, who understand it as little more than a label. As one scholar has claimed: “Virtually all indigenous Central Asians consider themselves Muslim, although a large number of Central Asians have only a vague idea about what that implies” (Gleason, 1997, p. 42). Another has suggested a certain “embarrassment” on the part of Central Asian Muslims, who call themselves Muslims but “display little knowledge of, or interest

in, the content of Islam” (Lubin, 1995, p. 61). Ted,¹⁸⁹ a former Peace Corps volunteer and NGO worker who lives in Bishkek, explained that the Kyrgyz are “cultural Muslims”¹⁹⁰ at best, whose knowledge of Islam is “incoherent” and “inconsistent.” In Ted’s words, “They don’t eat pork. They don’t know *why*, but they don’t eat pork.”

As we have seen, the most common explanation for the phenomenon of “cultural Islam” is that decades of enforced atheism and declining “religious knowledge,” combined with the ideologically-driven and state-supported fetishization of “national culture,” resulted in certain religious rites and traditions becoming reinterpreted as ancient national customs. In short, this is the “national-religious symbiosis” theory. As Chris Hann and Mathijs Pelkmans note:

The socialist encoding of religious identities through nationality politics led in the USSR ineluctably to a folklorised, “cultural” Islam, in which ties to national tradition were deemed more important than scriptural knowledge. Religion was thus not eliminated, but it was emptied of sacrality and rendered amenable to secular bureaucratic management (Hann & Pelkmans, 2009, p. 1524).

According to this narrative, male circumcision, the hosting of celebratory feasts to mark weddings and funerals, and saying “a mumbled prayer (seldom with the original words intact) and a rather perfunctory rub of the face” (Khalid, 2007b, p. 104) before meals were considered the marks of “being a Muslim.” In fact, a person could “remain[] a Muslim even if one did not observe local customs or traditions. For the vast majority of Central Asians, Islam was a form of localism, a marker that opposed Muslims/Central

¹⁸⁹ Not his real name.

¹⁹⁰ His words.

Asians/locals to Europeans/outside/Russians” (ibid., p. 107). Although “every one of these ‘cultural’ practices in each Central Asian country had at their roots the same Islamic doctrines” (Rowe, 2007, p. 147) some have nevertheless argued that “‘cultural Islam’ was largely devoid of Islamic knowledge and religious effervescence” (Pelkmans, 2015, p. 181).

But what should we make of arbitrary criteria like “Islamic knowledge” and normative judgments regarding abstract and ultimately subjective concepts like “religious effervescence”? While examples of people who lack “Islamic knowledge,” rarely visit the mosque, or for whom religion is not the central concern of their lives, are not hard to find in Kyrgyzstan, it is potentially more interesting to examine the ways in which they conceptualize what it means to being Muslim, for as Gabrielle Marranci reminds us:

The anthropology of Islam is not theology. This means going beyond the question of Islam or Islams,¹⁹¹ and observing the dynamics of Muslim lives expressed through their ideological and rhetorical understanding of their surrounding (social, natural, virtual) environment (Marranci, 2008, pp. 49-50).

In other words, rather than rendering a verdicts on the “religious effervescence” of “cultural Islam,” it may be more profitable to analyze it as a grounded theology which, although it does not necessarily conform to social scientists’ expectations of what “authentic religion” should look like, nevertheless constitutes a position on the sacred.

¹⁹¹ Here, Marranci refers to Abdul Hamid el-Zein’s influential article, “Beyond Theology and Ideology: The Search for an Anthropology of Islam” (1977), wherein the author questioned whether or not it was possible to identify “a single, real Islam” (ibid., p. 249).

Saltanat¹⁹² is in many ways an example of a typical “cultural Muslim.” While she says that believes in God, she does not regularly perform religious rituals or attend services at the mosque, even on Fridays. For Saltanat, Islam constitutes part of her personal and cultural identity, but religion is far from being the central concern of her life. In fact, she is highly skeptical of the growing role of Islam in Kyrgyz society, and argues that groups like the Tablighi Jama’at, which will be discussed later, who espouse conservative and purist interpretations of Islam, are guilty of spreading superstition and irrationality.

To illustrate her point, Saltanat pointed to the time her daughter came home from school one afternoon and announced that she thought that it might be good to start wearing a headscarf. Saltanat was surprised at this suggestion, as well as a little concerned, since veiling had not previously been practiced in her family. When she asked her daughter about what had prompted this decision, the girl replied that a friend of hers, who regularly wears a *hijab*, had been having difficulties preparing for her exams. This friend had spoken to an imam at the mosque about her academic problems, and the imam informed her that if she believed in God and prayed hard, then “everything would be good” for her in school.

According to Saltanat’s daughter, her friend dutifully followed the imam’s advice and, in the end, did very well on her exams. Encouraging her friends to follow her example, the friend attributed her success to her fervent belief in Allah, and in the power of prayer. Saltanat’s daughter thus came to the conclusion that becoming more visibly pious – praying more frequently, covering herself, and so forth – might also help her do

¹⁹² Not her real name.

better in school. With a laugh, however, Saltanat told me that she curtly informed her daughter that studying harder, not praying harder, would improve her test scores.

Although Saltanat admits that this episode is amusing, it also in many ways epitomizes the reasons for her discomfort with what is sometimes interpreted as the increasing “religiosity” of Kyrgyz society.¹⁹³ She believes that a broad socio-cultural drift is occurring in Kyrgyzstan, towards what she sees as unquestioning faith and, perhaps, even religious fanaticism. Such developments, in her view, threaten the modern character of society, as well as the gains made by Kyrgyz women during the Soviet era, when gender norms evolved significantly.

Saltanat ruefully describes, for example, how her younger sister married a Kyrgyz man whose business often takes him to Turkey for extended periods of time. Over the course of multiple journeys, however, her husband’s religious views have become increasingly influenced by conservative streams of Islam that are popular in Turkey. Now, she says, her brother-in-law has begun to press his wife to start wearing the *hijab* and to dress more modestly. But Saltanat has urged sister not to give in: “She already prays and goes to the mosque, so why should she let herself become more oppressed in the name of her husband’s religion?”

While Saltanat considers herself to be a Muslim, she nevertheless remains wary of currents that are reshaping Kyrgyzstan into a more “religious” country. For Saltanat, these trends are epitomized by veiling, which, because of its visibility, has become a

¹⁹³ In this context, the adjective “religious” should be taken to refer to people who are self-consciously pious, often adhering to a purist, textually-grounded interpretation of Islam.

locus for debates about the place of religion in Kyrgyz society more general.¹⁹⁴ The practice of veiling is seen as a sign of a broader “Islamic” discourse on gender, in which women are “dis-empowered” (Myrzabekova, 2014, p. 59). According to a journalist interviewed by Asel Myrzabekova, for example, “Islamic ideology has negative effects on women: a woman must stay at home, she must give birth, she does not have voice and rights and she should be from time to time beaten” (ibid.).

Saltanat’s attitudes are thus in many ways a microcosm of the kinds of everyday collisions and negotiations that work to produce different kinds of theologically constituted subjects in Kyrgyzstan today: her skepticism towards veiling, and indeed of the other trends like increasing mosque attendance, the growing number of people who enroll their children in medresehs, and the spread of Islamic banking (Sabi, 2014; Vela, 2011), is linked with her understanding of what it means to be a Kyrgyz Muslim. She agrees, in fact, with the view that the Kyrgyz, as a nomadic people, never followed Islam as deeply as other nations, like the Uzbeks. Saltanat suggested that if asked, everyone at the restaurant we were in would affirm they were Muslim, but that none of them would have much of an idea, for example, what was in the Qur’an. In her view, then, the growing trend of “religiosity” in modern-day Kyrgyzstan challenges the ways in which Islam has habitually been practiced by the Kyrgyz.

If Saltanat to a large degree resembles the classic image of the “cultural Muslim,” however, she should not necessarily be considered paradigmatic. Although her views are by no means uncommon, there is in fact a striking degree of diversity among “cultural Muslims.” For example, Adilet, whom we met in Chapter Four, describes himself as

¹⁹⁴ A fuller discussion of the politics of veiling, either in the Kyrgyz context or more broadly, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, see: Borbieva (2012a); Gökarıksel (2009); Gökarıksel and Secor (2009, 2012, 2014); Heyat (2008); Mahmood (2005); McBrien (2009, 2012); Myrzabekova (2014).

having been “born a Muslim,” but he emphasizes that he rarely attends the mosque: “just once or twice a year ... maybe once a year, if that ... just on holidays.” Despite this, he says that holds intensely personal religious beliefs, which he places in the context of his own family history. Adilet’s grandfather, an Uzbek from southern Kyrgyzstan, studied in a medreseh as a young man, but after the Bolshevik Revolution went to Moscow to study engineering. Although his grandfather eventually even joined the Communist Party, he nevertheless remained a devout Muslim, and continued to pray in private throughout his whole life. Similarly, Adilet’s father, who grew up in the 1950s, “was not a religious man,”¹⁹⁵ but he nevertheless considered himself to be a Muslim, and admonished his son to never forget that “we are all children of Allah.” Thus, from a very young age Adilet himself imbibed not just a sense of being a Muslim, but that being a Muslim was something deeply significant.

Moreover, although he admits that he does not regularly attend religious services, Adilet nevertheless has a unique and considered perspective on Islam: “As a chess player, I see my religion like this: my pieces ... my position is already set, you see, and I will move according to it. For me to change my position — to become a Christian, for example – I would need to dig *very* deeply into it and be convinced that it is right.” To explain what he meant by these remarks, Adilet pointed to the example of a friend of his,

¹⁹⁵ Emil Nasritdinov has called the generation that grew up in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s as the “lost generation.” This “lost generation” was steeped not only in Communist historical-materialism, but also Soviet conceptions of national identity. Members of this generation, even today, are more likely than others to be anti-religious. As Nasritdinov argues, “[F]or them, religion was always a prejudice. Starting from youth, it was always criticized... [They] spent their whole life living in this utopia of Communism, which eventually disappeared. And now they can't go back to something they always thought was a prejudice, something they themselves always criticized. So they're neither here nor there: their communist ideals are gone, but they can't 'go back' to Islam” (E. Nasritdinov, personal communication). The “lost generation” is thus in some ways trapped in the interstices between received notions of the primordial character of nationality, which valorized “authentic” national culture while at the same time downplaying the historical influence of Islam, and post-Soviet nationalist discourses that have positioned Islam as an integral part of the cultural and historical patrimony of the nation.

a devout member of the Russian Orthodox Church. He described this friend as a good, pious man, and as someone whom he greatly respected, so much so that that he had even gone to the Orthodox Church with this friend on a number of occasions in order to experience an Orthodox Christian service. But, Adilet emphasized that he had never prayed while at the church: he had only gone to observe and to learn. He once again resorted to his chess analogy to explain his reasoning: as in chess, he said, a person can respect their opponent, and maybe even consider them a friend, but they should always study their strategy. Religious conversion, for Adilet, is like a series of “moves,” which could potentially result in a sort of spiritual “checkmate.”

Adilet’s chess analogy, while perhaps somewhat unconventional, also suggests his views regarding the relationship between Islam and Kyrgyz national identity more broadly: “You know,” he told me, “I *do* think that the Kyrgyz are a Muslim people. We are Muslims and we *were* Muslims.” Adilet tells me that he has a hard time imagining the Kyrgyz not being Muslims – Islam is, in terms of his chess analogy, their “position.” He does not mean individual Kyrgyz people, however – he himself knows Kyrgyz who are Christians or atheists; rather, from the standpoint of cultural memory, Adilet associates Kyrgyz ethno-national identity with Islam. In Adilet’s view, for a person to convert to another religion – or to be come an atheist, for that matter – without first coming to terms with their own Muslim identity – that is, without being certain of the reasons why they *should* give it up, and the significance of that decision – would be pointless and hollow, if not hypocritical.

He cited the example of another acquaintance, an Anglophile who had converted to Protestantism. In Adilet’s view, this man did not “dig into” the meaning or significance

of Christianity before converting – he was merely an Anglophile and decided that becoming a Christian might open up economic opportunities in Europe and the United States. In terms of his chess analogy, Adilet viewed this man as not even really having “lost” the game, as it were: he willingly conceded, and thus achieved nothing. It was not the act of conversion itself that Adilet found so vexing, it was that this man’s “conversion” was, for all intents and purposes, spiritually meaningless, as evidenced by the man’s continuing immoral behavior: he had divorced three wives and essentially abandoned his children. Adilet had no respect for him.

Such remarks reveal some of the problems inherent in the ways in which the scholarly discourse of “cultural Islam” has been constructed. In particular, they call into question the degree to which we should understand cultural Islam as being little more than folklore or a latent “national” characteristic. Indeed, Adilet’s likening of his relationship to religion to a game of chess suggests that, even for many quite “secularized” Kyrgyz, an Islamic identity is a matter of serious contemplation and conscious positioning.

Far from being devoid of “religious effervescence,” such positions are explicitly theological, both in their orientations and in their conclusions. Saltanat’s ambivalence towards veiling and public piety more broadly, for instance, also represents a position on the proper role of religion vis-à-vis Kyrgyz society, not an ambivalence towards religion itself. Meanwhile, Adilet, like his father and his grandfather, relates to Islam on an intensely personal level, even if he himself admits that he rarely engages in rituals. Nevertheless, he also associates Islam with being Kyrgyz, albeit not in the reflexive, spiritually inert way that depictions of “cultural Islam” usually suggest.

Many Kyrgyz would likely agree that “cultural Muslims” exist, and might even count themselves among them. However, as we have seen here, “cultural Islam” is, to the extent that it can be conceived of as a cohesive category, not necessarily as inert and desacralized as it is sometimes portrayed. Meanwhile “cultural Muslims” themselves often evince a deep engagement with theological questions, even if religion itself does not provide the central narrative of their lives. We should thus understand “cultural Islam” as representing an array of different, explicitly theological, perspectives. These perspectives are at once a function of personal belief as well as arguments about the role of piety and religion in shaping modern society. “Cultural Muslims,” of course, are not alone in having such perspectives. However, as is to be expected, these perspectives are not uncontested by other segments of Kyrgyz society.

5.6: The Purists

I met Abdulrahim *moldo* in Duboviy Park on a warm September evening. A slight, intense young man in his mid-30s, he was perched on a short concrete wall, his comfortable-looking brown leather loafers resting on the back of a bench. He was wearing round glasses and a brown skullcap, and on top of his Adidas track pants and black t-shirt, he wore a long, black corduroy trench coat, giving him an air of rebellion. Upon approaching him I extended my hand and said “*assalam alaykum!*” Warily, Abdulrahim hopped down from his perch and took my hand, and uttered a hesitant “*salaam...*” Like many other “religious” Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, he was initially suspicious of my intentions. Abdulrahim *moldo* quickly warmed up, however, and he began to ask questions about where I lived, why I was in Kyrgyzstan, and where I studied. He took great interest in my answers, and informed me that he too was well-

traveled, having spent time in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and even in Bangladesh on *daavat*.

As we talked, we made our way to a nearby café, where we immediately encountered difficulties: like many cafés in Kyrgyzstan, this one served alcohol, and Abdulrahim was unsure about the propriety of staying there for our interview. Because the hour was late, however, and because he had already postponed our meeting several times, he hesitantly agreed to stay, provided we sit in the corner of the room, as far away from the bar as possible. Abdulrahim was also uncomfortable with the idea of me recording our interview: “Who am I?” he asked. “I am just a small man, compared to Allah. Who am I? Taking notes is okay, but no dictophone, no camera, okay? It is better to speak eye-to-eye.” His fear, he told me, was that I or someone else would “manipulate his words and use them against Islam.” I assured him that was not my intention to slander his religion, and I agreed to forego recording. He seemed satisfied, and he we proceeded.

Abdulrahim told me that he was “born a Muslim.” However, while today Islam is the most important aspect of his life, he admits that did not become “strongly religious” until about the age of 15, when his brother suddenly passed away. Around that time, he started pondering the meaning of life and the nature of “true happiness.” It was during this period of “searching” that he found his faith and, he says, the happiness he was searching for.

As a sign of his rededication of his life to religion, he adopted the name “Abdulrahim” – although he is Kyrgyz, he was born in Ukraine, and his birth name is Taras. He also began studying religion intensely and soon, despite his relatively young age, people began calling him *moldo*, or “mullah,” in recognition of his piety and his

knowledge of Islam. Abdulrahim himself, however, is quick to claim that he does not believe himself worthy of the title. In fact, he says, there are no “real” Muslims in the world today, and indeed, no “real Islam.” He explained what he meant by relating an anecdote about the eighth century theologian, Hasan Basri:

When people came to Hasan Basri¹⁹⁶ and said, “show us real Islam, show us a real Muslim,” Hasan began to cry. Hasan Basri said, “Real Islam is in the books – Quran, *hadith*, Sunnah – and all the real Muslims are in the cemeteries.

Abdulrahim is what might be called a “purist Muslim.” “Purists,” or “conscious Muslims” are people for whom “religious study, heightened public devotion, expressing a Muslim identity, and ensuring that public arenas [are] subject to ethical regulation” (Hefner, 2004, p. 21) are especially important.¹⁹⁷ As the term suggests, “conscious Muslims” are people who consciously seek out a more “authentic” expression of Islam, which in most cases is said to be found in the Qur’an and the *hadith*, as well as the regular observance of prescribed rituals, the “correct” performance of *namaz*, and so forth.¹⁹⁸ Here, however, I will generally use the term “purist” to indicate the theological

¹⁹⁶ Hasan al-Basri, who lived between 642-728 CE, was a theologian, renowned for his piety and his wisdom. Although he later relocated to the city of Basra (hence his name), he was born in Medina during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and knew many of the Companions of the Prophet.

¹⁹⁷ Although the term “universalist Muslim” might also be appropriate, I have chosen to employ the term “purist Muslim” in order to highlight the self-consciously textualist attitudes of this group, which also tend to be universalist in nature. Likewise, “conscious Muslim” suggests that other Kyrgyz Muslims, such those who have more particularist beliefs, are not self-consciously pious. Some of the literature on Islam in Kyrgyzstan also uses “the newly pious” to refer to Muslims who have begun to adopt a more “religious” lifestyle, particularly in comparison with “cultural Muslims” (McBrien, 2009, p. S133). Although there is clearly overlap between those who might be considered “purists” “conscious Muslims,” “universalist Muslims” and the “newly pious,” I have chosen to use the first term, as it is more comprehensive, and would include both lifelong Muslims as well as those who have begun to prioritize religion more recently. I acknowledge, moreover, that the act of choosing an appropriate label is fraught with difficulties. As David Montgomery reminds us: “Labels, while necessary, obfuscate the details beyond what is experienced, and can create categories that take on a life of their own” (Montgomery, 2014, p. 32).

¹⁹⁸ Almost as if to underscore this point, Abdulrahim checked his watch during the middle of our interview, and noticed that it was time to perform his evening prayer. He asked if I would mind if he excused himself for a few minutes; I replied that it was not a problem. He thanked me for waiting, and asked whether knew

orientation of this group, which tends to emphasize the textual sources of Islam, and the necessity of purging Islam of local customs and practices that have accrued over the years.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the relaxing of border controls greatly facilitated the spread of new religious ideas into Kyrgyzstan. With freedom of movement, moreover, came religious groups from abroad, who saw the former Soviet Union as a ripe opportunity to win converts. Indeed, one of the most important vehicles for spreading a more consciously universalist conception of Islam among many Kyrgyz have been transnational organizations from Pakistan, Turkey, and various Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These groups, as well as the spread of mass literacy and the availability of multiple forms of media, have introduced into the region different perspectives on Islamic belief and practice.

One of the most significant perspectival shifts that has occurred in Islamic theology over the last century is what Eickelman and Piscatori (1996, p. 38) have described as the “objectification of Islam,” a process by which Islam becomes conceptualized as a unified, “self-contained system.” Objectification often entails the search for authentically “Islamic” answers to various questions – consider, for example, the pamphlets published by the Muftiyat, which seek to explain an “Islamic” approach to family life, child-rearing, and so forth.

which direction West was – so that he could pray towards Mecca. I pointed him in what was essentially the correct direction; however, demanding greater accuracy, Abdulrahim asked to use the compass app on my mobile phone. Once he determined to his satisfaction which direction was West, Abdulrahim looked around for a place to pray, eventually settling on a nearby booth, one that had a curtain and was somewhat set apart from the rest of the cafe. Loudly intoning “Allahu akbar!” (much to the surprise of the other patrons of the café), he began performing *namaz*.

More generally, however, the objectification of Islam also implies the existence of an authentic, “universal” Islam, “valid in any cultural context” (Roy, 2004, p. 25). As a consequence, many local practices and traditions have become the objects of “conscious deliberation and debate” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 53). At stake, for many purists, is whether or not these traditions are indeed consistent with what is posited as “real” Islam. As we will see, certain Kyrgyz religious practices, which are closely associated with Islam by many Kyrgyz Muslims, are considered by purists to be deviations (*bid’a*, or “unwelcome innovations”) by “purists,” who deride them as relics of Kyrgyz shamanism.

Bakyt,¹⁹⁹ the director of a medreseh²⁰⁰ in a village outside of Bishkek, for example, scoffed at the common Kyrgyz practice of visiting sacred places with strong *nur*, or holy energy: “Why not build a *mazar* on top of a mountain, since it’s closer to heaven?” Lamenting the persistence of such practices, he told me: “We [Kyrgyz] lost Islam at our very roots during the Soviet times. But nowadays, religion is reviving. Generally, people consider themselves to be Muslims, but many things were lost. We call ourselves Muslims, but it is on the surface only. It is not deep in our hearts.”

The medreseh that Bakyt oversees is operated by an Islamic NGO called Adep Bashati (“The Source of Morality”), which was founded by a group of Kyrgyz Muslims who studied at Al Azhar University in Cairo. In addition to operating medresehs, Adep Bashati also holds courses on Qur’an recital, Arabic language, and lectures on religion (Isci, 2010, pp. 84-85). According to one description, “Adep Bashati’s goal is to promote

¹⁹⁹ Not his real name.

²⁰⁰ The medreseh I visited recently replaced an older school in the village of K k-Zhar (see de Cordier, 2010, but note that Ustad Kurban is no longer the director of the medreseh). Currently, around seventy students study in the school, but Bakyt informed me that there are plans to expand the school even further by building an even bigger campus across the street from the current one in order to accommodate growing demand for religious education.

the true understanding of Islam, based on the idea that science and morality are products of faith” (Abramson, 2010, p. 29). The group has pursued a strategy similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and has developed a strong base of support among affluent businessmen and members of the upper-middle class. It is from these locally cultivated sources that virtually all of Adep Bashati’s funding is derived, although Bakyt tells me that some money is provided to his medreseh by the Muftiyat to help meet the needs of students and to provide for the purchase of animals to sacrifice during *Kurman Ait* (*Eid el-Adha*).

Adep Bashati, of course, is by no means the only religious organization operating in Kyrgyzstan: other groups include, but are not necessarily limited to the *Nurçular*, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the Tablighi Jama’at. While each of these organizations has its own distinct philosophy and doctrine, all of them are concerned with educating the Kyrgyz about “real” Islam and instilling in them knowledge about the “correct” way to practice their faith. Although Adep Bashati is not as hostile to certain Kyrgyz practices as some other groups are, Bakyt’s dismissal of the practice of visiting *mazars* is suggestive of the group’s “purist” orientation.

Today, perhaps the most influential religious organization operating in Kyrgyzstan is the Tablighi Jama’at. The group, whose name means “the society of delivering the message,” was founded in the 1920s near Delhi, India, and its primary mission, as one observer has noted, is “faith renewal – that is, to make nominal Muslims good practicing Muslims by helping them to get rid of un-Islamic accretions and observe Islamic rituals faithfully” (Ayoob, 2008, p. 135). The group spreads its message through the medium of *dawa* (*daavat*, in Kyrgyz), or “calling,” whereby small groups of

“Tablighi travelers,” as Emil Nasritdinov (2012) has called them embark on missionary journeys, inviting their fellow Muslims to come to the mosque reaffirm their faith. These trips, which range from three to forty days or more, can sometimes be international in scope, taking a group of *dawatchilar* to neighboring countries, or even to India or Pakistan.²⁰¹ So pervasive are these missionaries in Kyrgyzstan that the Tablighi Jama’at as whole is often referred to metonymically as “the *daavatchilar*,” or “those who perform *daavat*.”

The *daavatchilars*’ appeal is not difficult to understand. Maria Louw has argued that the “Islamic revival” in Central Asia made many Kyrgyz Muslims painfully aware of their putatively superficial and syncretic – if not “un-Islamic” – religious beliefs.²⁰² As a result, Louw has argued, Islam *qua* Islam “increasingly became important in the minds of Kyrgyz Muslims as something they have never had – at the same time as ‘religion’ increasingly made its presence felt, in public discourses as well as in everyday experience” (Louw, 2012, p. 157). The Tablighis’ embrace of “pure” Islam, as found in the Qur’an and *hadith*, thus appeals to many Kyrgyz, who are searching for what they see as a more “authentic” religious experience. The group, moreover, is avowedly non-political, and it maintains that its only purpose is to call people back to Islam and to help them to strengthen their faith. Consequently, the group has thus far escaped being banned in Kyrgyzstan, as it has elsewhere in Central Asia, which makes participation risk-free.²⁰³

²⁰¹ It is important to note that, although the *daavatchilar* are sometimes depicted as “Muslim missionaries,” their aim is not to convert non-Muslims to Islam, but rather to invite their fellow Muslims to become better Muslims. Thus, if they mistakenly knock on the door of a home that happens to belong to a non-Muslim family, they will apologize and excuse themselves (E. Nasritdinov, personal communication). For an ethnographic account of Tablighi travel, see Nasritdinov (2012).

²⁰² See Chapter One.

²⁰³ Tablighi Jama’at is banned in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and sometimes faces severe repression in Tajikistan. The group has no official status in Kazakhstan, where it remains somewhat marginal and is sometimes repressed. See: Balci (2015); Rotar (2013).

In fact, the current Mufti of Kyrgyzstan, Maksatbek *azhy* Toktomushev, is also known to be a member of the group, and the doctrine of the Muftiyat – and thus the character of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” – in many ways resembles the more “universalist” interpretation of Islam adhered to by the *daavatchilar*. The group’s apolitical, decentralized nature, moreover, has produced a general perception that the Tablighis are free from the kinds of corruption that touch almost every aspect of life in Kyrgyzstan.²⁰⁴ As Imam Almambet, a theologian at the Bishkek Central Mosque, told me of the Tablighi Jama’at: “Their role in spreading Islam is huge. They never do it for getting profit – they do it for the grace of God. They have improved the previous state of Islam [in Kyrgyzstan].”

The Tablighi Jama’at, Adep Bashati, and other “purist Muslims” clearly embrace theological positions that posit a radically different configuration of the relationship between the personal, the social, and the religious than those held by “cultural Muslims.” Whereas the latter are sometimes characterized by their ambivalence towards the growing visibility of religion in the public sphere, or by the fact that religion does not constitute the central narrative of their lives, many “purists” are both motivated by their faith and envision a society in which Islam plays a special role. They are, however careful to avoid suggesting that Kyrgyzstan should cease to be a secular country in which religion is regulated by the state, sentiments that would place them beyond the boundaries of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” and acceptable religious discourse.

“Purists,” moreover, have a complicated relationship with the concept of nationality, and they often reject the notion of a “national-religious symbiosis.” The

²⁰⁴ The Muftiyat itself has been tarred with accusations of corruption connected to the annual organization of the *hajj* (Eurasianet, 2013; RFE/RL, 2011a), and one former Mufti was embroiled in scandal when a sex tape involving him and an unknown young woman was leaked to the Internet (Beishenbek, 2014).

“purist” Muslims who I interviewed in Kyrgyzstan all drew a sharp division between religion and national identity, and insisted that they are “two separate issues.” Purists conceptualize their faith as a universal belief system that is theoretically identical for all Muslims; therefore, they assert “there is no nationality in Islam.” Abdulrahim *moldo* suggested, for example, that nationalism is a false ideology having no basis in Islam; rather, like other ideologies it serves as a test of a person’s faith in Allah. Bakyt, the medreseh director, argued:

There is no connection between nation and religion. Not all of the Arabs in Egypt are Muslims. They have the religion that was passed down to them from their parents. About 20% of the population of Egypt is Christian... Islam came to us [Kyrgyz] in the eighth century. Before the eighth century our ancestors believed in shamanism. We still have remnants of that – it has existed for many years. I remember some rituals that my grandparents performed, like when they lit candles and believed that the spirits of the ancestors would visit them. This is in our blood. So Islam can never be connected to nationality.

Similarly, when asked about the connection between Islam and Kyrgyz national identity, Ibrahim *moldo* responded succinctly: “There is no difference between Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, or Americans. If we follow Islam, we are in the Prophet’s nation.”

These responses, however, do not indicate that these people deny the contemporary reality and salience of national identity altogether. Instead, they see Islam and nationality as occupying separate spheres: “Nationality is one thing,” as Aisuluu, a young Muslim told me, “and religion is quite another thing.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, many “conscious Muslims” also find novel avenues for expressing their national identity in religiously sanctioned ways. Ibrahim *moldo*, for example, wore a very finely made *kalpak*, an unmistakable Kyrgyz ethno-national symbol. “I have been

wearing a *kalpak* since my childhood,” he told me. “In Islam, respecting the country you live in is called *iman*. Since my country is Kyrgyzstan, I wear a Kyrgyz *kalpak*.” He also related a story about one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, a man called “Akkash” (Ukasha bin Mihsan):

When the Prophet Muhammad was alive, there was a man Akkash. He was Kyrgyz. Arabs called him Akosha. He was a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and accompanied him everywhere. He participated in wars in defense of the Prophet ... He died in Kazakhstan while preaching Islam. His grave is in Kazakhstan.

With unmistakable pride, he added, “A *Kyrgyz* man spoke with the Prophet, and stood right next to him!”

Abdulrahim *moldo* believes that the concept of national identity (though not the ideology of nationalism) is consistent with Islam. “Everyone is a Muslim,” he says, “but nations are a way for us to know each other.” Similarly, Ibrahim *moldo* argues, “Our Prophet said good things about different nations. It is said in *hadith* that nations were created in order that they might visit one another. This means we need to be in good relations with other nations. This is not a new phenomenon.” The words of both men closely echo Sura 49:13 of the Qur’an: “O mankind! We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other).”

Moreover, when Ainura, a graduate of a medreseh operated by the Tablighis, told me that “Some people say, ‘I am not a Muslim, I am a Kyrgyz.’ But being a Kyrgyz means being Muslim!” she was not necessarily making the same argument as scholars who assert that “to be Kyrgyz means being a Muslim.” That is to say that she was not suggesting that Kyrgyz are Muslims because Islam has come to be seen as part and parcel

of Kyrgyz folklore or “national tradition”; rather she is invoking Islam in an explicitly religious sense. She thus gives voice (and indeed embodies) a grounded theology that envisions the gradual reconfiguration of Kyrgyz society according to universal Islamic values through the (re)shaping of Muslim subjectivities.

The grounded theologies embraced by “purist Muslims” are, perhaps, more recognizably “theological” than those of “cultural Muslims.” However, they should not be interpreted as extrinsic to the Central Asian religious experience nor as representing a fundamental challenge to “local notions of religion and its place in modern social and political life” (McBrien, 2008, p. 21). Both perspectives, in fact, are essentially arguments about the proper role of religion in the public sphere. Whereas the latter wish to preserve the division between the religious and public spheres, the former envision the transformation of the nation as a whole through the spiritual transformation of individuals. That is, even if the Tablighi Jama’at, for example, is apolitical, it is nevertheless engaged in the project of remaking Kyrgyz society, and thus remaking the nation-state of Kyrgyzstan itself. In the contemporary world, then, the state and the sacred cannot be wholly disentangled, since they constitute one another.

The universalist vision held by “purists,” however, is not entirely uncontested. As we have seen, “cultural Muslims” are often wary of the increasingly vocal claims of the “religious” on the public sphere. The claims of the “purists” to represent “real Islam,” moreover, are contested by those whom we might label as “traditionalist Muslims.” These are Muslims who understand Islam as being intimately connected with local customs and practices, to the point of being largely inseparable from notions of “Kyrgyzness.”

5.7: Traditionalists

Kyrgyz national identity is often associated with the concept of *kyrgyzchylyk*, which translates roughly as “Kyrgyzness” or “the essence of being Kyrgyz” (Murzakulova & Schoeberlein, 2009, p. 1236n1239). *Kyrgyzchylyk*, which involves practices like fortune telling, visiting *mazars*, participating in rituals and practices surrounding the *Manas* epic, the use of traditional medicines to cure disease, and other life-cycle rites, is for many Kyrgyz a deeply sacred concept. However, many of these customs have been relegated by social scientists to the status of “folklore,” and by “purist” Muslims to the status of *bid’a*, or unwelcome innovations in Islamic practice.

For many Kyrgyz, however, *kyrgyzchylyk* and Islam are closely intertwined (although they are not conceived of as being identical), and the ritual boundaries between them are often indistinct. One of the most important aspects of this “traditionalist” Islam is the practice of *ziyarat*, or making a pilgrimage to a *mazar* and reading from the Qur’an. Jamilya *eje*,²⁰⁵ the *shaykh* of the Baytik *baatyr*²⁰⁶ *mazar* near Bishkek, explains the significance of visiting *mazars* in Kyrgyz religious life:

No matter what difficulties a man has, if he prays [at a *mazar*] throughout the entire night, blessings will come from Allah and his wishes will come true. In *mazars*, the souls of seven generations of ancestors are waiting for you. When you come and read Qur’an and say “*omin*,” the spirits of the ancestors will be grateful to you. If the spirit is in hell, it can only visit *mazars*. They cannot come home...

To purify oneself of all bad things, one needs to come to *mazars*. It is preferable to make a sacrifice in such sacred places. Wishes are only granted one-hundred percent of the time in *mazars*. When people read the

²⁰⁵ Not her real name.

²⁰⁶ Baytik *baatyr* was a nineteenth century Kyrgyz warrior who fought against the Kokand Khanate. His grave has become a place of pilgrimage.

Qur'an at home, spirits cannot enter the house, and it doesn't always work. I can solve these issues [here at the *mazar*]. The more we visit *mazars* the better it is for us. Your wishes come true faster in *mazars*. People visit *mazars* seven days, one month, three months. People's well-being depends on *bata*.²⁰⁷

Similarly, Kanikei *eje*,²⁰⁸ a practitioner of *kyrgyzchylyk*, who sells souvenirs at Manas Ordo, described to me how the practice of visiting *mazars* a means of experiencing the grace of God:

When we read Qur'an [at *mazars*], some people believe that it is recited for the souls of dead people. But it is not true. The Qur'an is the words of Allah. When one begins to read Qur'an, and feels with the heart, all that he needs is accepted by God, and it is *omin*. *Omin* is *bata*.²⁰⁹

The word *mazar* comes from Arabic, and originally referred to the grave of a saint. However, in Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere in Central Asia, the meaning of the term has expanded to include a variety of other kinds of sacred sites as well, and is sometimes used interchangeably with Kyrgyz terms like *kasiettuu zher* ("a site that has a special spiritual power and impact") and *yiik zher* ("holy" or "sacred" site) (Aitpaeva, 2013, p. 6). According to Gulnara Aitpaeva, the director of the Aigine Cultural Research Institute, these terms all "place a slightly bigger emphasis on the divine rather than human, spiritual rather than material, and unseen rather than visible" (ibid.).

As in the case of Baytik *baatyr*, many *mazars* in Kyrgyzstan are associated with prophets, saints, Sufi adepts, and other religious figures. As Aitpaeva points out: "If we pay attention to the names of sacred sites.... We can easily notice their direct links to

²⁰⁷ Blessings.

²⁰⁸ Not her real name.

²⁰⁹ A blessing.

Islam. Their names often contain such words as *ajy* (*hadji*),²¹⁰ *paigambar* (*prophet*), *eshen* (*ishan*),²¹¹ *kojo* (*khoja*),²¹² *sakaba* (*Prophet Muhammad's followers*), *moldo* (*mullah*), *oluya* (*saint*), etc.” (ibid., p. 93). Others are associated with the *Manas* epic, historical events, local legend, or even, in some cases, contemporary events. Still others are natural sacred sites, such as rocks, waterfalls, or sacred groves, which are said to possess spiritual energy, called *nur* (“light”). *Mazars* are also closely connected with traditional healing practices in Kyrgyzstan. As we saw in the previous chapter, for example, Nurassyl *eje* visited the tomb of *Manas ata* to cure her lifelong afflictions. In many instances, moreover, different kinds of *mazars* exist side-by-side, literally grounding what might otherwise be seen as disparate traditions. As discussed in Chapter Four, for example, there are two stones directly adjacent to the Mausoleum of *Manas* that are said to have spiritual energy and themselves have the status of *mazars*.

However, many “traditionalist” practices, including *ziyarat*, are sometimes excoriated by “purist” Muslims as “un-Islamic” or even “shamanism.” As one *moldo* from the Talas region suggested to researchers from the Aigine Cultural Research Center:

Kyrgyzchylyk is a mistake. Nowadays we call clairvoyants bearers of *kyrgyzchylyk*, but this is fortune-telling [and] does not tell the truth. In this Shariat these people are called *dubana*, *bübü*, *bakshy*.²¹³ Islam hates *kyrgyzchylyk*; it also hates *dubana* and *bakshy*. In the Qur’an, The Holy One says, that all soothsayers and fortunetellers commit a breach against faith, as do they, who believe their words (Aitpaeva, 2009, p. 229).

²¹⁰ One who has performed the *hajj*.

²¹¹ A Sufi saint.

²¹² Members of a particular saintly lineage.

²¹³ *Dubana*, *bübü*, and *bakshy* are all Kyrgyz words (derived from Persian) for different kinds of shamans, fortune-tellers, holy fools, or false prophets. See Aitpaeva and Egemberdieva (2009, pp. 346-347).

Altynbek²¹⁴, a *daavatchy* from Bishkek, echoed this verdict, telling me that practitioners of *kyrgyzchylyk* ultimately derive their powers from *djinni*, or evil spirits. The supernatural powers of healing and clairvoyance manifested by practitioners, in his view, are simply meant to mislead them and tempt them and their followers into *shirk*.

Despite these sorts of criticisms, “traditionalists” nevertheless claim to represent “traditional Kyrgyz Islam.” Thus, Pulat Mirbek *ulu* argues that “Islam was assimilated into and synthesized with [Kyrgyz] tradition. That synthesis was accepted by our ancestors and *became* the tradition.” Similarly, Nurassyl *eje* maintains that practitioners of *kyrgyzchylyk* are Muslims: “Because we perform *namaz*, read and recite the Qur’an, we often do feasts of sacrifice, and perform alms. It is in our blood, and it is passed to us from our ancestors from seven generations ago.” As Vernon Schubel reminds us, “peoples with pieces of crucial local knowledge – knowledge of texts in Farsi and Chagatay Turkic, knowledge of rituals at *mazars*, local vernacular poetry, and songs and epics – have asserted their voices as purveyors of real and legitimate Central Asian Islamic traditions” (Schubel, 2009, p. 281).

Nevertheless, the Muftiyat has expressed skeptical attitudes towards what it views as “folk practices” – *bid’a* that have arisen out of ignorance of Islam. While not necessarily placing “traditionalists” beyond the discursive boundaries of “traditional Kyrgyz Islam,” even if many of their practices are criticized as “unbelief,” the Muftiyat has at times suggested that “*kyrgyzchylyk* can be seen as an important and interesting example of times that have passed into history, but today ... must be considered a sign of backwardness and poor education” (ibid., p. 234). In other instances, however, the Muftiyat has fulminated bitterly against certain aspects of *kyrgyzchylyk*, especially

²¹⁴ Not his real name.

clairvoyance, spirit mediation, and traditional healing, which are described as being completely opposed to the teachings of Islam:

These days, it is important to be able to differentiate “kyrgyzchylyk” and “musulmanchilik.”²¹⁵ There are still many superstitions in Kyrgyzchilik [sic] that go against Islam and are sinful. In the Qur’an it says Allah will gather all *mushriktun* [those who commit shirk] and ask the angels if these people worshipped them... the angels will say to Allah, you are our friend, not them. These people worshipped jinn ... Shirk is the one sin God will not forgive. The Qur’an says, “if you commit shirk, all your good work will dissolve.” The one who commits shirk certainly can expect to be thrown into the fires of hell (quoted in Borbieva, 2010, p. 7).

Considering its centrality to “traditionalist” religious practice, it is not surprising that *ziyarat* has not been immune to these kinds of criticisms. Some “purists” like Ibrahim *moldo*, attribute the prevalence of the practice to ignorance about Islam: “At the moment, we are working on this issue and informing people [that visiting *mazars* is wrong]. But it hasn’t produced any results yet. People who go to *mazars* tell us that they just go there to perform *ziyarat* and to read the Qur’an to the spirits of the ancestors. But in general it is a big sin to worship a *mazar* instead of God.” Others, such as Imam Almanbet, a theologian at the Bishkek Central Mosque, suggest that people who visit *mazars* are essentially unbelievers:

²¹⁵ “*Musulmanchylyk*” is usually translated as “Muslimness.” As Toktogulova notes: “*Musulmanchylyk* means practicing only according to Islamic rules and rituals. *Musulmanchylyk* requires strict adhering to Islamic rules and clear distinction from folk beliefs. During Soviet times being Muslim meant identifying oneself Muslim, even if one did not practice Islamic rituals, nowadays being a ‘real’ Muslim means following many rules” (Toktogulova, 2007, p. 512)

VMA: I have been told that Kyrgyz read Qur'an in *mazars*. Some people claim that it is acceptable, but others say that it is wrong. Which of these statements is correct?

IMAM ALMANBET: When you say *mazar*, do you mean a graveyard?

VMA: Any holy place.

IMAM ALMANBET: Muslims don't go to these "holy places."²¹⁶ For us the holy place is the mosque. Usually clairvoyants and those who don't know enough about Islam go to *mazars*.

VMA: Do you mean people with insufficient knowledge about Islam?

IMAM ALMANBET: I mean those who don't have a strong faith in God. They don't want to believe in God, to read *namaz*. They want to wander around mountains and stones.

Some "traditionalists," however, argue that purists like Ibrahim *moldo* are simply confused about what their practices really entail. As Jamilya *eje* told me:

The main contradiction between us and the imams is that we pray in *mazars*. But saying that we "pray" is basically wrong. Because in *mazars* we only need to read Qur'an. By reading the Qur'an, we release the spirits in another world. It was mentioned in the Qur'an that one needs to go *mazars* and read Qur'an.

Likewise, Kanikei *eje* complained to me about what she saw as the misconceptions that some people have about "traditionalism":

Of course, *shariat* is taught by very educated people. But some people who are not very educated [about Islam] pretend to know everything, and they misrepresent the religion.²¹⁷ They believe that those who pray to stones and water are outside of Islam and are unbelievers. But there are contradictions in those words. We do not pray *to* stones, we pray to

²¹⁶ "Yiyk zher."

²¹⁷ She was referring to *daavatchilar*.

God,²¹⁸ who created the stones. God blesses only those places that are beloved by him. His energy is there. So we visit such places. We go to the places beloved by God. I myself have visited many *mazars*.

Similarly, Almaz, the Youth Ministry propagandist, sees no contradiction between Islam and *kyrgyzchylyk*, since members of his own family are, in his view, pious Muslims who also practice *kyrgyzchylyk*:

My *okul apa*²¹⁹ performs *namaz* five times a day. She also follows *kyrgyzchylyk*. When you go to a *mazar*, you go there not to worship a tree or stone, but to pray to God. There is holy power in *mazars*. It is like a mosque. Pilgrims go to Mecca not to worship the Kaaba, but to pray to God. A *mazar* is also a holy place given to us by God.

As these anecdotes suggest, Kyrgyz “traditionalists” reject suggestions that their religious practices are somehow “not Islamic.”

Kadyr Malikov, a popular and respected Kyrgyz theologian, who has been a strong proponent of the development of a culturally grounded, yet still doctrinally “correct,” form of Islam – that is, “traditional Kyrgyz Islam” – has suggested that *ziyarat* is not always problematic. Nevertheless, he says that there are times when religiously sanctioned practices cross the line into *shirk*, or polytheism:

In our traditional understanding of Islam ... [*ziyarat*] is not problematic. We even have *hadiths* that tell of our Prophet making *ziyarat* to cemeteries ... because these visits will remind us about our ancestors. It’s good for *iman*... for faith. But sometimes, people do practice incorrectly. They perform *ziyarat* and pray to ... not God. They pray to some of the dead, to their spirits. This is not good, ok? So we must explain to people, to believers, where this border is. Between good things and *shirk*, for

²¹⁸ Throughout our conversation, she used the word *kudai*, which means “God,” rather than the word “Allah.”

²¹⁹ Mother-in-law.

example... paganism, I mean... So, for example, if somebody says to me: “I want to visit a mazar.” Well, okay! But before that, I must explain the culture of *ziyarat*... the etiquette: Don’t cry, don’t do like this and whip yourself ... [*Mazars* are] just things ... created by God. They are not God. [...]

[People] can make *ziyarat* about their relationship between them and their God. [U]nfortunately some people are ignorant about the Islamic understanding of monotheism. Time after time, some of them tell me that they are confused by this concept of monotheism. This is a real threat to having a true understanding of the religion ... I do not forbid people to make *ziyarat* to caves ... but look: caves, trees, *anywhere* is somewhere we can pray to our God. This is not a problem ... but time after time, they make their *kurban* — they sacrifice an animal ... and pray to God. But God is everywhere. Okay, not *only* in the mosque [as some people say], but everywhere. God is everywhere, and not just in *mazars*.

These kinds of debates may seem on the surface to be relatively obscure disputes over esoteric religious practices. But their importance lies in what they reveal about the ways in which religion affects discourses surrounding national identity: not only do they belie the idea that there is a consensus around the notion of a “national-religious symbiosis,” but they also have repercussions for how the relationship between nationality and religion are conceptualized in society at large. *Ziyarat*, moreover, is not the only aspect of traditional Kyrgyz that has become a site of conflict between different grounded theologies. As we will see in the next section, the *Manas* epic has itself become a contested symbolic resource for “traditionalists” and “purists” alike, albeit in different ways.

5.7.1: *The Manas Epic*

As a result of its centrality in both the Kyrgyz myth-symbol complex and nationalist discourses, the *Manas* epic also holds a crucial place in religious and spiritual discourses. However, like the practice of *ziyarat*, the significance of the epic vis-à-vis Islam has become a source of contention. For many “traditionalists,” *Manas* is one of the cornerstones of the Kyrgyz way of practicing Islam. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter Four, *Manas* has immense spiritual significance for many Kyrgyz. Kanikei *eje*, for example, tells of her encounters with the heroes of the epic:

There are places [*mazars*] where Bakai *ata*²²⁰ lived, prayed, and walked. [When I go to these places] I see him. So for me, Bakai *ata* is alive. These spirits support the strength of Umai *ene* ...²²¹ They support the strong power of *Manas*. Some say that it is not right to turn to spirits and ask for their support. This is a lie. Among the spirits there are immortals. There are people who are forever alive. *Manas ata* died, but Kanikei, Bakai *ata*, Semetei, Aichurok – they all vanished in one night. They were beloved by God. [Their spirits] fly [around us]. Those who can see them become great people, they become great *manaschys*.

But Purists often express anxieties about what they consider to be the epic’s “shamanistic” and “un-Islamic” elements. As Ainura, who graduated from a Tablighi Jama’at medreseh, told me, “I went [to the Mausoleum of *Manas*], but I don’t really know why. It can be visited as a museum, but not as a place to pray. It is said that *Manas ata* was a Muslim. But people are praying to him. This is not right.” Despite such misgivings, however, many “purists” also view *Manas* as an important symbol of the Kyrgyz people’s Islamic heritage. Some draw parallels between the story of *Manas* and

²²⁰ Bakai *ata* was the friend and adviser of *Manas*. See Chapter Four.

²²¹ Umai *ene* is “a female Goddess, the patroness of children and the family hearth. This is an ancient religious cult of the Kyrgyz people. Kyrgyz midwives, witch-doctors and healers turn to Umai-ene when assisting in childbirth or when healing a patient, with the words: ‘This is not my hand, this is [the] hand of Umai-Ene’ (Aitpaeva & Egemberdieva, 2009, p. 359).

the lives of people today: just as Manas's faith allowed him to lead the Kyrgyz people to glory in the past, for example, so to will the Kyrgyz nation's faith in the present day. As Imam Almanbet told me, "My own father has no connection with Islam. But I studied Islam and now I know all about it. Likewise, Manas's father didn't know about Islam. But because Manas understood Islam, he was able to unite the split Kyrgyz tribes into a whole nation. He read *namaz*. He died while reading *namaz* ... Manas is our history. Our hero. He followed Islam."

Likewise, while Abdulrahim *moldo* says that he believes that the *Manas* epic itself is fictional, he nevertheless speaks reverently of the times that he has visited the *Manastyn Kūmbözü*. While there, he says, he reads the Qur'an for the spirits of the dead, and he believes that the mausoleum is a site that possesses powerful *baraka*, or spiritual energy. Abdulrahim also points out that the epic contains numerous episodes that revolve around the characters' faith in Islam, and their personal sacrifices for their beliefs. In a version of the epic told by the famous *manaschy*, Sayakbay Karalaev, Manas's birth is foretold by his father during the holy month of Ramadan. Likewise, Manas's companion Almambet, the son of a Buddhist Oirat khan, undergoes a harrowing process of rejection and separation from his own family and community when he decides to become a Muslim and lead his people towards his new faith. When Almambet is ambushed, Manas's ancestor spirits²²² come to his aid, helping him to escape death. The spirits then lead him to Manas himself, who, despite never having met Almambet, nevertheless recognizes him as a fellow Muslim and declares him to be his brother (Hatto, 1990, pp. 13-71).

²²² The veneration of ancestor spirits is a crucial component of Muslim practice throughout Central Asia (DeWeese, 1994, pp. 36-37). For a detailed study of this practice among the Kazakhs, see (Privratsky, 2001, pp. 154-188).

If Almambet forsook his family and his people for his faith, then, as Abdulrahim points out, Manas gave his own life. Kongurbay, a Kalmak warlord, sent an old woman to spy on Manas in order to find out what the indomitable hero's weakness was. He learned that Manas was vulnerable while performing *namaz*, since his attention was completely directed towards his religious duties. Thus, Kongurbay was able to sneak up on him and slay him with a spear while he was praying, in effect making a martyr out of Manas. Consequently, said Abdulrahim *molod*, "a nationalist will take nationalism out of Manas. But a Muslim's *iman* will be strengthened by reading it."

As Abdulrahim alludes to, the debates about the Islamic significance of the *Manas* epic are also occurring against the backdrop of wider discussions about the significance of the epic to Kyrgyz national identity more broadly. For example, some people, including Tengrists and others who see Islam as a threatening force in Kyrgyz society, argue that the *Manas* epic actually documents the Kyrgyz people's "authentic" pre-Islamic traditions. As the *manaschy* Zamirbek Bayalinov told me:

The epic contains many religions, both ancient and modern. It contains Tengrism and Buddhism. Many scholars say that this fact shows *Manas*'s antiquity. It also means that *Manas* existed before Islam came to the Kyrgyz. Today Manas *ata*'s religion is considered as Islam, but he is not considered to be a "real" Muslim.²²³ His roots were Tengrism. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *manaschys* started adding Islam in their recitals of *Manas*."

Moreover, while some Tengrists are resolutely opposed to Islam, others "find [Tengrism] completely compatible with Islam, seeing it as the Islam practiced by their ancestors before the arrival of Islam" (Montgomery, 2014, p. 30). The *manaschi* Doolot Sydykov,

²²³ By this he means that many "purists" do not view the epic as conforming to a universal conception of Islam.

for example, asserts that “There is only one God. In Arab language it is Allah and in Kyrgyz it is Tengri. Kyrgyz place Manas right after God.”

Such sentiments, unsurprisingly, are deeply unsettling for many “purist” Muslims, for whom they represent a form of *shirk*. Imam Almanbet at the Bishkek Central Mosque, for example, expressed concern, that despite the epic’s Islamic content, *Manas* can still be used as a vehicle to spread “a new religion” – namely, Tengrism, which rejects Islam as not belonging to “authentic” Kyrgyz culture. Likewise, Bakyt, the director of the Adep Bashati medreseh, suggested that Tengrists and others who are opposed to Islam have deliberately downplayed the importance of Islam in the epic:

Basically, in the epic *Manas* there were episodes when Manas performed *namaz*. But now it is obvious that people deny it. It might be an official policy. Because many people work against Islam ... Many things about Islam were written in the *Manas* epic, but our compatriots who believe in Tengrism do not want to speak about it openly.

For many Kyrgyz Muslims, then, the religious importance of the *Manas* epic lies not so much in its inherent spiritual significance, but rather that certain aspects of the epic establish a fundamental connection between the Kyrgyz nation and Islam.

The *Manas* epic has thus become an important site of contestation among adherents of different grounded theologies in Kyrgyzstan today. These essentially theological disputes, however, have direct bearing on the constitution of the public sphere, in which the *Manas* epic plays an increasingly important role as a nationalist ideology, as well as the ways in which the relationship between religion and Kyrgyz national identity are talked about and understood. As such, the debates over *Manas* can be seen as a microcosm of the larger debates over these very issues that are occurring throughout Kyrgyz society, and which this chapter has sought to shed some light on. As

the *manaschy* Rysbai Isakov lamented, “[A]t present, this conflict is growing. Right now, religious people²²⁴ and those who follow *kyrgyzchylyk* interpret the information given in *Manas* epic differently, and that causes divisions. But *Manas* should be used to unite people, not to incite conflict.”

5.8: The “Religio-national Symbiosis” as a Grounded Theology?

Craig Calhoun has suggested that nations are best thought of as “discursive formation[s],’ a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness, but is also problematic enough that it keeps generating more issues and questions, keeps propelling us into further talk, keep producing debates over how to think about it” (Calhoun, 1997, p. 3). If this is the case, then turning our attention to Muslim grounded theologies in Kyrgyzstan can provide some insight into the meanings invested in nationality and religion, and their points of convergence and divergence as they manifest themselves in practice. As the preceding pages have demonstrated, Islam in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is vital, dynamic, and multi-faceted – it is, to use Gabrielle Marranci’s phrase, a complex “map of discourses” that provide a window in the different ways in which Kyrgyz people feel to be Muslim” (Marranci, 2008, p. 146). Far from having been rendered culturally inert during the Soviet period, Islam has assumed a central place in Kyrgyzstan’s social, political, and moral spheres. Not only are Islamic arguments deployed in the fight against social ills like corruption and alcoholism, for example, but they also have bearing on the ways in which people understand what it means to be Kyrgyz.

Indeed, the relationship between religion and nationality in Kyrgyzstan is far more complex than the phrase “to be Kyrgyz means to be Muslim” suggests, since that relationship is manifested in different, and oftentimes competing, grounded theologies.

²²⁴ He is referring to those whom I have labeled “purists.”

Moreover, as David Montgomery reminds us: “As a moral foundation for life, Islam is not fashioned by most who identify as Muslims as a fragmented aspect of life, but rather a fully integrated explanation of life and requisite behavior” (Montgomery, 2015, p. 233). As a consequence, seemingly obscure issues like the propriety of *ziyarat* have become exceptionally important loci for debates over what constitutes “real” Islam. Moreover, as the divergent interpretations of the theological significance of the *Manas* epic suggest, debates over the meaning of Islam are not irrelevant to discourses surrounding Kyrgyz national identity.

The state, of course, does not stand entirely apart from these kinds of discourses. As we have seen, for example, the Kyrgyz government has itself become a theological actor, working in cooperation with the Muftiyat to elaborate the discursive boundaries and contours of a normative “national” Islam. There is, however, another, though less immediately obvious, dimension in which the state is bound up with the sacred. According to the logic of the sovereign-territorial ideal (Murphy, 1996), the state itself has become conceptualized as the political and territorial expression of the nation. The state thus not only functions as the political and social arena in which grounded theologies are contested and negotiated, but also both acts upon them and appears an *outcome* of these dynamics, insofar as it is inseparable from the discourses – including theological ones – that work to shape national identity. In the contemporary world, state and sacred should be seen as being mutually constitutive. This, then, is where we can find a true “national-religious symbiosis.” However, the theological orientation of states is not only to be found in the delineation of social boundaries. As the next chapter will explore, the political territory of the modern nation-state represents a map of theology and

memory, in which the connection between religion, nation, and state, can be seen as being woven into the fabric of statehood itself.

Chapter Six: The Sacred Geographies of Kyrgyzstan: Grounding Ideology and Theology

Every culture can be conceptualized as spreading out over its shared landscapes a layer of associations and narratives that assign meaning to otherwise insignificant spots on our earth.

- Martyn Smith (2008, p. 5).

The graves of the dead are the most powerful of the visible emblems which unify all the activities of the separate groups of the community.

- W. Lloyd Warner (1959, p. 278).

The previous chapter explored the role theology plays in shaping discourses surrounding society and national identity, and how secular states intervene in the religious sphere. Importantly, such interventions occur not only in the regulatory sphere, but also in the realm of religious doctrine and practice, effectively positioning the state as a theological actor. This analysis also pointed to the ways in which the nation-state can itself be theologically constituted, suggesting that discourses on national identity are often inseparable from theological debates over correct doctrine and practice. The nation-state itself, insofar as it represents the political-territorial expression of the nation, cannot

therefore be wholly divorced from the disparate subjectivities that are generated out of that process of contestation.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that theological underpinnings of the nation-state exist not only on the plane of discourse, but have a crucial geographic dimension as well, which grounds and locates theology, cultural memory, and national identity. For example, although the process of *razmezhevanie*, which effectively created Kyrgyzstan as a bounded national territory,²²⁵ was guided by a set of explicitly secular (or atheist) ideological rationales, the contemporary political geography of the Kyrgyz Republic is nevertheless inseparable from geographies of the sacred. Crucially, however, these sacred geographies do not serve merely as a “pre-national” stratum over which political geographies have been superimposed. As we will see, the geographies of the nation-state should not be read as constituting a “palimpsest”²²⁶ upon which the traces of the past remain visible “beneath” the dominant logic and assumptions of the sovereign-territorial regime. Rather, sacred and political geographies, even in legally secular states like Kyrgyzstan, are deeply enmeshed and mutually constitutive.

This chapter begins by briefly examining how scholars have theorized the relationship between identity and the nation-state. While globalization has altered the nature of this relationship in some respects, nationalism and the logic of the modern state system still exert a powerful influence over the ways in which many people imagine and articulate their identities. However, as we will see, the ideational hegemony of the nation-state not only influences the ways in which people imagine concepts like nationality,

²²⁵ See Chapter Three.

²²⁶ See Chapter One.

citizenship, and belonging; the conceptual frameworks of nation- and statehood also work to mold other forms of identity as well, including the religious.

The chapter then addresses the potential drawbacks inherent in the notion of the palimpsest, a common trope in the historical and cultural geographic literatures, to the relationship between sacred and political geographies. As we will see, although the palimpsest metaphor is a useful and powerful analytical device for comprehending and visualizing the impact of successive cultural, political, and economic orders on a particular landscape, it also introduces certain problematic interpretive tendencies. Chief among these issues is the propensity to uncritically reproduce the traditional division between the concepts of “sacred” and the “profane” by conceptualizing the nation-state as somehow having “overwritten” or “displaced” other geographies, especially religious ones. These “other” geographies, meanwhile, are typically portrayed as having been “superceded” by the conditions of modernity.

If we take seriously the insights of the grounded theologies perspective, however, we can begin to recognize not only that the “sacred/profane” binary is conceptually incoherent (as many scholars have indeed argued), but also that the logic of the secular nation-state both conditions and responds to the theological imaginary. Once this relationship is acknowledged, the strict epistemic division between “sacred” and “profane” begins to appear less certain. From this standpoint, then, the palimpsest metaphor seems somewhat inappropriate, since, conceptually speaking, it suggests that the modern, secular state has effectively “overwritten” pre-modern sacred geographies.

One means of illustrating the problems inherent in the palimpsest metaphor is to examine the phenomenon of “museumization”: the process through which sacred sites are

embraced by the state and invested with an alternative set of secular meanings. Traditionally, places are museumized out of an acknowledgement on the part of the state that they carry some kind of historical, cultural, or architectural value; at the same time, however, the process of turning a sacred site into a museum typically involves official efforts to downplay or ignore their underlying religious significance. As we will see, however, the process of museumization, and indeed the *étatisation* of sacred space more generally, cannot fully succeed in effacing the spiritual significance of such places. Instead, and rather paradoxically, it is precisely because of the state's attempts to nullify their transcendental character that it is in "museumized" sacred spaces that the interconnections between the secular and the sacred become particularly apparent.

To illustrate how these interactions occur in the context of the Kyrgyz Republic, the chapter then turns to an examination of the phenomenon of *mazars*, which are crucial not only in Kyrgyz religious life, but also in terms of the role they play in providing an ideational framework around which nationalist and statist discourses are constructed. As we will see, the assumptions that underpin the concept of sovereign territoriality have effectively colonized – or, perhaps, "nationalized" – the religious imaginary by enclosing it within national borders. This section also examines the ways in which Kyrgyzstan's natural environment operates as both as an interface and a site of contestation between the state and the sacred.

Along with *Manas Ordo*, which was discussed in Chapter Four, there is no better example of the ways in which the state and the sacred converge than the *Ata Beyit* memorial near the village of Chong Tash, south of Bishkek. *Ata Beyit*, or "The Grave of the Fathers," was explicitly conceived of by the Kyrgyz state as a *lieu de mémoire* – a

“place of memory” – that gives physical form and location to the collective memory of national tragedy and sacrifice. At the same time, however, the site occupies a space in Kyrgyzstan’s sacred geography, serving as a *mazar* to which people visit and pray for the dead. Like *Manas Ordo*, then, *Ata Beyit* is thus a site where the “sacred” and the “secular” are not only inextricably comingled, but are in fact mutually supporting.

As noted in the previous chapter, moreover, there has been a resurgence of Islam in the public sphere in Kyrgyzstan, and indeed throughout Central Asia more generally. This phenomenon has been accompanied by the simultaneous growth in the number of mosques and medresehs in the country. The rapid increase in the number of Islamic religious buildings reflects the growing importance of particular interpretations of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, and it is not especially surprising that such trends are producing visible changes in both the physical and cultural landscapes. The expanding network of Islamic institutions throughout the country is also situated within a discursive matrix that includes questions of security, terrorism, and extremism. Thus, in response to the perception that these mosques and medresehs are being infiltrated by people who sympathize with groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Islamic State, the Kyrgyz government has launched an aggressive program meant to test the “knowledge” of imams and headmasters, thereby reinforcing its role as a theological actor.

6.1 Identities and Territory

In an influential article entitled “The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory,” the political geographer John Agnew argued that social scientists have tended to privilege understandings of spatiality that rest upon three faulty assumptions, namely: 1) “the reification of state territorial spaces as

fixed units of secure sovereign space”; 2) “the division of the domestic from the foreign”; and 3) “the territorial state as existing prior to and as a container of society” (Agnew, 1994, p. 77). Agnew’s ambition was to highlight what he viewed as the problematic conceptualization of the state as something essentially timeless and unchanging, despite the reality that “[c]omplex population movements, the growing mobility of capital, increased ecological interdependence, and the ‘chronopolitics’ of new military technologies” (ibid.) all pose increasingly stark challenges to traditional ways of understanding of the role and significance of the territorial state in the contemporary, globalized world. By drawing attention to the ways in which the concept of the nation-state has entrenched itself as the default unit of social and political analysis, “The Territorial Trap” helped to foreground the necessity of paying closer attention to alternative – and frequently more important – scales of analysis.

Agnew’s central insight has thus been critical in shaping the ways in which scholars understand not only how nation-states have, in certain respects, found themselves at the mercy of the countervailing forces of sub-state localism and supra-state globalism, but also to the historical contingency of the nation-state itself. At the same time, however, the nation-state does not appear to be in any danger of disappearing. Consequently, many other scholars, while acknowledging Agnew’s insights, have pointed out that, regardless of the territorial state’s historical contingency, and despite the social, political, and economic forces that are (and indeed always have been) undermining its logic and assumptions, the territorial state continues to enjoy a remarkable normative currency.

For example, although Alexander Murphy concedes that “[r]ecent decades have seen dramatic challenges to the traditional functional prerogatives of the territorial state, in the form of supranationalist projects, shared sovereignty arrangements, foreign interventions, globalised economic networks, and much more” (Murphy, 2010, p. 771), he nevertheless calls attention to the need for further attention to “how the sovereign territorial ideal as it developed in conjunction with the modern state system continues to shape ideas and practices in ways that are integral to identity communities and international relations” (ibid., p. 772). That is, despite the reality of pervasively globalized circuits of capital, of information, and of people, the “dissolving” of state borders (at least for certain people, in certain places), and the emergence of “postnational” identities, politics, and economies,²²⁷ the concept of nation-statehood has by no means lost its normative power. Indeed, as Murphy points out: “The identity literature has long evidenced a *conceptual conflation of the terms nation and state* – a notable example of the territorial trap’s influence on conceptions of identity; when states are treated as immutable sovereign spaces, state and nation become interchangeable” (ibid., p. 769, emphasis added).

Ultimately, the nation-state and national identity are more than simply discursive categories, but they have been reified in a variety of ways. The sovereign territorial regime – “the assumption that the land surface of the earth should be divided up into

²²⁷ One of Kyrgyzstan’s most important economic assets, the Kumtor gold mine, for example, is owned by a Canadian firm. Similarly, remittances from migrant workers, primarily in Russia, make up nearly a third of the country’s GDP; these remittances, moreover, are themselves affected by broader economic and political dynamics, including the falling price of oil and Western sanctions against Russia as a result of the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in the Donbas region of Ukraine (Trilling, 2015). The “economy of Kyrgyzstan” is thus an outcome of processes occurring simultaneously at the sub- and supra-state levels far beyond the political borders of Kyrgyzstan itself. Indeed, as Agnew notes: “The struggle for jobs and incomes takes place within a global spatial division of labor that no longer parallels territorial-state boundaries” (Agnew, 1994, p. 75).

discrete territorial units, each with a government that exercises substantial authority within its own territory (Murphy, 1996, p. 81) – is itself is one means by which the connection between nation, state, and territory is grounded and made real. Thus, as Murphy notes, “No matter how disputed or how much dishonored in practice, state governmental elites claim authority over a particular segment of Earth’s surface on behalf of their people – whether ethnically or politically defined (Murphy, 2013, p. 1217). Furthermore, as Anssi Paasi has pointed out, national identity and territory are often bound together through a given group’s emotional, affective, and mnemonic connections to a particular place. Paasi notes that the concept of national independence, for instance, is comprised of

much more than the legal aspects related to sovereignty ...
It is also a social process and set of practices/discourses that bring together an actual (or aspired) sovereignty, the history of a territory, as well as a selection of routinized habits, events, memories, and also narratives and iconographies related to the purported national identity (Paasi, 2016, p. 4).

As these habits, memories, and so forth are performed and reproduced on a daily basis – what Michael Billig (1995) calls “banal nationalism” – people begin to form attachments not only with the “imagined community” of their co-nationals, but also with what Benedict Anderson has referred to as the “logo-map” of the nation-state, a decontextualized image that most commonly depicts the political *shape* of the nation-state. According to Anderson, the logo-map functions as “[p]ure sign, no longer compass to the world,” which makes it uniquely suitable for “penetrat[ing] deep into the popular imagination” (B. Anderson, 2006, p. 175). Consequently, the idea of the nation-state,

framed and encapsulated by the logo-map, continues to provide the scaffolding around which people construct their identity, their community, and make sense of their place in the world. Indeed, as Prys Gruffudd reminds us: “Territory is nationalized by its treatment as a distinctive land,” which serves both as a home for and, perhaps more importantly, as an expression of, the nation itself (Gruffudd, 1995, p. 236). Therefore, while the nation-state should by no means be considered to be the *only* important unit of analysis, we must nevertheless concede the normative functions that it continues to perform in the framing of politics and identity (and the politics *of* identity).

We must also recognize, however, the crucial importance of the interplay between the political geography of the nation-state and other geographies connected to identity formation at the individual and communal levels. Religious geographies, for example, despite often existing prior to the state, have in many regards come to be shaped by its logic and assumptions. In some cases, moreover, sacred geographies are in fact embraced and invested by the state itself. At the same time, we should not treat the state as if it has effectively *supplanted* other geographies. For example, the relationship between religious and political geographies is not uni-directional: the religious, as we saw in the last chapter, always possesses the capacity to “act back” on the political, questioning its assumptions and exerting a powerful influence on the kinds of subjectivities that are generated by ceaseless social, cultural, and political discourse. As the next section will show, the political and the sacred coincident and overlapping, and should be viewed as coexistential.

6.2 Palimpsest Geographies?

As described in Chapter Two, Central Asian history has always been

characterized by a continuous influx of disparate peoples, cultures, and ideas. Each successive wave left its own traces – be they linguistic, religious, scientific, or political – and Central Asia, perhaps more so than any other part of the world, has been – and in some respects, still is – shaped by such tides. This history has induced many scholars to search for the “buried imprints” of past societies on Central Asia. S. Frederick Starr, for instance, has described what he views as the “geological layering of religions” in Central Asian history, with Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, shamanism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism each constituting a discrete socio-historical stratum (Starr, 2013, p. 96). In this view, although long buried under successive “layers,” traces of past societies and religious communities are sometimes still visible – not only in decaying Sogdian ruins and Tengrist steles, but also in the persistence of certain cultural practices, such as *kyrgyzchylyk* or the celebration of *Nowruz*,²²⁸ which still exist in the present day.²²⁹

Starr’s likening of Central Asian history to a process of geological layering is by no means novel: cultural geographers, for example, have long employed the metaphor of the palimpsest to describe precisely the kind of “geological layering” of socio-cultural influences that Starr discerns in Central Asia (see for example: Crang, 1996; Mitin, 2007, 2012; A. Taylor, 2000; Tuan, 2003). Although Donald Meinig (1979) was the first to use the term “palimpsest” to describe a landscape, the idea was prefigured by the work of cultural geographers in early twentieth century. Figures like Carl Sauer and Derwent Whittlesey began to focus on the ways in which cultural landscapes changed over time through a process Whittlesey called “sequent occupance” (1929). These ideas presented a

²²⁸ *Nowruz* is a Persian holiday marking the new year, which is said to begin on the Spring Equinox. The celebration of *Nowruz* is associated with Zoroastrianism, and is common throughout Central Asia.

²²⁹ Rafis Abazov, for example, asserts: “The popular beliefs that survived the thousands of years to the present have their main roots in the pre-Islamic religious practices of the Turkic-speaking nomadic people” (Abazov, 2007, p. 62).

direct challenge to the then-prevalent notion of geographic determinism, and, like the palimpsest metaphor, emphasize the ways in which different cultures and historical epochs leave distinct and enduring traces on the landscape.

Although the work of many cultural geographers who have employed the palimpsest as an analytical tool has focused on landscape succession in specific urban or rural settings, the palimpsest metaphor has also found application beyond the scope of particular localities and cityscapes. Indeed, whole cultures and societies have been conceptualized as constituting palimpsests. Anthony D. Smith, for example, has suggested that nations constitute a “palimpsest on which are recorded experiences and identities of different epochs and a variety of ethnic formations, the earlier influencing and being modified by the later” [sic] (A. Smith, 1995, pp. 59-60). Similarly, in the context of Central Asia, the imposition of national identity and nation-state borders under the Soviets has been depicted as having been “layered” on top of – and indeed superseded – other geographies and forms of identity. Whereas in the past tribal, linguistic, and other markers served to denote both individual and communal identity, it has been argued that the imposition of national identity as a normative category, along with the concomitant division of Central Asia into separate national republics, resulted in an irreversible reconfiguration of political and geographic imaginaries. As John Heathershaw and David Gullette have argued:

In post-Soviet newly independent states, the lives and bodies of citizens are particularly affected by the recent past of becoming sovereign, which itself is a distinctive legacy of the development of the national question ... The nation was the highest form of identity, including the formal recognition of a territory, based on a recognized

ethnic nationality ... (Gullette & Heathershaw, 2015, p. 131).

Furthermore, according to this argument, the inevitable internalization of nationality as the dominant category of personal and communal identification also effectively rendered obsolete alternative forms of political organization, such as monarchy, nomadic confederation, the city-state, and so forth. In this reading, the fundamental reordering of the political geographic landscape both reflected and reified the broader shift towards the internalization of nationality as the primary category of personal and communal identity. Consequently, even where alternative forms of social organization have persisted – in discourses surrounding “tribalism” in Kyrgyzstan (Gullette, 2010), for example, or in depictions of Islam’s role in contemporary Central Asia – they are almost always described as constitutive elements of national identity.

In other words, the figure of the palimpsest implies that, while modern modes of political, economic, and territorial organization have become normative in Central Asia, there are nevertheless traces of the past just below the surface, glimpses of which might occasionally be observed between the cracks in the edifice of secular modernity. It is only as the arbitrary “shreds and patches” of culture (Gellner, 2006, p. 55) that are exploited by nations to ground their legitimacy that such traces are typically acknowledged as having any significance whatsoever to the contemporary age.²³⁰ The palimpsest metaphor therefore effectively reproduces a teleological epistemology in which modernity is

²³⁰ It is worth noting that Doreen Massey has also pushed back against the “geological layering” metaphor, with which she is sometimes associated – see: Massey (1995); (Warde, 1985). As she notes in *For Space*: “[T]his is to imagine the space being mapped – which is a space as one simultaneity – as the product of superimposed horizontal structures rather than a full contemporaneous coexistence and becoming” (2005, p. 110). Ultimately, she concludes, “[c]oevalness may be pointed to, but it is not established, through the metaphor of the palimpsest. Palimpsest is too archeological” (ibid.).

conceived of as having “overwritten” alternative models of social, political, and economic organization, and, as a consequence, their geographies as well.

Even when traces of these older modes survive as faint outlines in cultural memory and in the landscape, they are understood as being essentially ossified, and possessing no symbolic autonomy beyond their instrumental functions vis-à-vis national identity. As we will see in the next section, however, this way of conceptualizing the relationship between political and sacred geographies is ultimately unsatisfying. Not only does it obscure the continuing vitality of the sacred in the modern, secular nation-state, but it also obfuscates the important ways in which the two are interrelated and mutually supporting.

6.2.1 Sacred and Secular

Although the palimpsest metaphor remains a useful and illuminating tool, it also suffers from some of the same drawbacks as the “national-religious symbiosis” argument described in Chapter Five. For example, the figure of the palimpsest relies on the assumption that the political and economic geographies of the modern nation-state have in essence “overwritten” and subsumed other geographies, much in the same way that nationality is depicted as having subsumed other forms of identity. As we saw in the previous chapter, however, the relationship between national and other identities, especially religious ones, is characterized by its myriad interrelations and contestations, not by fixity and consensus: to say that “being Kyrgyz means being Muslim” elides the very real debates about what both of those categories actually signify. In a similar fashion, rather than insisting that political and religious geographies constitute largely distinct “strata,” it may ultimately be more productive to reconceptualize the nation-state

as constituting a series of *coexistential geographies*²³¹ among which putatively discrete “layers” are impossible to disentangle.

Importantly, if we accept the notion of coexistential geographies as a starting point, then we must also question the traditional division between “sacred” and “profane” spaces. Much, of course, has been written about the subject of sacred space (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Kong, 1993; Park, 1994, pp. 249-258; Scott & Simpson-Housley, 1991; J. Z. Smith, 1987; Tuan, 1978), but in many respects the most influential treatment of the topic remains Mircea Eliade’s landmark *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959). Eliade’s central argument rests on what he sees as a fundamental ontological distinction between the concepts of “sacred” and “profane.”

Eliade locates the source of this distinction in the “hierophany,” which he defines as the penetration of the transcendental into the mundane world, “a break in the homogeneity of space... [a] revelation of an absolute reality, as opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding space” (ibid., p. 21). “Every sacred space,” he goes on to argue, “implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (ibid., p. 26). However, by dividing the world into “the sacred” and “the profane,” Eliade implicitly denies the possibility that spaces can exist simultaneously in different registers, at the same time sacred *and* profane. Ultimately, although Eliade does concede that “even the

²³¹ My use of the term “coexistential geographies” is intended to distinguish the phenomenon under consideration here from the poststructuralist “hybrid geographies” described by Sarah Whatmore. According to Whatmore: “At its most skeletal, ‘hybrid geographies’ takes a radical tack on social agency manoeuvring between two theoretical commitments. The first is to the de-centring of social agency, apprehending it as a ‘precarious achievement’ spun between social actors rather than a manifestation of unitary intent... The second is to its de-coupling from the subject/object binary such that the material and the social intertwine and interact in all manner of promiscuous combinations... (Whatmore, 2002, p. 4). At the same time, I seek to avoid the sense of “non-interacting” in the term “simultaneity” connoted by Jonathan Z. Smith (1987, p. 110).

most desecralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world” (ibid., p. 23), his perspective essentially precludes the possibility of coexistential geographies – either a place is “sacred,” or it is something else.²³²

Consequently, while Eliade’s arguments about the nature of and distinction between profane and sacred spaces are in many respects foundational, they have not been immune from criticism. Jonathan Z. Smith, for example, has called into question the original ontological division between the two categories, suggesting that the real difference between them can in fact be discerned in how their significance is perceived (or not). Sacred space, according to Smith, is only sacred because people make it that way:

The temple serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference. Within the temple, the ordinary (which to any outside eye or ear remains wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes “sacred,” simply by being there. A ritual object or action becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way. From such a point of view, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational ones. Sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement (J. Z. Smith, 1987, p. 104).

In highlighting the slippage and uncertainty between the experience of profane and sacred space, Smith thus brings us closer to an understanding of coexistential geographies. However, like Eliade, he still appears to conceptualize space as being experienced as either one or the other, the main difference being the ritual orientation of a particular

²³² Indeed, his formulation distinctly recalls the image of the palimpsest.

person. Consequently, Smith maintains that “[r]itual is, above all, an assertion of *difference*” (ibid., p. 109, emphasis added). This fundamental distinction, Smith asserts, is one of figurative “location” – that is, in the sacred *or* in the profane, but never in both: “Ritual is a relation of difference between ‘nows’ – the now of everyday life and the now of ritual space; the simultaneity, but not the coexistence, of ‘here’ and ‘there’” (ibid., p. 110).

By contrast, in responding to Lily Kong’s call for scholarly inquiry “beyond the officially sacred” (Kong, 2001, p. 226), the geographer Julian Holloway has argued that it is necessary to explore “the sacred *in* the everyday, where sacred and profane imperatives, forces, and sites *interact and impact upon one another*” (Holloway, 2003, p. 1963, emphasis added). Holloway’s approach thus departs from that of Smith in some very important ways. In particular, he rejects Smith’s assertion that the sacred can be found somewhere other than in the profane itself. Indeed, according to Holloway, “instead of focusing our accounts upon sacred spaces and times separate from the geographies and temporalities of our everyday (re)making of the world, we should seek out the extraordinary as practiced and sustained in the ordinary” (ibid. p. 1961). From this perspective, it makes sense to take seriously the ways in which sacred and political geographies implicate and constitute one another, a dynamic that neither the palimpsest metaphor nor the sharp division between “sacred and profane” fully acknowledge.

6.2.2 Grounded Theologies and Coexistential Space

Curiously, Eliade himself appears to have conceived of the human psyche as resembling a kind of palimpsest, upon which traces can be found of what he calls *homo*

religiosus – “religious man” – are indelibly inscribed. As he argues in *The Sacred and the Profane*:

In short, the majority of men “without religion” still hold to pseudo religions and degenerated mythologies. There is nothing surprising in this, for, as we saw, profane man is the descendent of *homo religiosus* and he cannot wipe out his own history – that is, the behavior of his religious ancestors which has made him what he is today. This is all the more true because a great part of his existence is fed by impulses that come to him from the depths of his being, from the zone that has been called the “unconscious” (ibid., p. 209).²³³

According to Eliade, although *homo religiosus* might have been “‘eclipsed’ in the darkness” of the modern mind (ibid., p. 213), then “nonreligious man,” despite his putatively secular orientation, nevertheless preserves the fundamental religious impulse in his psyche and even performs it in unreflected-upon ways: “[E]very existential crisis,” writes Eliade, “once again puts into question both the reality of the world and man’s presence in the world. This means that the existential crisis is, finally, “religious,” since on the archaic levels of culture *being* and *the sacred* are one” (Eliade, 1959, p. 210).

Surprisingly, Eliade’s conception of *homo religiosus*, combined with the insights of later interlocutors like Julian Holloway, point towards the kinds of coexistential geographies we are interested in here. The final piece of the puzzle is Justin Tse’s notion of grounded theologies, which was introduced in Chapter Five. Although he does not

²³³ It is perhaps worth noting that David Sopher, in his book *Geography of Religions*, has similarly labeled modern ideologies like nationalism and Communism as “quasi religions” (1967). Talal Asad, for his part, rejects the likening of ideology to religion, arguing that to do so “miss[es] the nature and consequence of the revolution brought about by the Enlightenment doctrine of secularism in the structure of modern collective representations and practices” (1999, p. 187).

necessarily endorse Eliade's psychological conceptualization of *homo religiosus*, Tse nevertheless calls for renewed attention to Eliade's suggestion that "humanity retains a sense of transcendence despite the advent of modernity" (Tse, 2014, p. 205). Tse therefore advocates for what he calls a "critical return to *homo religiosus*," which, he argues, "would read 'religion' and 'the secular' as performing the boundary between the public and the private as a grounded theology" (ibid).

In fact, Tse explicitly argues that "it is not necessary to define the religious in geography, as if there were anything that could be considered outside the bounds of religious inquiry" (Tse, 2014, p. 202). A grounded theology perspective thus permits us to contemplate coexistential geographies without resorting to the figure of the palimpsest (and its attendant division between the strata of "sacred" and "profane") or falling back on the assertion of difference immanent in the performance of ritual. Instead, we can begin to see how political and sacred geographies (for instance) are intertwined and mutually constitutive.

James Duncan (1990), for example, has described in great detail how the morphology, the siting, and the development of the capital city of the Kandyan Kingdom, which held sway over much of eastern Sri Lanka between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, all served to reproduce a particular set of cosmological principles on the physical landscape. The location of the city itself was said to occupy a "liminal" space between heaven and earth. As Duncan explains, the site of the capital was selected because it was there that observers witnessed a cobra was chasing a mongoose, thus

marking it as a place where “the normal order of the mundane world was reversed”²³⁴ (ibid. p. 91).

While on the surface this seems like a fairly typical assertion of the “difference” inherent in sacred space, it must not be forgotten that despite the city’s other-worldly orientation, the capital of Kandy was also a center of political power. This power, moreover, was not viewed as being sequestered from the power of heaven; rather, it was understood that temporal power itself was derived from the cosmos. Consequently, numerous urban development initiatives pursued by the Kandyan leadership, including the sub-division of the capital city into precisely twenty-one districts, and the decision to physically redevelop the city into a roughly rectangular shape, represented attempts to harness divine energy by physically altering the landscape for the purposes of shoring up the political power of the monarchy (ibid., p. 93). The political and urban geographies of the Kingdom of Kandy were therefore quite intentionally linked with theological principles.²³⁵

Indeed, as we have already seen in our discussion of *Manas Ordo*,²³⁶ the distinction between political and sacred geographies is seldom as stark as is commonly depicted: *Manas Ordo* is at the same time a political monumental space and a destination for religious pilgrims. Moreover, it is not insignificant that the reasons that *Manas Ordo* maintains its significance in both the political and transcendental registers are rooted in the same source: the *Manas* epic itself, which serves both as an ideological charter and a

²³⁴ Mongooses typically feed on cobras.

²³⁵ Duncan is quick to remind us, however, that the ways in which these landscapes were interpreted was always a matter of contestation. He cautions: “The lesson for geographers... is that if the political efficacy of textual messages encoded in the built environment is to be assessed, it should be studied not only from the point of view of those who build it, but also from the point of view of those who read it” (Duncan, 1990, p. 154). As the case of *Manas Ordo* demonstrates, Duncan’s warning is well-taken.

²³⁶ See Chapter Four.

repository of cultural memory. The “sacred” and “profane” functions of *Manas Ordo* cannot, therefore, be understood as being ontologically distinct: like the city of Kandy it is a place where theologies are grounded and the coexistential geographies of state and sacred are manifest. As we will see in the next section, such qualities are even evident in places where the state has attempted to efface the sacred.

6.2.3 *Urban Transformation, “Museumization,” and Sacred Geography*

As Duncan’s depiction of the Kandyan Kingdom suggests, it is important to recognize that the confluence of political and sacred geographies does not necessitate the “overwriting” of the sacred by the political. But the comingling of the sacred and the profane is not relegated to the ancient past, or to societies like Kandy, which are customarily described using terms like “traditionalist” or “pre-modern.” Jeffrey Meyer, for example, has evocatively described Washington, D.C. itself as being characterized by “a fusion of the secular and sacred, a uniquely modern blend of politics and religious that is nevertheless grounded in the archaic past” (J. Meyer, 2001, p. 8). Meyer, of course, is not suggesting that Washington, D.C. constitutes a “sacred space” per se. Rather, he argues:

There is a religious message implicit in most of the buildings, memorials, art, and iconography of Washington that recalls the original conviction so often stated by the Founding Fathers, that the Almighty stood behind the American experiment. As the Great Seal of the United States proclaims, *annuit coeptis, novus ordo seclorum*: “He [God] gave his approval to these beginnings, a new world order” (ibid., pp. 3-4).

From Meyer's point of view, then, Washington, D.C. is a city whose design and subsequent development embedded and incorporated religious symbolism into its landscape:

Besides the clear expressions of civil religion, there are older and less obvious strands of religious meaning in Washington, which have their roots in the world of biblical thought, both Jewish and Christian. At the foundation of American politics is the deliberate attempt to separate the state from any specific church, while at the same time protecting the right of citizens to freely practice their religions. Still, the Founding Fathers were in certain ways embedded in the world of biblical language and thought because it had, over the centuries, so thoroughly penetrated European and American culture. They spoke the words of the Bible, and they thought by its metaphors (J. Meyer, 2001, p. 6)

Meyer's observations reveal the difficulties inherent in attempting to neatly separate "sacred space" from "profane space." Washington, D.C., after all, is undeniably a place of immense political and economic power, but it is also a city that is composed of "symmetries and axial boulevards, shrines, and monumental architecture whose underlying purpose is to give a transcendent meaning to the city" (ibid., p. 8). Indeed, despite the clearly secular impulses that have underpinned American politics and society since the country's founding, Meyer's work points to the persistence of Eliade's *homo religiosus*. In advocating his "critical return" to Eliade, Justin Tse reminds us that "those who claim to be 'religious' may be performing secular theologies in their spatial practices

and... those who purport to have no 'religious' leanings make places informed by implicit theological narratives" (Tse, 2014, p. 214).

If putatively "secular" places, such as Washington, D.C., can thus be shown to be pervaded with religious significance, we can, conversely, also observe the coexistentiality of sacred and political geographies in places where efforts have been made to efface the former altogether. In the Soviet Union, for example, the state's various campaigns against religion, whether they took the form of propaganda, discrimination, or outright violence, were all elements of a much broader program of social revolution, one that was aimed at fundamentally transforming the peoples of the Soviet Union into modern, industrialized subjects. According to Marxist-Leninist teleology, religion was conceptualized as nothing more than a regressive, counterrevolutionary leftover from the past, one that impeded the achievement of what was referred to as the "radiant future" (Froese, 2008, p. 45).

Considering the intrusive, centralized control the state attempted to exert in all dimensions of political, economic, and social life,²³⁷ these kinds of ideological imperatives inevitably carried major implications in the realm of urban planning. Particularly in the fermentative years of the early Soviet era, the transformation of urban spaces and the rebuilding of cities according to putatively "socialist" principles was viewed as being key to reshaping society and producing modern, revolutionary socialist citizens (Kopp, 1970, p. 185; Miliutin, 1930, p. 50). Consequently, throughout the entire Soviet Union, religious buildings of all kinds succumbed to repurposing, sometimes being converted into factories, schools, offices, meeting halls, etc. At other times, they were simply demolished outright: in Central Asia, countless mosques and *madrasas* were

²³⁷ Of course, it must be conceded that the actual amount of control that the center exerted varied considerably at different times, in different places, and among different groups.

razed to make room for hotels, apartment buildings, and movie theatres (Liu, 2012, p. 111).²³⁸



Figure 15: "Oriental" motifs on the facade of the Kyrgyz public television station (photo by author).

However, few in the Soviet government believed that simply knocking down religious buildings and shrines would clearly not enough to effect the desired transformation of society. New buildings would have to be erected in their place, and they would have to reflect and support the ideological priorities of the regime. Thus, as Morgan Liu has pointed out, even the movie theatres and shops that were sometimes constructed on the rubble of demolished religious structures often bore such ideologically

²³⁸ In many instances, little thought was spared for historical or cultural significance. See for example: Colton (1995, pp. 230-233).

appropriate names as “*Rodina*” (“Motherland”) and “*Kosmos*” (“Cosmos”), symbolically demonstrating the triumph of Soviet socialism over backwards superstitions.

The centralized nature of Soviet urban planning meant that many of the new construction projects made use of building designs that were already approved and familiar to architects and planners, who were quite frequently Russians dispatched from Moscow.²³⁹ As Paul Stronski has noted, for example, during the modernization of Tashkent, “Moscow-based planners generally used standard housing designs from other regions of the Soviet Union” (Stronski, 2010, p. 59), rather than drawing from local architectural traditions. At the same time, practitioners of officially-sanctioned “socialist realist” architecture were encouraged to incorporate certain local motifs as part of an effort to give substance to what were supposedly progressive national architectural traditions.

Consequently, in Uzbekistan, for example, where architects assiduously avoided making use of explicitly religious symbols, certain examples of local Islamic architecture like the Registan in Samarkand served as basic points of reference for those trying to discern the putative character of “Soviet-Uzbek” architecture (Stronski, 2010, p. 9).²⁴⁰ In Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, monumental structures (such as war memorials) often included characteristically “Kyrgyz” features like a *tyndyk*, while the facades of apartment and office buildings frequently carried characteristically “Oriental” motifs inspired by traditional Kyrgyz patterns. In this way, while “religion” was deliberately suppressed,

²³⁹ This was particularly the case in the early years of Soviet power, when there were few educated and qualified local specialists.

²⁴⁰ What was largely ignored, of course, was the question of whether or not such buildings in fact represented genuinely “Uzbek” styles – a difficult question to answer in any case, since the modern Uzbek nation, like other Central Asian nationalities, did not exist as such until Soviet ethnographers defined and delineated it.

and while religious structures were destroyed or repurposed, vestiges of Central Asia's Islamic and pre-Islamic heritage were subtly reproduced on the new "socialist" landscape as a result of Soviet "national in form, socialist in content" aesthetic sensibilities.

Moreover, many buildings constructed in this "socialist realist" style stood side-by-side with older structures that had survived and subsequently been pressed into "socially useful" purposes. Indeed, although many mosques, *mazars*, and other religiously significant buildings were razed or simply neglected and left to crumble, certain buildings bearing some particular historical or architectural value were preserved, often being classified as museums of architecture, history, or culture, or simply designated as tourist attractions. In fact, in certain instances such structures were even rebuilt by the Soviet government: in Kyrgyzstan, both the Mausoleum of Manas and the Burana Tower were restored, for example, while the Soviet government also constructed an ethnographic museum on Solomon's Throne in Osh. Likewise, the Registan in Uzbekistan and similar sites in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and elsewhere were also rebuilt and, in some cases, developed into cultural institutions (Atai, 2012).

Such efforts were not, of course, intended to preserve and celebrate the *religious* aspects of such places; instead, they were intended to confirm the Soviets' teleological worldview. Maria Louw, for example, has pointed out that religious structures, such as the Registan, which were fortunate enough to be preserved by the state, often succumbed to what she calls "museumization." The intent underlying the museumization of sacred spaces in Soviet Union was to redirect the narrative surrounding such sites away from their religious significance. Instead they were presented as showpieces of what was framed as the "progressive development" of the Soviet nations toward a socialist "radiant

future." Eva Näripea, for example, has described how museumization functioned in redefining the meaning of the urban landscape in Soviet Tallinn:

“[M]useumization” meant a change in the function of the city, favored by the new regime, where everyday spatial practices were replaced by a frozen museum exhibition. The old meanings and symbolic codes were cancelled, the authentic sense of the place fell back and was replaced by placelessness; pure reactions and experiences were muted... This process is exemplified by St. Nicolas church, which had been severely damaged in World War II. At first, St. Nicolas was supposed to be converted into a museum of scientific atheism... but as the restoration stretched over more than twenty years, the church opened in 1984 as a museum of old art and a concert hall. In such a way... [the church] did not fulfill its original sacred function anymore. It was pushed into the marginal zone of the social arena, into the realm of art, which operated according to the canon socialist realism – “national in form, socialist in content” – and should have been as such, at least in theory, controlled by the authorities (Näripea, 2009, p. 7)

The point, then, was to ossify such structures as remnants of a bygone era – historically significant, perhaps, but long since surpassed by the progressive cultural, political, and economic achievements of Soviet society.

Similarly, Jennifer Webster has described how the Soviet regime attempted to desacralize the geography of Osh:

From the formative days of the Soviet Union up until glasnost, periodic attempts to undermine the religious

significance of the space were devised. These tactics included destruction of sacred buildings (mosques in the city of Osh as well as smaller buildings on the mountain), the construction of the Osh Historical and Archeological Museum at the base of the mountain, an attempt to turn the largest of five sacred caves into a restaurant, and an attempt to discredit religious specialists who worked on the mountain providing services for pilgrims (Webster, 2012, p. 1).

By transforming Central Asia's sacred geography into a network of tourist destinations and museums where Soviet citizens could consume ideologically-curated knowledge about the past (or, perhaps, simply to eat), the state discursively constructed such sites as elements of a didactic narrative that glorified the evolution of modern proletarian culture and the triumph of Soviet power. From the perspective of the Soviet state, as Maria Louw argues,

[t]he social dramas that used to unfold at these places – places where human suffering and hope met the power of the divine to change the course of lives – were bracketed, relegated to place far back in history, before Soviet modernizing forces had eliminated religion as a form of social consciousness and made way for a rationalist, secular outlook (Louw, 2007, p. 53).

In the end, however, these efforts did not accomplish the radical social and psychological transformations that were hoped for. As Lily Kong reminds us, “sacred places are as much invested with symbolic meanings and values by individuals as they are by more impersonal forces (such as the state and its planning agencies...)” (1993, p. 343).

In his study of veneration of the tombs of saints in Egypt Christopher Taylor has remarked on the role of holy places as physical loci of the sacred. Shrines “provided sacred history with certain very specific reference points: real places where believers might go, confident in the certainty that they were in close proximity to the holy.” Meanwhile, visitation to shrines constituted an important element of “a relationship through which believers were able to gain direct access to the sacred past and thereby engage the holy in immediate time and space” (Christopher Taylor, 1990, p. 80). Certain *mazars* for instance, contain the graves of saints who were said to have been endowed with *baraka*, or spiritual powers, while others are recognized for possessing strong *nur*, or holy energy. For believers the association of such places with this energy is indelible: simply destroying or repurposing the physical structures associated with *mazars* did not alter their spiritual significance.

In Soviet Central Asia, *ziyaratchilar* were not dissuaded from performing religious rites simply because a particular site had been converted into an architectural monument. While it was in many cases difficult or impossible to pray openly, pilgrims nevertheless continued to visit sacred sites, masking their real intentions beneath what were ostensibly officially sanctioned purposes. As Louw explains:

[People] would go to the shrines and couch their activities in such accepted secular terms as "tourism" or "studies in ancient architecture," contesting the authorities' monopoly on truth by investing conventional categories with alternative meanings ... They would go in disguise, or they would go at night ... They would go to places they knew were sacred even though everything possible had been done to disguise this fact ... People would also pay ziyarat to

shrines that were officially *zakret* (closed), or converted to secular use (Louw, 2007, p. 55).²⁴¹

The persistence of *ziyarat* can be explained by the fact that, for the believer, the very real significance of sacred geographies is rooted in the dense web of associations, visceral and metaphysical, that are attached to them. Cultural memory, after all, tends to preserve maps of such geographies, even in the face of concerted attempts to obscure or erase them.

Many sites, after all, were considered sacred because they were associated with holy figures, miracles, or other events of transcendental significance (Abramson & Karimov, 2007), while others, such as mosques, were etched in the cultural memory as hubs of social and communal life. Thus, as Morgan Liu points out, even today older Muslims in Osh still recall “a religious geography of magnificent mosques and madrasas that was layered beneath [the] cityscape of bus stops, hotels, and theaters” (Liu, 2012, p. 112). Even if we question Liu’s subtle invocation of the palimpsest metaphor, what seems clear is that, for many Muslims, Osh’s sacred geographies remained legible during the Soviet period, despite official attempts to bury them beneath movie theatres, factories, and apartment blocks. Even in the deliberately “disenchanted” public sphere of Soviet Central Asia, such spaces often retained these associations, and attempts by the Communists to efface them merely succeeded in investing sacred sites with an alternative set of meanings that operated simultaneously with older ones, adding a new dimension to what were already coexistential geographies.

²⁴¹ It is also worth noting that, in addition to “museumized” sites like the Mausoleum of Manas, people also continued to perform *ziyarat* at natural sacred sites, such as springs, waterfalls, and so forth, throughout the Soviet period. Such sites were far more difficult to regulate access to, even if the state had any knowledge of them at all.

In the post-Soviet era, of course, the Central Asian states have abandoned Marxist-Leninist ideology and, to a lesser degree, its explicitly materialist orientation (if not always its authoritarian politics). There has been a notable shift in how the newly-independent states have approached and made use of sacred sites, especially those that were museumized during the Soviet period: while the spiritual significance of such sites is now acknowledged, their status as museums has not, in general, undergone any major reconsideration. In fact, in certain instances, the museumization of certain sites actually occurred *after* independence. For example, although the actual tomb of Manas was restored during the Soviet period, the *Manas Ordo* complex as a whole (including the historical museum) was only built in the mid-1990s. Thus, while the sacred significance of sites like the *Manastyn Kömbözü* has remained constant throughout several political regimes, the secular meanings invested in them have shifted. Now, rather than supporting narratives of “socialist progress” towards the “radiant future,” such sites have been invested with discourses of national sovereignty, history, and cultural memory.

The “nationalization” of sacred space, of course, is by no means a phenomenon limited to Central Asia. Rose Aslan, for example, has described how the tomb of the revered poet Rumi, which is an important *mazar* located in the city of Konya in central Turkey, has been reconstituted by the Turkish state as both a tourist destination and as what is effectively a nationalist shrine. Under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the Turkish government pursued an aggressive policy of secularization, ultimately bringing most of the religious institutions in the Turkish republic under state control, while eliminating others outright. One aspect of this campaign involved the forcible closure of most Sufi lodges, since Atatürk believed that the existence of organized Sufi orders had

the potential to serve as pole of resistance to the secular Turkish state (Aslan, 2014, p. 6).



Figure 16: A Qarakhanid stele near Burana Tower (photo by author).

Thus, as Aslan notes, most such lodges

were eventually converted into mosques, museums, and other public and private institutions, and completely stripped of any signs relating to their original function. This aided the process of “modernization” by delegating ritual objects from Sufi lodges to ethnographic museums, where they were deemed to be remnants of Turkey’s folk heritage (ibid., p. 9).

Curiously, although it was turned into a museum, Rumi's tomb was left largely intact. Meanwhile, the historical Rumi "went from representing a Persian-speaking Muslim from Balkh²⁴² to a Turkish universalist and humanistic mystic who spread a message of tolerance, peace, love, and brotherhood (although not necessarily informed by his deeply religious background)" (ibid., p. 8). In Turkish nationalist ideology, Rumi was thus transformed into a "Turkish" cultural hero, and his tomb became a place of national interest. Now known as the Mevlana Museum,²⁴³ Rumi's museumized tomb supports a particular narrative of the Turkish nation and its history, one that mostly ignored Rumi's actual ethnic background, as well as the sacred significance of his final resting place. As Aslan notes, "[a] secular Turk would be interested in visiting the Mevlana Museum to learn more about the life of a great 'Turk'" (ibid., p. 13).

At the same time, Aslan also emphasizes that the Turkish government's decision to museumize (and indeed, nationalize, in the full sense of the word) Rumi's tomb has not deprived the site of its spiritual importance. Like the furtive pilgrims who visited museumized sacred sites in the Soviet Union, many pious Turks still travel to Rumi's tomb, challenging official narratives about what the place is supposed to mean:

I observed visitors stopping for a quiet moment, whispering the Islamic prayer for the dead and requests for intercession on behalf of a sick child or for a safe journey. The guard insisted they move on, but some pilgrims remained defiantly in supplication... I entered into the room once used for communal prayers and Mevlevi Sufi "whirling dervish" ceremonies. This room is now home to ritual objects such as copies of the Qur'an and manuscripts of

²⁴² Balkh is in modern-day Afghanistan.

²⁴³ "Mevlana" is derived from the Persian word for "master," which was one of the titles given to Rumi.

Rumi's poetry, musical instruments, dervish garments, and prayer mats—all locked beneath glass museum cases. Recently, part of the room has been opened up to allow for Muslim pilgrims to engage in their prayers, a new addition in recognition of the room's historical use (ibid., p. 2).

Rumi's tomb, then, is at once a tourist destination, a node in the matrix of Turkish nationalist discourses, and a sacred space, where the pious seek to encounter the divine. None of these functions, moreover, can be easily separated from the other: Rumi's tomb in other words, is defined by its coexistential geographies. This "simultaneity of place," as Aslan terms it (Aslan, 2013), speaks against both the epistemic division between "sacred" and "profane," as well as the figure of the palimpsest, which depicts the modern (in this case, represented by nationalist discourses) as somehow "obscuring" the sacred. As we can see in Aslan's description of pilgrims visiting the Museum, for many pilgrims the experience of visiting Rumi's tomb is neither purely "sacred" or "profane": a person may at one moment be muttering a prayer and at the next be snapping photographs of museum exhibits behind plexiglass barriers. Ultimately, a visit to Rumi's tomb means encountering a coexistential geography of the state and the sacred; of tourism and nationalism; of memory and piety. Although the example of the Mevlana Museum is in many respects distinct from the sacred sites that were museumized in the Soviet Union, there are also important similarities. For example, there are strong parallels between the strategies employed by the secular, nationalizing states of Central Asia to lay claim to cultural memory by localizing nationalist discourses in spiritually significant places and similar strategies employed by the Turkish government. As we saw in Chapter Four, for example, *Manas Ordo* is a monumental space that is as much dedicated to locating state

power as it is to commemorating the *Manas* epic or acting as a pilgrimage destination. As in the case of Rumi's tomb, these characteristics cannot be understood as isolated: as a result of the *étatisation* of the *Manas* epic, the spiritual act of performing *ziyarat* at the Mausoleum of Manas is simultaneously an act that exalts the state and valorizes the memory of national greatness.

In a similar fashion, Burana Tower, located in the ruins of the capital city of the



Figure 17: Japanese tourists at Burana Tower. The Russian airbase at Kant is a few kilometers to the east (photo by author).

Qarakhanid Khanate,²⁴⁴ has been co-opted by the state as a symbol of Kyrgyzstan, even being featured on banners unveiled at Ala Too Square to commemorate Kyrgyz Independence Day. Despite the fact that the Kyrgyz have no ethnic or historical

²⁴⁴ See Chapter Two.

connection to the Qarakhanids, Burana Tower was nevertheless transformed into a national museum (originally established by the Ministry of Culture of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic as the “Burana Tower State Archeological-Architectural Museum”). Today, visitors can climb Burana Tower, peek into the remains of collapsed buildings, and view old Qarakhanid artifacts before entering a nearby yurt to purchase souvenirs, postcards, Kyrgyz flags, and textbooks about Kyrgyz history.

At the same time, however, Burana Tower is also a destination for pilgrims: many people visit Burana Tower to pray and touch one of the many ancient steles inscribed with Arabic letters. Similarly, newlyweds often travel to the tower to have pictures taken, as well as to say a quick prayer for marital bliss (and perhaps to carve their names into the bricks at the top of the tower for good luck). But visitors to Burana Tower are also confronted with contemporary geopolitical realities: the Russian airbase at Kant is only a few kilometers away, and the air is often filled with the sounds of military aircraft taking off and landing. On the day of my own visit, a clear October afternoon, SU-25 ground attack aircraft circled lazily around Burana Tower before landing at Kant, a stark reminder of Kyrgyzstan’s increasingly controversial geopolitical relationship with its former imperial master.

As the preceding analysis suggests, the categories of “sacred” and “secular” cannot be meaningfully extracted from one another: the “sacred,” in many instances, reflexively reinforces the “secular,” while the “secular” operates in a symbolic field grounded, figuratively and literally, in the sacred. Like the nationalistic interpretations that have been inscribed in the presentation and arrangement of the Mevlani Museum, places like *Manas Ordo* and Burana Tower have been “museumized” and enlisted into

the ongoing project of national mythologizing. But this process has by no means resulted in the “disenchantment” of sacred places. The persistence of the practice of *ziyarat*, even at sites endowed by the state with an alternate set of meanings – socialist or nationalist – demonstrates the impossibility of drawing a distinction between “sacred” and “profane” spaces.

6.3 Kyrgyzstan’s Coexistential Geographies

On October 27, 2014, the Aigine Cultural Research Institute hosted a conference, called “The Sacred Geography of Kyrgyzstan,” at the National Library in Bishkek. The conference featured traditional Kyrgyz music and dance, recitations from the *Manas* epic, and speeches from official representatives from the State Cultural Ministry, but its primary purpose was to bring together *shaykhs* from all across the country, many of whom had participated in Aigine’s research on *mazars*. Following a short ceremony in which a *batachy*²⁴⁵ burned a small sprig of *archa*²⁴⁶ and read an incantation to bless the proceedings, *shaykhs* gave presentations about their *mazars*, the rituals performed there, the importance of *kyrgyzchylyk* and its significance for Kyrgyz spiritual life, and the Kyrgyz nation’s deep connection with nature.

The conference concluded with a presentation by a representative from Aigine, who highlighted the work that the organization has done on the subject of *mazars* in recent years. This work has resulted in the publication of several volumes, each of which describes the general location,²⁴⁷ appearance, history, and significance of *mazars* in different parts of the country. The books also feature oral histories, interviews, and

²⁴⁵ A person with strong *kasiyet*, who specializes in blessings.

²⁴⁶ *Archa* is a type of juniper. When burned, it emits a strong-smelling white smoke, which is used in many Kyrgyz religious ceremonies.

²⁴⁷ In many cases, the exact location of *mazars* is kept secret, in order to prevent them from being ruined. The locations of large *mazars* like *Manas Ordo*, of course, are well known.

academic articles related to *kyrgyzchylyk*, the practice of *ziyarat*, traditional healing, the *Manas* epic, and other topics relevant to the study of *mazars*.²⁴⁸ Interestingly, however, while the presentation included details about Aigine's research methods, its classification schemes, and the results of its research, it also included several maps that depicted the number and location of *mazars* in each of Kyrgyzstan's regions.²⁴⁹



Figure 18: Map depicting the distribution of *mazars* in Kyrgyzstan. From "Sacred Geographies of Kyrgyzstan" conference, Aigine CRC, 2014 (photo by author).

From a geographical standpoint, however, what was most intriguing about these maps was how they explicitly associated the *sacred* geography of Kyrgyzstan with its *political* geography. That is, while there are many *mazars* in neighboring countries like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, as well as across the border in Xinjiang, China, and while these *mazars* are sometimes visited by Kyrgyz citizens living in border regions or by ethnic Kyrgyz communities living outside of the Kyrgyz Republic itself, the Aigine maps

²⁴⁸ The most recent book, *Sacred Sites of the Southern Kyrgyzstan: Nature, Manas, Islam* (Aitpaeva, 2013), was being officially released at the conference, and each of the participating *shaykhs*, many of whose interviews and stories were published in the book, received a complementary copy.

²⁴⁹ Chui, Talas, Issyk-Kul, Naryn, Osh, and Batken.

depict the country's sacred geography as ending abruptly at the borders of the republic. In one respect, the depiction of information in this way is so pedestrian and commonplace as to be unremarkable – it is, after all, a classic example of Agnew's "territorial trap." From another perspective, however, the Aigine maps suggest the extent to which the religious imaginary has been molded by the sovereign territorial ideal.

Alexander Murphy (2013) has suggested that the persistent power of the nation-state in shaping social consciousness is derived, at least in part, from the fact that "the state continues to occupy a position of centrality in the generation of large-scale cartographic and statistical renderings, which helps to maintain the hold of the territorial state on the geographical imagination" (ibid., p. 1217). Maps, in other words, do not passively depict reality, but they in fact support particular narratives and discourses, including those of sovereign territoriality, the historicity of the state, its sovereign territoriality, and its connection with particular communities of people. Thus, as Thongchai Winichakul pointed out in his influential study of Siam, maps of the nation-state have historically "anticipated spatial reality, not visa versa ... a map was a model for, not a model of, what it purported to represent. A map was not a transparent medium between human beings and space. It was an active mediator" (Winichakul, 1994, p. 130). Maps are thus powerful tools for shaping a given population's consciousness of belonging to an imagined community that is indelibly linked with a particular territorial unit.

As the Aigine maps suggest, this national-territorial grid, which in Central Asia was originally imposed by the Soviets, and which is today reproduced daily by countless forms of "banal nationalism," continues to exert a profound influence on the ways in

which not only political subjectivities are imagined and articulated, but religious ones as well. If Kyrgyzstan's sacred geography is constituted by a vast network of *mazars* and other kinds of sacred spaces, then that geography, as depicted in the Aigine maps, is understood as conforming precisely to the republic's borders. In other words, the logic and assumptions of the modern state system have resulted in the compartmentalization of the religious imaginary and the division of sacred geography into discrete territorial units. From this perspective, sacred geographies are significant not merely because of their relevance to Kyrgyz spiritual and religious life, but also because of the ways in which they connect with broader social and political processes, including statist and nationalist discourses. In other words, political and sacred geographies are coexistential.

For example, many Kyrgyz proudly describe their close connection to nature as being one of their most distinctive national traits. Water and mountains figure heavily in these representations, and indeed, the Ala Too Mountains and Lake Issyk Kul are inseparable from popular images of the Kyrgyz Republic and Kyrgyz national identity more generally. Ormush Choinbaev, the director of *Manas Ordo*, thus recapitulated a sentiment common among many Kyrgyz when he told me: "The ancient Kyrgyz lived in open nature and among mountains. Their life was connected to water and fire ... They drew their sustenance from the mountains and from the water."

For many Kyrgyz, this connection with nature has important spiritual dimensions as well, which are often associated with traditional healing methods (Bunn, 2013). As Gulnara Aitpaeva points out, despite the changes wrought by the forces of modernization and industrialization, many Kyrgyz still feel a deep connection with the natural environment:

Although lifestyle [sic] of the Kyrgyz people has changed drastically, and they moved to sedentary life more than 70 years ago and became rather estranged from nature, their faith in the might and benevolence of nature has not fallen into oblivion. It may well be that one of the reasons for preserving this ancient faith lies in the fact that properties of sacred sites and their miraculous power are still clearly manifested in all sorts of situations, such as curing those who are ill, finding a physical or spiritual path, protecting domestic animals and fulfilling people's wishes (Aitpaeva, 2013, pp. 11-12).

Importantly, many Kyrgyz also draw explicit connections between the national and sacred dimensions of Kyrgyzstan's natural environment. For example, at a UNESCO symposium held in Kyrgyzstan in 2004, the author Chingiz Aitmatov rhapsodized:

[T]here is a kind of sacrality in the fact that we have gathered at Lake Issyk-Kul. So, here we are, on the shores of the crystal-clean, deep-water blue, mountainous sea, which is initially under the protection of the Heavens according to the legends ... Here, on the Issyk-Kul shores, our ancestors practiced their rites, praying and addressing the Heavens, the Spirits and the Celestial God Tengri to give them force to survive, to be inspired, to protect people from invasions, to live in harmony with the environment and in peace with neighbors (Aitmatov, 2005, pp. 77-78).

Likewise, former President Askar Akaev drew explicit connections between the sacredness of the natural environment of Kyrgyzstan and conceptions of Kyrgyz national identity and state territoriality:

The most valuable legacy of the Kyrgyz people, in my opinion, is the sacred land of Ala-Too,²⁵⁰ which we received from our ancestors. Our ancestors left to present and future generations the wholesomeness and royalty of these fine mounts, the Lake Issyk Kul – a magnificent pearl that has no equal in the world today, fertile valleys, and sparkling mountain streams and rivers. On this ancient land, in the twentieth century, the Kyrgyz people created their own national state (Akaev, 2003, p. 8).

Ultimately, according to the *manaschy* Doolot Sydykov, the essence of *kyrgyzchylyk* itself is intimately connected to Kyrgyzstan's natural environment: "Historically, Kyrgyz lived in close relationship with nature," he told me. "Each person's character depends upon the land he or she lives in."

It is tempting, of course, to interpret such sentiments as the *ex post facto* projection of present-day concepts and institutions – the nation and the nation-state – into the ancient past, or to simply dismiss them as nationalist *blut und boden* romanticizing. This is not necessarily an unfair verdict, as Akaev in particular has not infrequently been guilty of schmaltzy grandiloquence in his efforts to stoke Kyrgyz national pride. However, to dismiss Akaev or, for that matter, Doolot Sydykov or Chingiz Aitmatov, as nothing more than naïve romantic nationalists in the Herderian tradition is to miss the point that, for in the minds of many Kyrgyz, the sacred geography of their country, which is composed in equal turns of mosques, the graves of saints, heroes, martyrs, and ancestors, as well as of mountains, lakes, and valleys, is part of what gives the Kyrgyz Republic – and indeed the Kyrgyz people – their special character.

²⁵⁰ That is, modern-day Kyrgyzstan.

While these kinds of narratives operate chiefly in the ideational and discursive realms, the relationship between the political and the sacred is evident in more prosaic ways as well. The state, for example, has established the Issyk Kul Biosphere Reserve (YKBR), whose mandate includes: “a) biocultural conservation, b) promotion of sustainable use of resources and c) ecological education and monitoring” (Samakov, 2015, p. 42). However, ongoing pollution of the lake and its surrounding environment, including a “slow-motion ecological catastrophe” caused by an oil plume spreading from a defunct Soviet-era petroleum facility (Kalybekova, 2013) and widespread flouting of existing environmental regulations,²⁵¹ has outraged local communities. This anger has, in turn, led to demands the Kyrgyz government to do more to protect the lake and surrounding areas.

In response, some have begun to argue that sacred sites might play a potentially important role in contributing to the preservation of the Issyk Kul Biosphere Reserve, since the etiquette surrounding them naturally lends itself to an ethic of sustainability. As Aibek Samakov points out:

[O]ne of the main rules of visiting sacred sites is to “keep the sacred site clean and take care of sacred places as far as opportunities permit.” There are also strict taboos such as prohibition for ‘polluting and littering a sacred site’ and “causing damage to a sacred site’s biophysical elements (e.g., cutting the branches of the trees, bushes).” Similar to sacred sites in other parts of the world ... violations of rules and taboos are believed to have negative consequences

²⁵¹ The Kumtor Gold Mine, one of Kyrgyzstan’s most important economic resources, which is in the Issyk Kul Oblast, has been at the center of several environmental and corruption scandals (Ashakaeva & Sindelar, 2013; Jusupjan, 1998; RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service, 2013; Trilling, 2014). Protests over conditions at the mine have sometimes escalated into violent protests.

(such as illness, misfortune or death) for the violator
(Samakov, 2015, p. 68).

Despite this, however, Samakov also notes that “sacred sites are overlooked in formal conservation strategies within the YKBR.” He points out that the state is not always equipped to work with “local spiritual, cultural or religious institutions, including sacred sites and their guardians” (ibid., p. 72) on conservation and sustainability strategies. Thus, while the potential for *mazars* to contribute to environmental and ecological sustainability efforts has yet to be fully explored (to say nothing of exploited), the very existence of such initiatives points to some of the surprising ways in which the political and the sacred are often linked together.

However, as described in Chapter Five, the propriety of visiting sacred sites, especially natural sites like sacred groves or stones, is a hotly contested topic among Kyrgyz Muslims. In fact, as Aibek Samakov notes, some conservatives actually oppose efforts to preserve natural and other sacred sites, in some cases even going so far as to support their destruction. They argue that visiting *mazars* constitutes a form of *shirk* (Samakov, 2015, p. 119), and is therefore a heretical practice that must be opposed. According to Samakov, moreover, conflicts between those who venerate *mazars* and those who disapprove of them sometimes results in *mazars* becoming damaged. He notes that efforts are being made to pass laws at the national level that would protect sacred sites, but that these initiatives have thus far produced mixed results (ibid., pp. 122-123).

The legal connections between the state and the sacred are evident in other ways as well. As described in Chapter Five, numerous *mazars* throughout Kyrgyzstan have



Figure 19: One of the “Springs of Kanikey.” Note the plastic cup for use by pilgrims (photo by author).

come under the custody of the state. The Kyrgyz government, moreover, has adopted legislation that establishes proper modes of behavior while visiting sacred sites and provided salaries to some *shaykhs*. In some instances, the state has taken an even more active role in the administration of *mazars*. As we saw in Chapter Four, for example, the *Manastyn Kömbözu* has been incorporated into the state-run Kyrgyz National Complex “*Manas Ordo*.” Similarly, the Kyrgyz government administers the National Historical-

Archaeological Museum Complex “*Sulayman Too*” at Solomon’s Throne in Osh. State supervision of the museum and the complex are meant to “ensure the preservation, restoration, study, and public representation of a holistic historical, cultural and natural complex, [and] its material and spiritual values in their historical and natural environment through research, exposition, cultural education, and tourism” (Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2004). In other words, the sacred significance of *Sulayman Too* is understood by the state as being inseparable from its cultural and historical – and therefore national – significance.

Other, much smaller sites have also been taken over by the Kyrgyz government. The Springs of Kanikei (*Kanikei apa Bulagi*), for example, is a small *mazar* located a short distance from *Manas Ordo*. As the name suggests, the site consists of a network of forty-one springs, each of which is said to cure a different disease (Aitpaeva et al., 2007, p. 31). As Esengul Jumanazarov, a former guardian of this site pointed out, even this *mazar*, which is relatively modest in comparison with the *Manas Ordo* complex, has come under government administration:

Because local authorities failed to take care of the *mazar Kanykei Apa Bulak*, it was taken under care by the former governor of the oblast Iskender Ai'daraliev, who organized the planting [of] different trees – apple, birch, oak. The governor ordered that this spring was to be owned by the state (ibid., p. 180).

The state has even invested some money in the construction of several large statues depicting Manas, Kanikei, and Aichurök, the wife of Manas’s son Semitei, which stand near springs.

If some prestigious *mazars* like *Manas Ordo* and *Kanikei apa Bulogi*, have attracted the attention of the national government, countless other instead receive the support of local or village administrations. For example, Jamiliya *eje*, the *shaykh* of Baytik *baatyr mazar*, complained to me that the government in Bishkek “does not even supply us with water.” However, she praised the authorities of a nearby village, also called Baytik, for helping to develop the *mazar* and to raise money for its maintenance. Jamiliya *eje* told me that the village government had even helped to build a house for her to live in when she relocated to become the guardian of the *mazar*:

In 1999 I had a dream in which an old man came to me and said that I need to sit in a *mazar* next to *Oluya ata*²⁵² and read from the Qur’an. Then he disappeared. In my dream, I read Qur’an for two hours. People in black were waiting to attack me right after I finished reciting Qur’an. When I finished reciting, though, they went behind a car and disappeared. I was very afraid, and was going to get into the car [and drive away], but suddenly I saw a holy light falling upon this very mountain. I heard voices telling me that I should stay in this place.

In 2001, on March 16, when I spent the night here there was just a tree. Later, I came again, on March 26, 2002 to spend the night. Then I returned in August. At that time, Kubanych *baike*²⁵³ built the foundations of my house. Then with the funds collected at the [donation drive], these structures were built. I have lived here since the very beginning. My well-being is here. I was sent by God to this place.

Sacred geographies are thus implicated with the state at a variety of different scales, from the local to the national, and the logic of the modern state system itself

²⁵² *Oluya* is the Kyrgyz pronunciation of the Arabic word *awliyah*, or “saint.” In this case, she is referring to Baytik *baatyr*.

²⁵³ *Baike* is a word that literally refers to an older male cousin, but can also be used as a general term of respect for an elder, in this case a member of the local government.

works to shape the religious imaginary. The argument being made here is not that Aigine is suggesting that there are that there are no meaningful sacred sites outside of Kyrgyzstan: many Kyrgyz, after all, look forward to performing the *hajj* to Mecca.²⁵⁴ Rather, the point is that their sacred significance helps to define define – and is in turn defined by – the logic of the modern state system. Gulnara Aitpaeva, for instance, has argued that

the names of sacred sites and the history of their appearance, development, and preservation indicate most vividly the connecting links between the north and the south, or in other words, *they point to the unity of Kyrgyz land ... such places unite various parts of the country into one whole in a symbolic fashion* (Aitpaeva, 2013, p. 67, emphasis added).

In conceptualizing the sacred geography of Kyrgyzstan in this way, an argument is implicitly being made that sacred geographies are defined by their relationship to modern-day political borders and notions of state territoriality.

Mazars thus reveal the coexistential nature of Kyrgyzstan's sacred and political geographies. It is clear that the logic of the sovereign-territorial ideal has resulted in a religious imaginary that in many respects ends at the Kyrgyz borders, but it is equally evident that the republic's sacred geography, which includes its natural environment, is felt by many Kyrgyz to imbue their country and its people with a particular ineffable – perhaps even sacred – quality. The political geography of the Kyrgyz Republic, then, in essence represents a kind of grounded theology, one that is impossible to extricate from

²⁵⁴ Indeed, Aibek Samakov notes that the *shaykhs* who gathered at the conference in Bishkek in 2014 adopted a resolution that explicitly stated that “Sacred Geography is not limited by the boundaries of individual states and serves a uniting spiritual principle via recognition of diversity” (Samakov, 2015, p. 145).

the Kyrgyz nation's history, national traditions (especially the *Manas* epic), and religious heritage. In the next section, we will examine more closely one particular node in this coexistential geography: the *Ata Beyit* memorial, which in many ways epitomizes the dynamics we are concerned with here.

6.4 The Grave of the Fathers

As we saw in the case of the Mevlana Museum, the sacred character attributed to certain places is not erased by the imposition of statist or nationalist narratives: what may



Figure 20: The official tomb at *Ata Beyit*. Note the *tyndyk* atop the grave (photo by author).

appear to be “different” geographies – political, tourist, and sacred – not only coexist, but are in fact interwoven. We have seen this dynamic at *Manas Ordo* in Talas, which serves as both as a monumental space that grounds the Kyrgyz government's ideology of state-centric national unity, as well as a focal point for Kyrgyz religious life. Considering the complex relationship between the *Manas* epic, *kyrgyzchylyk*, Islam, and statist and nationalist ideologies, pilgrimages to *Manas Ordo* are at the same time constitutive of

Kyrgyzstan's political and spiritual geographies. The disparate meanings invested in *Manas Ordo* – as a place where national identity and state legitimacy are grounded in Kyrgyz history and myth, as well as a site of miraculous occurrences like the healing of chronic diseases and encounters with the spirit of Manas himself – thus illustrate the polyvocality of both collective memory and the myth-symbol complex, as well as the identities, national and otherwise, that emerge out of them.

Ata Beyit, or the “Grave of the Fathers,” is another such place, but, unlike *Manas Ordo*, it began as a political monument. *Ata Beyit* is nestled among the trees in the foothills of the Ala Too Mountains, 24 kilometers south of Bishkek. Its bucolic environs, however, belie *Ata Beyit*'s disquieting history. Here, during the most vicious of Stalin's purges, the so-called “Great Terror” of 1936-1938, hundreds of people accused of “bourgeois kulak nationalism,” “Trotskyism,” “rightist deviation,” “leftist oppositionism,” “careerism,” or simply being “enemies of the people” (Osmonov, 2014, pp. 432-434; Ploskikh & Dzhunushaliev, 2009, pp. 233-235), were shot by the Soviet security services and their bodies dumped into a primitive brick kiln. As the Terror wound down, the grave was filled with dirt, abandoned, and forgotten.

Just months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the aging daughter of an eyewitness to the executions revealed the existence of the mass grave and its location. Consistent with the spirit of the *glasnost*' years, the grave was unearthed, the crimes of the past duly admitted, and the victims of the purges formally reinterred in an official burial plot. According to one account:

In 1991, the daughter of a former NKVD officer came forward with a secret her father had told her just before his death. He had witnessed a mass execution at the hands of

the NKVD, and this tip eventually led to the discovery of a mass grave in Chong-Tash ... After their discovery, the remains of the victims were exhumed and moved to a formal, shared grave about 100 meters away. This grave ... lies beneath a horizontal sculpture of a [tyndyk] – the crucial circular piece at the apex of a yurt. The sculpture rests on a large, stone platform, the sides of which are inscribed with all the victims' names (Rehm, 2014).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the significance of *Ata Beyit* has evolved into a national memorial for all of the victims of Stalinist repression in Kyrgyzstan and, more broadly, a permanent reminder of seventy years of Soviet domination. Today, adjacent to the new gravesite, stands a dramatic bronze sculpture depicting three prisoners, their eyes closed and their hands bound behind their backs; each man is awaiting his imminent execution. But although the figures themselves are emaciated and pathetic, the monument nevertheless evinces a sense of dignity and, perhaps, the promise of emancipation. The first prisoner is on his knees, his head slouching to one side in abject resignation; the second man, however, has risen to one knee, his head held high; the third prisoner, meanwhile, seems about to stand defiantly to his feet, his whole body stretching towards the heavens, even as a tattered prisoner's shirt falls from his shoulders. Like these prisoners, the memorial seems to say, the Kyrgyz nation must stand up and reclaim its dignity and, importantly, its sovereignty.

Turning south-east from the memorial one sees an imposing gate, which bears the words “*Ak iyilet, birok cynbait,*” a Kyrgyz proverb that means: “It bends, but it does not break.” Passing through the gate, the walls of which are lined with dramatic reliefs



Figure 21: Monument to the victims of Stalinist repressions (photo by author).

depicting the horrors of the Great Terror, visitors ascend a series of stairs to the the site of the original mass grave, which is little more than a brick-lined hole in the ground. The tomb itself is enclosed by plexiglass, allowing tourists, relatives, and other visitors to view the grave. Roses strewn about on the ground, and even thrown over the plexiglass into the tomb itself, bespeak the mourners who visit here to pay their respects.

The structure enclosing the mass grave is simple and unadorned, consisting of the aforementioned plexiglass screens and a roof supported by plain concrete slabs. The site

of the mass grave thus stands in stark contrast with the formal tomb, which is constructed from polished red granite and is adorned with a *tyndyk*, the Kyrgyz national symbol. Along with the statue of the prisoners, the new interment site symbolically “claims” the victims of Stalinist repression in the name of nation and, by extension, the state; meanwhile, the old mass grave, enclosed behind plexiglass windows, almost resembles a museum exhibition.



Figure 22: The structure surrounding the mass grave at *Ata Beyit* (photo by author).

In fact, following the re-interment of the bodies discovered in the mass grave, a small museum commemorating the victims of the repressions was indeed erected at the site, a short distance to the west of the execution grounds. The museum is a relatively simple affair, particularly as compared with the historical museum at *Manas Ordo*. The *Ata Beyit* museum consists of one main room, containing photographs, letters, scraps of clothing, passport documents belonging to the victims of the Terror, and items like shoes,

cups, and utensils that had belonged to the prisoners who circulated through the GULAG²⁵⁵ labor camp system. The walls are lined with newspaper reports, memorabilia, and short captions giving short biographies of some of the people who lost their lives in the Terror, including several members of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia. Such figures included Evgenii Polivanov, one of the first people to translate the *Manas* epic into Russian, and who was shot as a “Trotskyist”; Törökul Aitmatov, father of Chingiz Aitmatov²⁵⁶; Iusuf Abdrahmonov, the first Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Kyrgyz SSR; and Kasym Tynystanov, a scientist and linguist who also served as the first Minister of Education of the Kyrgyz SSR and who is also credited for helping to develop a Latin-script Kyrgyz alphabet (Osmonov, 2014, pp. 431-433).²⁵⁷

Curiously, however, the undeniable centerpiece of the museum has very little to do with the Stalinist repressions at all: inset into the floor in the main room, almost directly opposite to the entrance and standing beneath a stark black-and-white photograph of a flock of birds in migration, there is a black granite headstone. The inscription on the grave marker reads:

Aitmatov

Chyngyz

Törökulovich.

12.12.1928 - 10.06.2008

²⁵⁵ Although the word “gulag” has entered the popular lexicon as a word signifying any kind of system of political prisons or labor camps, the origins of the word are the Russian acronym constructed from the term *glavnoe upravlenie lagerei*, or “main camp administration.”

²⁵⁶ Aitmatov, in fact, gave *Ata Beyit* its name (Eurasianet, 2008).

²⁵⁷ The “reclaiming” of the past has extended to other locales as well: in the capital, Bishkek, the old “Sovietskaya *Ulitsa*” (“Soviet Street”) was renamed “Yusup Abdrahmonov *Köchösü*” (“Yusup Abdrahmanov Street”), while another section of the road in the south of the city was renamed “Baytik Baatyr *Köchösü*.” Other streets have also been renamed: “*Komsomolskaya*” (after the Young Communist League), for example, became *Erkindik* (“Freedom”), while a street which at times has borne the name of Stalin, Lenin, and Deng Xiaoping, has been renamed Chui Prospekt, after the province in which Bishkek resides. Prospekt *Mira* (“Peace Prospect”), of course, has taken on the more nationally-inspired Prospekt *Manasa* (“Manas Prospect”).



Figure 23: Chingiz Aitmatov's headstone (photo by author).

At first glance, the placement of Aitmatov's headstone in the museum of Stalinist repressions is incongruous: Aitmatov himself was barely ten years old during the Great Terror, and he went on to become one of the Soviet Union's most celebrated literary figures. However, the writer was instrumental in the efforts to reinter the victims discovered in the mass grave, one of whom was, as noted, his own father. Aitmatov, for understandable reasons, also named the *Ata Beyit* complex.

Despite the prominence of his headstone, Chingiz Aitmatov is not actually buried beneath the floor of the museum: his actual tomb lies a few meters to the southeast of the official grave, beneath a white mausoleum bearing a bronze relief of his face and a quote, written in both Kyrgyz and in Russian, that reads: "The most difficult thing for a person is to every day be a person." While Aitmatov's burial at *Ata Beyit* at long last reunited the writer with his father, his interment had a broader resonance as well. As one observer notes, "[t]he Kyrgyz people say that two heroes made their nation world-known: one is the epic hero of 'Manas,' another is Chingiz Aitmatov" (Eurasianet, 2008). Indeed, at Ala Too Square, the heart of political power in Kyrgyzstan, a statue of Aitmatov stands facing Manas himself from across the plaza, giving him pride of place as second only to that of the greatest Kyrgyz hero of all.

Although Aitmatov was not necessarily a *nationalist* writer,²⁵⁸ he was an unmistakably *national* one: as we saw in Chapter Four, his concept of the *mankurt* reflected the writer's concern with what he saw as the loss of Kyrgyz memory and identity during the Soviet period. Aitmatov himself, moreover, is considered one of Kyrgyzstan's most recognizable "exports." As Erica Marat has pointed out, Aitmatov "is

²⁵⁸ In fact, throughout his life, Aitmatov always asserted: "I am a cosmopolitan" (Karliukevich, 2003).

a recognizable brand name [for Kyrgyzstan] in Germany and the former Soviet states, where his books were especially popular” (Marat, 2007). At the same time, Aitmatov is revered as one of Kyrgyzstan’s most treasured artists and for many Kyrgyz the ideas that Aitmatov stood for represent something fundamental about their national identity. As one observer has pointed out:

When discussing what “being Kyrgyz” meant to them, many informants made references to ... the novels of Chingiz Aitmatov ... While fiercely proud of their literary hero, youth were vague about their familiarity with specific works by Aitmatov. However, they did repeat a pervasive theme in Aitmatov novels: Do not forget your motherland, language and history ... In this conversation and in others about Aitmatov, the tale seemed to matter less than the broad message: remember who you are and where you come from (Ibold, 2010, p. 526).

The fact that Aitmatov is interred at *Ata Beyit* alongside the victims of the Great Terror is thus freighted with nationalist and political significance. This act places the body of the modern hero of the Kyrgyz nation, symbolically and physically, alongside the victims of the Great Terror.

Perhaps even more significant than the graves of Aitmatov or the victims of the purges, however, is the fact that *Ata Beyit* also serves as the final resting place for many of the protesters and others who lost their lives during the 2010 revolution. As described in Chapter Four, security forces loyal to former President Kurmanbek Bakiev opened fire on protesters in Ala Too Square, killing dozens and wounding hundreds more. The protests continued despite the massacre, and Bakiev quickly fled the country, paving the way for the interim government of Roza Otunbayeva and the eventual election of current

President, Almazbek Atambaev. The new government did not miss the opportunity to consecrate its legitimacy with the sacrifices of the fallen protesters. In a 2015 speech commemorating the events of 2010, Atambaev declared that the revolution ultimately “saved the country from economic collapse and spiritual impoverishment” (Niyazova, 2015). According to the government, the interment of the fallen protesters at *Ata Beyit* was an act made out of recognition of “the historical significance of the April revolution of the people of the Kyrgyz Republic, accomplished at the cost of human lives and in the name of prosperity and freedom of the Kyrgyz people” (Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2011).

Interestingly, the graves of those who lost their lives in 2010 are set apart from the rest of the complex, a short distance down the hill from the Great Terror memorial and Aitmatov's tomb. But unlike the victims of the Terror, who share a common resting place, symbolically located beneath a large *tyndyk* at the center of the *Ata Beyit* complex, the graves martyrs of 2010 are located beneath individual black granite tombstones, each bearing the name and an engraved photograph of the deceased.²⁵⁹ A towering monument, topped with a symbolic *tyndyk*, stands in front of this graveyard, along with a stone wall bearing the names of the dead. The memorial, which was expressly constructed in order to “perpetuate the memory of the fallen heroes of the April 7, 2010” (Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2011), stands near the center of a large square, where hundreds of mourners gather on formal occasions in order to pray and commemorate the dead.

²⁵⁹ Placing images of the dead on headstones is a fairly common practice throughout the former Soviet Union, and does not necessarily serve as an indicator of the status or importance of the person buried there.



Figure 24: Graveyard of the martyrs of 2010 (photo by author).

The area dedicated to the commemoration of the victims of 2010 is nearly as large as the rest of the *Ata Beyit* complex taken as a whole, including the museum grounds, the old mass grave, and the official memorial grave, and Aitmatov’s tomb. Like the rest of the complex, however, it is also an unmistakably political space, where the bodies of the “fallen heroes,” who are said to have given their lives for future of their country and their nation have been laid to rest and, in a sense, are put on display as exemplars of the spirit of national sacrifice. As Atambaev declared, in a 2014 speech:

We have to remember all of the heroes! All of those who died for freedom and justice, truth, and the rule of law. After four years, of standing as witnesses to the disintegration of the entire country and the people, we understand that by giving their lives, that they have

preserved the unity of the people have saved our
Kyrgyzstan (K-News, 2014)!

Similarly, in April of 2015, five years after the massacre, the President, along with other government officials, including former interim President Roza Otunbayeva and Prime Minister Djoomart Otorbaev, and accompanied by the families of those who died in 2010, held a commemorative ceremony at *Ata Beyit*. The President and others prayed and placed red wreaths at the memorial wall, while the families visited the graves of their loved ones. Not surprisingly, this event was not simply a memorial ceremony: along with the retinue of government functionaries, many of whom wore traditional kalpaks along with their formal attire, the nationalist and statist overtones of the ceremony were underscored by the presence of a military guard in dress uniform.

Ata Beyit thus occupies an important position in the matrix of Kyrgyz nationalist mythology and statist discourse. In this narratives, the victims of Stalinist repression have in many respects become metonymous with the whole history of Soviet domination over the Kyrgyz people, their executions a visceral reminder of the sacrifices made by all Kyrgyz people in the name of sovereignty and statehood. Likewise, the graves of those who perished during the revolution in 2010 contain the bodies of martyrs who gave their lives in the struggle to overthrow a tyrant and secure the country's freedom. The seemingly incongruous presence of Chingiz Aitmatov's tomb among the graves of these national martyrs serves as a kind of bridge between the Soviet past and the national present, a link made all the more potent by the fact that his own father is among the bodies buried beneath the official monument.

Like the *Manas Ordo* complex, *Ata Beyit* serves as a *lieu de mémoire*, a place whose deliberately curated symbolism grounds Kyrgyz cultural memory in ways that

reinforce the state's preferred narratives of national unity, shared sacrifice, and the struggle for sovereignty and freedom. Indeed, *Ata Beyit*, *Manas Ordo*, the planned monuments commemorating the *Urkun*,²⁶⁰ and indeed even ancient sites like Burana Tower and *Sulayman Too*, all give form, substance, and – crucially – *locality* to collective memories of Kyrgyz history and national identity. These memories are thus irrevocably connected with, and indeed grounded in, the sovereign territory of the Kyrgyz Republic.

As we will see, however, while such *lieux de mémoire* work to constitute the political geography of Kyrgyzstan, then they are at the same time inseparable from its sacred geography. *Ata Beyit*, like *Manas Ordo*, is not merely the site of memorial to the victims of the Great Terror, a museum dedicated to the history of Stalinist repressions, or a monumental space glorifying the martyrs who gave their lives for their nation in 2010. It is also a sacred space, one whose significance is inseparable from the political and national narratives it is meant to support.

6.4.1 *The Sacred Significance of Ata Beyit*

My own pilgrimage to *Ata Beyit* took place as part of the program for the “Sacred Geographies of Kyrgyzstan” conference organized by the Aigine Cultural Research Center. I went there with the group of *shaykhs* who had traveled to Bishkek from across Kyrgyzstan to participate in the meeting. Although the first day of the conference had been devoted to presentations and discussion about sacred sites, the second day featured a field trip to *Ata Beyit*, where the *shaykhs* were given a tour before recommencing their discussions about the importance of *mazars* in helping to preserve cultural and ecological diversity (Samakov, 2015, p. 145). A winter storm had passed through the Chui Valley

²⁶⁰ See Chapter Four.

the day before, and the trees and ground were shrouded in a thick layer of snow and ice, lending the place a drab, funereal atmosphere.

The group gathered near the memorial to the Great Terror and listened while the *shaykh* of *Ata Beyit*, a short Kyrgyz man wearing white robes and a *kalpak*, described the significance of the site to the other *shaykhs*, many of whom were from other parts of the country and who had not previously visited the memorial. After participating in a short



Figure 25: *Manaschys* performing in front of Chingiz Aitmatov's headstone (photo by author).

prayer for the victims of the terror who were buried in the tomb before them, the *shaykhs* began to take photographs of the memorial, while many others then queued up to pose for pictures in front of the tomb of Chingiz Aitmatov. After a few minutes, the Aigine personnel directing the event announced that it was time to move on, and the tour group crowded into the museum.

While they were inspecting the exhibits, however, a dispute arose between the director of the *Ata Beyit* museum and the *shaykh* of the *Ata Beyit mazar*, with the latter being accused of being a liar, of not being a “real” *shaykh*, and of not possessing *kyrgyzchylyk*. Before the argument could escalate any further, however, chairs were hastily brought out from the museum’s storage room and placed in the center of the main



Figure 26: *Batachy* (center), with the *shaykh* of *Ata Beyit* (photo by author).

hall, directly in front of the memorial headstone for Chingiz Aitmatov. At once, a *manaschy* began to give an impromptu recital an episode from the *Manas* epic, putting an end to the squabbling. His performance was followed by another, and then by another: during the twenty minutes of recitals, members of three generations of *manaschys* had retold an episode, each in his own dramatically different and intensely personal style, and

accompanied by an old woman, a *semeteichy*,²⁶¹ who danced and cried out, waving a leather riding crop. The episodes the *manaschys* chose to recount touched on themes of bravery and sacrifice, and the entire performance was thus appropriate to the dominant narratives conveyed by the *Ata Beyit* memorial. At the same time, the political significance of *Ata Beyit* was thus linked with the historical, legendary, national, and spiritual connotations of the *Manas* epic.

With the recitals concluded, everyone's moods seemed buoyed, and the dispute seemingly settled. The Aigine staff indicated that it was time to move onto the next item on the itinerary: viewing the old mass grave, and so the *shaykhs* began to shuffle out of the museum and back into the cold. The group slowly made its way up the hill towards the execution grounds, a journey made difficult by the infirmity and advanced age of many of the *shaykhs*, as well as the icy conditions that rendered the stairways leading to the grave treacherous to navigate. Once the group finally arrived at the mass grave, however, a hush fell over the *shaykhs*, who had previously been chatting boisterously, laughing, and talking on their mobile phones. What had previously been a sightseeing tour suddenly became a religious ceremony.

The *shaykhs* solemnly knelt down and cupped their hands over their faces, while a well-known *batachy* chanted an incantation and recited passages from the Qur'an. After the prayer, which lasted about five minutes and ended with the customary "*omin*," the *shaykhs* stood quietly and stared into the rubble-strewn grave. A few quietly snapped pictures before starting down the icy slope, but the atmosphere of conviviality that had prevailed earlier seemed to have evaporated, replaced with a kind of reflective solemnity.

²⁶¹ Someone who recites the *Semetei* epic.

Everyone was aware of what had happened here, and they had come to pay their respects to the spirits of the dead.

Afterward, the group of *shaykhs* slowly descended the icy stairs. Upon reaching the bottom, near the memorial site, they were steered towards a yurt in a nearby field, which appeared to have been set up to accommodate them. Several horses stared languidly at the *shaykhs* as they removed their shoes on a wet, muddy rug at the entrance and quickly stepped inside, out of the cold. For my part, I was informed that the discussions that were going to take place in the yurt were “for *shaykhs* only.” Having not been invited to participate, I returned to Bishkek. My pilgrimage was over.

As the foregoing episode suggests, in addition to its function as a *lieu de mémoire* and a monumental space, *Ata Beyit* is also a site that possess a sacred significance. Indeed, although the event organized by Aigine was primarily focused *kyrgyzchylyk* and indigenous Kyrgyz religious traditions, *Ata Beyit* also has significance for Kyrgyzstan’s Muslim community as well. As we have seen, for example, official ceremonies honoring those who died in April 2010 have typically featured prayers for the dead, which are not dissimilar from those read by the *shaykhs* during my visit. Similarly, during the “First International Symposium on Extremism and *Takfirism*²⁶² as a Threat to Modern Society,”

²⁶² The concept of “*takfirism*,” at least in its modern usage, is rooted in the thought of Sayyid Qutb, one of the most influential modernist Islamic thinkers and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was executed by the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966. As John Esposito explains: “For Qutb, jihad as armed struggle in the defense of Islam against the injustice and oppression of anti-Islamic governments and the neocolonialism of the West and the East (Soviet Union) was incumbent upon all Muslims. There could be no middle ground. Mirroring the Kharijites [a seventh century Islamic sect responsible for the assassination of Caliph Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad], Qutb taught that those Muslims who refused to participate were to be counted among the enemies of God, apostates who were excommunicated (*takfir*) and who should be fought and killed along with the other enemies of God” (Esposito, 2002, pp. 60-61). From the perspective of Central Asian governments, each of which has tried to foster its own quietist “national” form of Islam (see Chapter Five) “*takfirism*” thus represents a clear threat,

which was held in Bishkek in April 2015, Maksatbek azhi Toktomushev, the Mufti of Kyrgyzstan, accompanied a group of visiting religious leaders to *Ata Beyit*. There, the Mufti, along with representatives from the Muslim communities of Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, and Saudi Arabia, toured the historical museum and, afterward, said prayers for those who had lost their lives on Ala Too Square in 2010 (Kyrgyzstan Musulmandaryndyn Din Bashkarmalygy, 2015; Nasaat.kg, 2014).

Although *Ata Beyit's* sacred significance is perhaps not as great as that of more renowned *mazars*, such as *Manas Ordo* or *Takht-i Sulayman*, it nevertheless occupies an important position in the sacred geography of Kyrgyzstan, one where the connections between the state and the sacred are particularly manifest: like *Manas Ordo*, *Ata Beyit* serves as a *lieu de mémoire* and a focal point for a statist ideology and discourses of national heroism and sacrifice (Kojobekova, 2014), while at the same serving as a place of pilgrimage for those who wish to pay their respects to the spirits of the victims of the Great Terror, the martyrs of 2010, and even Chingiz Aitmatov himself. As a *mazar*, a national and cultural memorial, and a graveyard of heroes, *Ata Beyit* thus grounds theology, memory, and political power, binding them enduringly together, both physically and ideationally.

We can therefore see certain parallels between the religio-political geography of the Kandyan Kingdom described by James Duncan and the geographies of the modern nation-state. If the ways in which the Kyrgyz state puts *Ata Beyit* to use are perhaps not as explicitly “magical” as the ways in which the Kandyan monarchy sought to manipulate cosmic energy to shore up its legitimacy, then the political geographies of the modern

since it explicitly calls upon Muslims to participate in armed struggle. At the same time, “*takfirism*,” like “Wahhabism,” has at times become a blanket term for any kind of political Islam disapproved of by the state. See for example: Knysh (2004).

nation-state are, as we have seen, in many respects inseparable from sacred geographies. Like the Kandyan kingship, moreover, modern governments often seek to exploit sacred geographies to legitimate and reinforce their own power.²⁶³ The sacralization of *Ata Beyit* through the bodies of the victims of Stalinist repression, of those who lost their lives in the 2010 revolution, and of Chingiz Aitmatov himself, represent the explicit appropriation and mobilization of “sacred” space in the service of temporal power, which serves to further efface the putative distinction between “sacred” and “profane.”

6.5 The Islamic Landscape

Mazars, of course, are not the only elements of Kyrgyzstan’s sacred geography, nor are they the only elements that resonate politically. As we saw in Chapter Five, the “Islamic revival” in Central Asia paved the way for the re-opening or reconstruction of formerly shuttered or demolished mosques and the construction of countless new ones. The scale of this effort is such that, by some counts, there were only thirty-nine mosques operating in Kyrgyzstan in 1991 (Murzakhilov, 2014), and no (formal) religious schools; however, as of January 2013, “there were 1,791 Islamic establishments in Kyrgyzstan: 9 kaziats, 1,674 mosques, 10 higher religious educational institutions, 67 madrasahs, 49 Islamic funds, centers, and alliances, and 3 missions of foreign confessions” (Kurbanova, 2014). According to even more recent estimates, the number of mosques in Kyrgyzstan has risen to nearly three thousand (Goble, 2015), while Islamic schools have become an increasingly popular alternative in the country.

²⁶³ In this way, it may indeed be that the ways in which the modern state uses sacred geographies *are* in fact “magical,” and serve the same purposes as the cosmological landscapes of Kandy. The chief difference, perhaps, is that such mobilizations are today simply framed in a way that is more palatable to the modern person more accustomed to interpreting the world through the lens of ideology.

It is important to note, however, that the rapid increase in the number of mosques and medresehs in Kyrgyzstan not only provides space for Muslims to study and pray; it is also Islamizing the landscape of the country in ways that have not necessarily been typical in the past. Particularly in the northern part of the country, where more nomadic lifeways prevailed, there were fewer permanent religious structures than in the more sedentary south. This disparity has frequently led to the verdict that the south of Kyrgyzstan has historically been “more religious,” or at least more “Islamized,” than the north. Such verdicts, however, ignore the self-consciously Islamic identity among northern Kyrgyz, whose religious practices tended to revolve more around *mazars* than around mosques.²⁶⁴ What is novel, therefore, is not that the landscape in northern Kyrgyzstan is becoming “more Islamic,” for it has been “Islamic” for a very long time, but rather that it is being Islamized in somewhat new ways.

At the same time, given the Kyrgyz government’s interest in regulating the religious sphere,²⁶⁵ these trends also have an important political dimension: during a ceremony commemorating the opening of a major new mosque at Solomon’s Throne in Osh, for example, President Atambaev suggested that “[t]he Muslims of Osh should become a uniting force for all city dwellers” (BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 2011). It was not insignificant that the occasion for the opening of the mosque was the anniversary of the 2010 pogroms that erupted in the wake of the collapse of the Bakiev regime.

²⁶⁴ These kinds of stereotypes, moreover, are often projected onto ethnic differences as well: Uzbeks, who are concentrated in the south of the country, are often described as “more religious” or “more fanatic,” while it is frequently suggested that the Kyrgyz were “superficially” Islamized.

²⁶⁵ See Chapter Five.



Figure 27: A typical village mosque in northern Kyrgyzstan (photo by author).

By dedicating the mosque on the anniversary, Atambaev sought to symbolically position Islam as a uniting and healing force in Kyrgyz society. In doing so, the President simultaneously reinforced the state's preferred narrative about the role of "traditional Islam" and thus mobilized theological discourses as a means of advancing the state's social agenda. This is clear since the President also used the speech to urge "every citizen of Kyrgyzstan [to] remember that they are part of 'a single nation'" (RFE/RL, 2012). The opening of an important new mosque in Kyrgyzstan's "second capital" thus became an opportunity to foreground the concerns of the state regarding the danger of renewed inter-ethnic violence and instability. Either way, Atambaev's gestures found a receptive audience among the city's religious community, who, like Atambaev, linked theological

issues to the problem of preventing another pogrom: “Islam,” said one imam, “is the thing that keeps the peace between people” (RFE/RL, 2011b).

On a more prosaic level, however, the dramatic growth in the number of mosques has led some to question whether money spent on the construction of so many religious buildings is really necessary, particularly when there are so many other basic social needs that are not being met by national and local governments. Some Kyrgyz, for example, complain that villages that do not even have a single school will often still have at least one mosque (D. Sydykov, personal communication). Several news outlets, moreover, have breathlessly reported that there are now more mosques in Kyrgyzstan than there are schools (Goble, 2015; Zarif & Muhammadly, 2015). Although such figures are not necessarily atypical in other countries,²⁶⁶ and while a significant number of these schools are being funded with money from places like Turkey, the undercurrent of trepidation with which the growth in the numbers of religious buildings has been reported is suggestive of broader anxieties about the growing role of Islam in Kyrgyz society.

Suspicious abound, for example, that many mosques are being led by “*takfirists*,” “Wahhabists,” or other “extremists.” Consequently, the state has begun aggressively testing the quality of the “Islamic knowledge” possessed by imams and medreseh headmasters (Eurasianet, 2015; RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service, 2016). There is thus a tension between aspirations that “Islam is the thing that keeps the peace between people” and the growing fear that religious extremists – who are themselves often explicitly political actors – are infiltrating Kyrgyzstan’s Islamic institutions, turning a sacred geography into

²⁶⁶ There are nearly 350,000 congregations of different faiths in the United States, for example, as opposed to roughly 130,000 public and private schools (Grammich et al., 2012; Institute of Education Sciences, 2015).

a geography of danger, and once again demonstrating the impossibility of separating the political and the theological.

6.6 Conclusion: Grounding Memory and Theology

Maurice Halbwachs once described the role played by *lieux de mémoire* in the consolidation of the Christian religion after the time of Christ, arguing that the importance of these spaces lay in the fact that they gave form and location to names and events which would otherwise have remained purely in the realm of the imaginary:

To be sure, it was important that the believers be confident they were seeing and touching the very places where the facts subsequently transformed into dogma had happened. The memory of groups contains many truths, notions, ideas, and general propositions; the memory of religious groups preserves the recollection of dogmatic truths that were revealed to them in the beginning and that successive generations of believers and clergymen formulated. But if a truth is to be settled in the memory of a group it needs to be presented in the concrete form of an event, a personality, or of a locality (Halbwachs, 1992a, p. 200).

Halbwachs, however, was careful to note that the ways in which such places are understood and remembered inevitably changes over time and in different geographical and cultural contexts. Thus, the early, persecuted Christian community related to the sacred topography of the Holy Land in ways that were inevitably very different from how the later “universal” European Christian community understood the significance of that same geography. Halbwachs, for instance, argued that the Crusaders, having reclaimed control (however temporarily) of the Holy Land, “now wished to reproduce the image that it had constructed for itself from afar throughout the centuries. This led to an

abundant flowering of new localizations, much more numerous but also, most of the time, much more recent” (ibid., p. 234).

An analogous process of generating and (re)allocating the meanings and significances of places also operates beneath the surface of the consolidation of sovereignty and the formation of national identity, processes in the service of which collective memory is routinely mobilized. As Karen Till reminds us, geography plays a critical role in grounding and locating discourses related to group identities:

During the period of nation building in Europe, official places of memory were created to establish a topography of ‘a people’ and to maintain social stability, existing power relations, and institutional continuity... understandings of the nation as timeless and sacred were represented through the relative locations, designs, and functions of places like monuments, memorials, and museums (Till, 2008, p. 292).

In a similar vein, Jeff Sahadeo has pointed out the ways in which particular spaces and media constitute an important part of the ideological substratum of nationhood:

Monuments, commemorations, textbooks, anthems and flags intertwine memory and history to bind collectivities – “imagined communities” in [Benedict] Anderson’s words – into nations and political units” (Sahadeo, 2015, p. 2).

From this perspective, then, *lieux de mémoire* like *Ata Beyit*, *Manas Ordo*, the statue of Kurmanjan Datka in Duboviy Park, and even Ala Too Square itself, all provide reality and physical locality to the Kyrgyz cultural memory. Stalinist repressions; the martyrs of the 2010 revolution; sacred rites performed by the ancestors on the shore of Lake Issyk Kul; the “reclamation” of a “lost” Islamic heritage; transcendental encounters with the heroes of the *Manas* epic: each of these phenomena is an important element of

cultural memory. Each, moreover, is grounded in a particular place: at *Ata Beyit*; at Lake Issyk Kul and in the Ala Too Mountains; in the plethora of mosques and medresehs springing up throughout the country; at the *Manastyn Kömbözü* and the Springs of Kanikei; and so forth. Along with patriotic films like *Kurmanjan Datka*, the “national” literature of Chingiz Aitmatov, the popular valorization of nomadic heritage, the celebration of cultural artifacts like the *kalpak* and the *komuz*, and the veneration of the *Manas* epic, such spaces serve as poles around which a coherent sense of Kyrgyz national identity has coalesced. As we have seen, the immanent narratives associated with this ensemble have also been embraced by the state, and their symbolic value has been mobilized in the service of official discourses regarding the importance of sovereignty, unity, and sacrifice in the service of the nation.

As Cynthia Weber reminds us, moreover, “sovereign nation-states are not pre-given subjects but subjects in process and ... all subjects in process (be they individual or collective) are the ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted” (C. Weber, 1998). Weber suggests that foreign policy is one such area in which sovereignty is performed, but the mutually constitutive nature of the sacred and political geographies of Kyrgyzstan, which is especially perceptible in *mazars*, monumental spaces, and *lieux de mémoire*, offers another window into this performative process. As Julian Holloway and Oliver Valins have noted, “[r]eligious and spiritual geographies are (re)produced through a variety of embodied acts and embodied practices” (Holloway & Valins, 2002, p. 8). Thus, when Jamiliya *eje* argues that *mazars* “make [Kyrgyzstan] sacred” as long as

“pilgrims say the correct prayers and pray to God,”²⁶⁷ she is implicitly pointing to the mutually constitutive relationship, enacted through the performance of *ziyarat*, between the state and the sacred.

As Justin Tse argues (2014, p. 206), the spatial subjectivities studied by geographers – even those, like national identity that are products of the logic and assumptions of the modern nation-state – are theologically significant. Thus, although the borders of Kyrgyzstan were effectively created by Soviet cartographers, and the idea of Kyrgyz nationhood was likewise the product of Soviet ethnographic theory, both Kyrgyz national identity and the Kyrgyz nation-state are today widely understood in terms that are undeniably theological: sacred *mazars* like *Ata Beyit* and *Manas Ordo* are at the same time political monuments, and the natural environment of the country itself is understood both in territorial and transcendental terms. Meanwhile, the religious imaginary itself has been shaped by the logic of the sovereign-territorial regime: as the Aigine map of *mazars* illustrates, the sacred geography of Kyrgyzstan, as well as and the spiritual connection between *kyrgyzchylyk* and nature, have come to be understood in terms of sovereign territoriality.

²⁶⁷ In a similar fashion, Bruce Privratsky (2001) has demonstrated how the shrine of Ahmed Yasawi in the city of Turkistan in Kazakhstan has become a cardinal point in the locative matrix of Kazakh national identity.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The past as it lives in our recollections and acquires form and shape in our cultural memory is very different than the past that is researched by historians. It is our past. It is what we once were.
- Jan Assmann (2006, p. 179).

7.1 Articulating Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz Republic has led a precarious existence since becoming an independent nation-state in 1991. Endemic corruption, political upheaval, ethnic violence, a struggling economy, and the legacy of both tsarist and Soviet imperialism have worked to hinder the emergence of what many hoped would be a stable, prosperous democracy in the heart of Eurasia. The government's efforts, moreover, to build a viable sense of national identity and to articulate a coherent "national idea" have been inconsistent and largely ineffective.

Askar Akaev's early attempts to create a romanticized *Manas*-centric nationalist ideology fell flat, owing in part to the dissonance inherent in his attempts to mobilize the Kyrgyz myth-symbol complex to promote civic ecumenism. Subsequently, the drift towards Kyrgyz ethnic chauvinism during the Bakiev era was the result of growing bitterness and disillusionment over deteriorating economic conditions, which were often blamed on ethnic minorities. The state's rapid descent into outright authoritarianism and wholesale economic plunder, meanwhile, largely precluded meaningful development in the ideological sphere. Contemporary ideological initiatives, by contrast, appear to be

aimed at mobilizing certain elements of the Kyrgyz cultural memory to advance a narrative of stability, national unity, and state sovereignty. Whether these efforts will ultimately succeed remains an open question.

Concomitant with the post-Soviet developments in the ideological sphere has been the growing interest on the part of many Kyrgyz in exploring their religious identities. In some respects, this trend has resulted in the emergence of an alternative pole (at least from the perspective of the state) around which a sense of Kyrgyz identity can coalesce. As we have seen, growing interest in Islam has already become a site of contestation and negotiation regarding what it means to be Kyrgyz. Not only are there major disagreements between “traditionalists” and “universalists” regarding questions of what constitutes “correct” doctrine and practice, but the state itself has found it increasingly necessary to intervene in the religious sphere in order to delineate the contours of a politically quietist, anti-*takfirist* “traditional Kyrgyz Islam.” The result of such processes has been the gradual emergence of the nation-state as an arena for competition between divergent grounded theologies.

The evolving dynamic between state-centric Kyrgyz nationalism and an increasingly influential Muslim community thus serves to highlight the difficulties inherent in attempts to draw sharp lines between “sacred” and “secular.” While the Kyrgyz state is itself a legally secular entity, its interventions into the religious sphere have constituted it as a theological actor. At the same time, official *lieux de mémoire* like *Ata Beyit*, which reify patriotic discourses of national sacrifice and martyrdom, also have acquired (or already possessed) profound spiritual significance. Similarly, the meanings invested in politicized monumental spaces like *Manas Ordo* cannot be divorced from the

confluence of spiritual and ideological discourses rooted, ultimately, in the myth-symbol complex and Kyrgyz cultural memory.

7.2 The Nation-State as Sacred Geography

In the end, the Kyrgyz Republic, like all nation-states, must therefore be understood as consisting of more than simply a political unit: it is also a place where collective and cultural memories – those of oppression and perseverance; of an ancient nomadic way of life; of military glory and statehood; of heroes like Manas and Kurmanjan Datka; and of the ancestors – are grounded and performed. As David Wilson has reminded us, space is not simply an inert “background” upon which more fundamental social processes play out; rather, it is an integral component of those very processes (1993, p. 75). Kyrgyz national identity, therefore, is not merely connected to – or, perhaps, conflated with – the space of the Kyrgyz nation-state: in reality, national identity is constituted, remembered, and performed through people's individual and communal relationships with particular places. Such places, as we have seen, can range from *mazars* and monumental spaces to Kyrgyzstan's natural environment, the abstract, vaguely spiritual notion of "Ala Too" as an ancestral homeland, or the idea of a Kyrgyz nation-state.

Askar Akaev, curiously, seems to have grasped the dynamics of the relationship between identity and place when he wrote that "statehood is not only the territory limited in space by a lined that we call a border, and not only the systems of enforcement and management of the state, *but also the national identity that lives in the consciousness of a people for centuries...*" (Akaev, 2003, p. 11, emphasis added). Setting aside Akaev's primordialist conceptualization of nationality, his vision of statehood as being not only

rooted in cultural memory, but also as something whose very nature transcends the purely political is intriguing. If something fundamental to statehood is truly encapsulated in cultural memory – or, as Akaev calls it, "the consciousness of a people" – then arguments that nationality and the nation-state, and indeed modernity itself, have supplanted other sources of truth and knowledge, including religious ones, begin to appear somewhat less persuasive. Indeed, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, even many of the political aspects of nation-statehood – official ideology, national identity, and state territoriality – are each, in their own ways, bound up with the sacred.

At the same time, it is imperative to avoid reducing this relationship to mere banalities: it is not enough to simply recognize that religion plays an important role in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, for example, or to suggest that Judaism shapes Israel's political landscape. While true enough, such observations do little more than reproduce the old division between "sacred" and "secular," effectively constructing religion as something fundamentally external to the actual substance of statehood: an important influence, perhaps, but ultimately distinct from the practice of geopolitics. A more nuanced approach, as Justin Tse has argued, requires that geographers endeavor to "demonstrate that what continues to shape contemporary geopolitical formations are contestations and interactions among grounded theologies, both conventionally religious and secular ones" (2014, p. 214).

In doing so, we also acknowledge that religion is not simply a reactionary impediment to modernity, but is actually part of the fabric of modernity itself, however defined. After all, as Tse points out, "'religion' as a term is a construction that in the modern era has demarcated an illusory line between matters of faith and secular spaces of

the purely social and political" (ibid.). Recognizing this fact, we can begin to move beyond the teleological metanarratives of secularization, wherein the modern, secular nation-state inevitably supplants religion while, paradoxically, also finding its apparent triumph threatened by religion's stubborn refusal to be relegated to the sphere of private belief. But it is this narrative that is, in the final analysis, illusory. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the political geographies of the modern nation-state are coexistential with sacred geographies. National identity, in myth, in memory, and in performance, is likewise suffused with theological discourses.²⁶⁸

7.3 Directions for Future Research

If the history of the past few decades can serve as a guide, then the salience of religion in the realms of culture and geopolitics is likely to only become more pronounced. If, as Justin Wilford has argued, "the secularization paradigm still has much to offer if it can plausibly account for the socio-spatial environment of contemporary religious communities" (Wilford, 2012, p. 22), then more serious attention must also be paid to the different ways in which communities of believers challenge assumptions about secularity and the relationship between politics and religion. Geographers are particularly well-placed to interrogate the performance and contestation of grounded theologies at and across multiple scales, from the local to the transnational and even to the global.

²⁶⁸ This, then, is a partial rejection of the concept of "multiple modernities" advanced by scholars like Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000). Although Eisenstadt is correct to question the universality of Western discourses on modernity itself, he undervalues the role of grounded theologies in those discourses, locating them instead as influences on non-Western trajectories of modernity. However, as Hefner has noted, "[e]ven in the West, modernity is not singular, least of all as regards religious matters" (1998, p. 87). Nevertheless, Hefner too appears to regard religion as fundamentally distinct from the nation-state.

To this end, this dissertation has proposed a reconceptualization of the relationship between religion and nationality. Rather than treating religious identity as a “building block” of national identity, or as a transcendently inert cultural artifact, this study has instead sought to examine the ways in which sacred and national discourses emerge as dynamically engaged and mutually constitutive. This perspective opens up new avenues for comprehending the interplay between religion and nationalism that avoids viewing the two as inherently antagonistic. Comparative studies focused on how such connections operate in specific cases, such as the expressly theological underpinnings of Uyghur or Tibetan nationalism in Communist China or debates in Germany regarding multiculturalism and identity in the wake of Syrian immigration, would add an important new dimension to our understanding of these pressing issues.

In a similar vein, this dissertation’s concern with cultural memory and the confluence of sacred and political geographies has the potential to inform the ways in which we understand geopolitical contestations as well. For example, the Russian annexation of Crimea in March, 2014, was explicitly justified by Russian President Vladimir Putin on the grounds that Crimea constitutes “sacred” territory for Orthodox Russians, and that “Moscow would treat it as Jews and Muslims treat holy sites in Jerusalem” (RFE/RL, 2014). The primary reason given was that it was in Crimea that the tenth century ruler of Kievan Rus’, Grand Prince Volodymyr, was said to have been baptized (Schreck, 2014). This epochal moment, which occurred in the year 987, brought Kievan Rus’, perhaps the most powerful and important Slavic state of the era, into the Orthodox Christian world.

At the same time, however, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church also lay claim to both Crimea and to the legacy of Kyivan Rus'. According to a spokesperson for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, for example: "From the Ukrainian perspective, Crimea is more relevant to Kyiv because Volodymyr was the ruler of Kyiv" (ibid.), thus alluding to the fact that Kievan Rus', as its name suggests, was centered on what is now the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. Ukraine's claim to Kyivan Rus', and thus to Volodymyr the Great, therefore constitutes a geopolitical (and anti-colonial) counter-narrative to the Russian tradition of tracing the origins of its own statehood back to Kievan Rus' as well.

While such debates might appear to carry primarily historical and political significance, the annexation of Crimea in fact activated disparate grounded theologies as a theater of contestation. The geopolitical conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which has expanded from the annexation of Crimea into a ruinous war in eastern Ukraine, has dramatically sharpened the distinctions between different religious subjectivities, precipitating what has been described as a "schism" between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.²⁶⁹ Increasingly, Ukrainian Orthodox churches in Crimea face intimidation and harassment (Jacobsen, 2014), on the grounds that they are fertile soil for anti-Russian agitation. Meanwhile Ukrainian Orthodox parishes throughout Ukraine "are becoming increasingly anti-Moscow and inclined toward splitting with the [Russian Orthodox Church]

²⁶⁹ There also exists a separate Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate, a Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and a Ukrainian Catholic (Uniate) Church, none of which have been connected with the Russian Orthodox Church. A close examination of the differences between these churches is, of course, far beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, as Pål Kolstø has shown, the history of Christianity in modern-day Ukraine is very much tied to debates over the legacy of Russian imperialism and Ukrainian national identity (Kolstø, 2000, pp. 66-70), illustrating once again the difficulties inherent in attempting to delineate between the state and the sacred.

and combining all three Ukrainian Orthodox churches into a single entity recognized by Constantinople” (Ryzhkov, 2015). The cultural memory of Volodymyr’s tenth century conversion to Orthodox Christianity has thus played a pivotal role in shaping the political and religious landscapes of Eurasia for over a millennium, and continues to animate theological and geopolitical contestation to this day.²⁷⁰

What examples like this illustrate is that the perspective adopted in this dissertation, which has sought to unify a concern for politics, memory, and theology, has broader application for understanding the nexus of (geo)politics and religion beyond the apparently obscure context of the Kyrgyz Republic. This approach, which takes seriously the arguments of the religious and seeks to comprehend the connections between religion and geopolitics from an emic perspective, thus aligns with the concerns of anthropologists like Gabrielle Marranci, who has contributed much to our understanding of what motivates people to engage in what is often described as “fundamentalism” or “extremism.” Although Marranci’s work is not concerned with grounded theologies as such, he has nevertheless elaborated what he describes as

a model in which Islam becomes part of the feelings – induced by emotions that are the result of interaction with particular schismogenic environments – used to make sense of the personal autobiographical-self. In these terms, what has been labeled as “Islamic fundamentalism” ... is not a

²⁷⁰ Apart from the inter-Orthodox struggles precipitated by the Russian violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty, there is also the problem of Crimea’s indigenous Tatar population, which is predominantly Muslim. The Crimean Tatars were deported en masse to Central Asia in 1944 on the grounds that they were Nazi sympathizers,²⁷⁰ and so have demonstrated little enthusiasm for joining Russia. As a result, the new Russian authorities in Crimea have not only moved to close Tatar political institutions (RFE/RL, 2016), but have also raised the specter of Islamic extremism. Numerous mosques and religious schools have been raided, in search of “extremist literature,”²⁷⁰ and thousands of Muslim Tatars have been induced to once again leave Crimea (Lukov, 2014), which is increasingly being defined as a Russian, Orthodox space.

thing, but a process; a process of emotional communication
(2009, pp. 153-154).

Consequently, in Marranci's view, the *process* of "fundamentalism" is derived from the complex interaction of theological arguments, political and social contexts, and, ultimately "the individual as a human being and her/his relationship with the surrounding environment" (ibid., p. 153) – in other words, a grounded theology.

Future research, drawing on the grounded theologies approach and the work of scholars like Marranci, carries the potential to inform and confront security-focused studies by challenging the "discourse of danger" (Heathershaw & Megoran, 2011) that often surrounds religion, and Islam in particular. If Jürgen Habermas, for example, has warned of the "potential for violence innate in religion" (2008, pp. 18-19), then it may be argued that it would be instead more productive to "understand how religious practitioners make sense of the world politically instead of uncritically assuming that 'religion' necessarily promotes violence" (Tse, 2014, p. 213).

The importance of Islam – and religion in general – in Kyrgyzstan's public sphere is not likely to diminish in the foreseeable future. As we have seen, however, the meaning and significance of Islam is by no means a settled question, and there is little consensus in debates over the propriety of Islam vis-à-vis indigenous Kyrgyz religious traditions or the compatibility of "universalist" Islam with Kyrgyz national identity. The state itself, as we have seen, has at times intervened in the discourses surrounding these questions, effectively becoming a theological actor with a crucial stake in particular definitions of what constitutes "real" Islam. Of course, these definitions are themselves by no means universally accepted.

At the same time, the Kyrgyz government, in an attempt to forestall state collapse, has begun to mobilize cultural memory in an effort to consolidate a sense of Kyrgyz identity, national unity, and state sovereignty. Until now these phenomena – the “Islamic revival” and nation-building – have typically been depicted by scholars as essentially isolated, while their intersections have frequently been interpreted in instrumental, or even oppositional, terms. This epistemic sequestration, however, is no longer sustainable.

This dissertation has demonstrated that the state and the sacred, and the social, political, and cultural processes that surround them, are indissolubly bound together, both on the level of everyday practice and on that of discourse and ideology. Theological debates over religious belief and practice have not only drawn in the state, but they have also extended into the realm of national identity and tradition. Similarly, while the logic of the modern sovereign-territorial system has worked to “contain” the religious imaginary, the territory of the state is viewed as sacred. The legendary hero Manas constitutes the literal embodiment of the state’s ideology, and indeed of Kyrgyz history and cultural memory; the place where his body is buried has become a national *lieu de mémoire*. But Manas also visits pilgrims, both in their dreams and waking *ayans*, giving them guidance and curing their ailments; he animates the souls of *manaschys*, who retell his epic, which serves as a living “encyclopedia” of his people’s history, traditions, and national greatness. Like debates over Islam in Kyrgyzstan, discourses surrounding Manas are thus simultaneously national and transcendental, their geographies coexistential.

David Sopher once wrote that “religion broadly conceived must become a central object of the discipline’s best endeavors” (1981, p. 581). However, for many social scientists, transcendental phenomena have often been interpreted as mere “cultural

flotsam produced by more fundamental social and political forces” (Stump, 2008, p. 369), or perhaps as little more than the quaint “building blocks” of ethnic and national identities. But Aryn Sajoo has argued that scholars need to address “the nature of the relationship between an ethical framework such as Islam’s to the... public sphere... while *recognizing that varying national and cultural contexts make for varying dynamics on the ground*” (Sajoo, 2004, p. 34, emphasis added). For geographers concerned with questions of politics, culture, and religion, these words should be a call-to-arms. Heeding Sopher, the time has come for us to turn our “best endeavors” toward this increasingly crucial field of inquiry, and to recognize at last the long neglected connections between the state and the sacred.

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Appendix 1: Methods

This dissertation is based on five months of intensive research carried out in Kyrgyzstan, between August and December of 2014. The bulk of this work was conducted in the capital city of Bishkek. Further research was conducted in the cities of Talas and Karakol. Data were also collected at a number of sites of particular significance, including the Baytik Batyr *mazar* (shrine) near Baytik Village, the Ata Beyit *mazar*, and the Burana Tower, all in the Chui Valley, the “Dungan Mosque” in Karakol, and in the Talas Valley, at the *Manas Ordo* complex, the Springs of Kanikei, and the Besh Tash and Zulpukor *mazars*.

There are, of course, tradeoffs associated with the focus on Bishkek. On the one hand, the city is undeniably the locus of political and cultural life in the country. Not only is it the seat of government, but the Muftiyat, which officially governs religious life in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the State Commission for Religious Affairs, which is a secular body that regulates the religious sphere, are located there as well. Moreover, many of Kyrgyzstan’s most prestigious universities, including the Kyrgyz National University “Yusup Balasagun”, the Kyrgyz-Turkish “Manas” University, the Kyrgyz-Slavic University, and the American University of Central Asia, are all in Bishkek. All major policy decisions – for instance, about regulating religious organizations and the content standards to which all textbooks on Kyrgyz history are expected to conform – are made in Bishkek. Only Osh, the “southern capital” of Kyrgyzstan, rivals Bishkek as a locus of political and cultural capital.

On the other hand, due to its very preeminence, life in Bishkek is in many respects atypical of life in other parts of Kyrgyzstan. Despite Bishkek's cultural, political, and discursive centrality, what a researcher encounters in the capital may not necessarily represent the situation in more remote villages. Moreover, in terms of its historical and spiritual importance, Bishkek cannot rival places like Lake Issyk Kul, Osh, or *Manas Ordo*. Thus, for example, while many of the country's most important artists, including *manaschys*, such as Ryspai Isakov and Doolot Sydykov, either live in or near to Bishkek, and the official union of *manaschys* is likewise headquartered there, the spiritual "center of gravity" for most *manaschys* is the Issyk Kul region. The notable feeling of cosmopolitanism that one encounters in Bishkek, moreover, attenuates the further one gets from the capital.

Ethnography and Epistemology

Michael Agar has written that "[n]o understanding of a world is valid without a representation of [its] members' voices" (1996, p. 27). Considering the long history of misrepresentation of the role of Islam in Central Asia, best exemplified by the tradition of "Sovietological Islamology" criticized by DeWeese (2002),²⁷¹ I believe it was crucial to

²⁷¹ There is no space here to devote to a full discussion of this problem. In short, "Sovietological Islamology" is the name given to a tradition of Western scholarship on Islam in the former Soviet Union that tended to uncritically repeat the conclusions of the Soviet sources it was dependent upon. However, Soviet sources were often highly unreliable. For example, during the period of national delimitation, Soviet ethnographers were presented with the problem of how to account for the profound influence of Islam on the cultures and societies of Central Asia. Ultimately, the Soviet authorities worked to diminish attachment to Islam by questioning the degree to which Central Asians had ever "really" Islamized. It thus became necessary to separate and distinguish putatively "authentic" national cultures from what were dismissed as "external" (and harmful) Islamic influences. One Soviet researcher, for example, argued: "If, in the seventeenth century, Islam among the Kyrgyz was completely insignificant, then in following centuries Muslim beliefs still had not made significant progress... Islam did not have time to put down such deep roots as, for example, among their neighbors – the Kazakhs" (Abramzon, 1971, pp. 267-268). Consequently, much of what has been written by Western scholars about Islam in Central Asia reproduces anti-Islamic stereotypes, particularly regarding the "laxity" or "superficiality" of religious practice in the region, particularly in comparison to an idealized, decontextualized stereotype of "pure" Islam. Thus, as Mark Saroyan has pointed out: "A fundamental problem in Western scholarship on Islam has been the

ensure that, as far as practicable, the voices and beliefs of the Kyrgyz themselves were represented in this study. My research therefore employed a varied ethnographic approach, involving: 1) interviews; 2) participant observation; and 3) textual and landscape analysis. Ethnographic methods are particularly useful for studying complex social phenomena while at the same time remaining sensitive to emic, or self-ascribed, understandings of such phenomena. Indeed, Phillips and Johns argue that ethnographic methods

dispense[] with the formality and structure associated with survey research methods such as questionnaires, and with the detachment associated with some forms of observation and landscape description, in order to pursue a deeper involvement in and understanding of a place, community, or situation. Its aim is to understand human geographies from the perspectives of those who inhabit them (Phillips & Johns, 2012, p. 167).

It should be noted from the outset, however, that, while my research utilized ethnographic methods, the present dissertation does not purport, nor even aspire, to be a comprehensive “ethnography” of Kyrgyz religious life akin to Bruce Privratsky’s *Muslim Turkistan* (2001). While such a study would undoubtedly represent a valuable addition to the literature on Kyrgyz religion, Privratsky’s fieldwork took place over nearly a decade of living and working in the Kazakh city of Turkistan. Similarly, this dissertation does

reification of religion. Many scholars do not view religion as a social manifestation of the sacred but as a fixed set of beliefs and practices” (Saroyan, 1997, p. 57). Similarly, Edward Said has criticized the “tendency to reduce Islam to a handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalizations about the faith, its founder, and all of its people” (Said, 1997, p. *xvi*). Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, this epistemological tradition continues to carry weight. As one recent observer has noted, for example: “Kyrgyzstan’s believers are often considered as ‘nominal’ Muslims practicing ‘popular Islam’ defined by adherence to traditions and customs, rather than strict observance of Islamic rituals” (Omelicheva, 2011a, p. 28).

not seek to present an ethnographic portrait of a particular ethnic community, as Morgan Liu's *Under Solomon's Throne* does vis-à-vis Uzbeks living in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh.

Instead the decision to employ traditional ethnographic methods, such as interviews, participant observation, and, of course, what Clifford has referred to as “deep hanging out” (1997, p. 188), was intended to mitigate certain problems that have traditionally marred social scientific writing on religion and culture in Kyrgyzstan. The methods used in this dissertation were chosen in order to create an opportunity for Kyrgyz people to explain their thoughts and experiences on their own terms, using their own categories. Therefore, while trying to avoid excessive credulity, I also tried to remain open to ideas and interpretations that I, as a researcher, may not necessarily have personally believed or accepted.²⁷² In the end, this approach paid off: there were numerous instances where contacts who were initially suspicious of my motives (repeatedly asking me, for example, if I was a “spy,” or simply being reticent during interviews) proved to be helpful and forthcoming once it became clear that I was genuinely interested in hearing their thoughts and ideas. The end result, I think, was a more authentic account of how Kyrgyz people themselves conceptualize their national and religious identities.

National Representation

²⁷² Some studies of the *Manas* epic, for example, make a point of noting that “objectively speaking” there is no evidence that Manas himself ever visited the places that he is associated with, or that he even existed at all (see for example: Wasilewska, 1997, p. 87). The fact is that for many Kyrgyz, Manas not only existed, but he still exists as a spirit who can be encountered in particular places, in dreams, etc. Dismissing this belief from the outset as superstitious and irrational would, from the standpoint of trying to comprehend how Kyrgyz themselves understand Manas, be counterproductive at best.

It should be noted from the outset that this dissertation distinguishes *nationality* from *citizenship*. In Kyrgyzstan, the distinction between citizenship and nationality has been marked by scholars using such terms as “Kyrgyz” and “Kyrgyzstani,” the former being an ethno-national category and the latter indicating citizenship.²⁷³ Apart from the Kyrgyz majority, the population of Kyrgyzstan also consists of Uzbeks, Russians, Ukrainians, Uyghurs, Dungans (ethnic Chinese Muslims), Germans, and others. However, for practical purposes, the research conducted for this dissertation focused on the ethnic Kyrgyz population. A Russian living in Bishkek, therefore, may be a citizen of Kyrgyzstan – that is, *Kyrgyzstani* – but not *Kyrgyz* by nationality.

It is important to make this distinction, because part of the focus of this dissertation is on discourses surrounding Kyrgyz nationality, not Kyrgyzstani citizenship. Consequently, a representative sample of the entire population of Kyrgyzstan, which would necessarily include significant numbers of non-Kyrgyz minorities, was neither required nor desirable. While participants from non-Kyrgyz minorities were not excluded from the study *a priori*, they were also not deliberately sought out. Indeed, when non-Kyrgyz people *were* interviewed, it quickly became apparent that many of the questions that I was asking were simply not applicable to them. Most non-Kyrgyz, for example, have very little spiritual or emotional investment in the epic *Manas*. Because of the epic’s ubiquity in politics and culture, most are at least passingly familiar with it, but for many it has no real cultural resonance.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Anecdotally, I did not hear the latter word used at any time while in Kyrgyzstan. If I used it, people understood its meaning, but they did not use the word themselves.

²⁷⁴ One person of half-Georgian/half-Russian ethnicity even expressed bemusement that I would even bother studying *Manas*, and suggested that the only reason it could possibly hold interest for anyone with “real” culture was because it was “exotic.”

The absence of a representative sample may raise questions about the universal applicability of this research. Such misgivings are misplaced. The study itself is focused on the relationship between religion, the state, and Kyrgyz national identity, which has necessitated a focus on particular cultural features as Islam, the *Manas* epic, the concept of *Kyrgyzchilik*, and the Kyrgyz people's nomadic past. These cultural features are not necessarily shared with (or even intelligible to) other ethno-national groups living in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, the questions regarding the relationship between religious and national identities that are addressed in this dissertation are broadly applicable. Similar research on the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and Russian national identity, for example, would simply require a research design oriented towards a different set of cultural touchstones, such as the conversion of Vladimir the Great to Christianity in 988 or, perhaps, the figure of the tsar in Russian cultural memory and religious discourses. However, accounting for every possible combination of histories and cultural symbols in a diverse population such as is found in Kyrgyzstan would be an undertaking that is far beyond the possible scope of a dissertation, and the results of which would in any case prove difficult to represent satisfactorily. The present focus on the Kyrgyz should thus be considered a case study that sheds light on more universal processes.

Notes on Research Design

The core of this dissertation is drawn from data gathered during the course of 32 semi-structured interviews. Interview participants ranged from *moldos* (Kyrgyz for “mullah”) and *manaschys* (bards who specialize in retelling the *Manas* epic), to government officials from the State Commission for Religious Affairs, *shaykhs*, or the guardians of sacred sites, and local scholars and experts on Kyrgyz culture. Of course,

many valuable insights were also gleaned through mundane interactions with ordinary people, such as taxi drivers, merchants, café waiters, and so forth. Interview participants included twenty-three men and nine women, ranging from their early twenties to their mid-eighties, with an average age of about thirty-five. The questions asked centered around themes relating to national identity, the significance of the *Manas* epic and Kyrgyz national traditions, and Islam, but conversations were allowed to range freely, allowing participants to discuss subjects that they believed were pertinent, interesting, or important.

Although most research participants were chosen because of their knowledge, position, or qualifications, this study also left room for serendipity: an abortive initial trip to interview the *shaykh* of the Baytik *baatyr mazar* (the *shaykh* happened to be away on business that day) nevertheless afforded an opportunity to instead interview a pilgrim at the shrine. This person had traveled to the village of Baytik from his village in the southern region of Osh after receiving instruction to visit the Baytik *baatyr mazar* in a dream; it was only sheer chance that he happened to be there that day and willing to be interviewed. In another instance, the owner of a local coffee shop, a Dungan,²⁷⁵ mistaking me for a journalist, invited me to interview him after noticing me speaking with different people about religion on several occasions. Unanticipated moments such as these helped to inform this study with valuable information that might otherwise have remained hidden, at least from me.

Hand-written notes were taken during every interview (in the case of unanticipated conversations, such as random encounters with taxi drivers, notes were

²⁷⁵ A Muslim of Chinese ethnicity. Often referred to as Hui in China.

jotted down after the fact). These “scratch notes” then formed the basis for more extensive field notes, which were written as soon as possible after the event. These field notes included contextual details about the date and location of the interview, the appearance and mannerisms of the interviewee, as well as an account of the conversation. Moreover, field notes also included my reflections on the interview itself, or on events connected with the interview, such as my impressions of visiting a *medressh* in the village of Chong Aryk. These field notes formed the basis of the analysis presented in this dissertation.

Most interviews were recording using a digital recording device. In all cases, oral consent was obtained from interview participants before the recording device was switched on. In most cases, interviewees readily assented to recordings. In some instances, interview subjects asked to know the purpose of my research and for what I planned to use the recordings. After describing the aims of my project and assuring them that only I and my interpreter, who made the Russian- and Kyrgyz-language transcriptions, would have access to the recordings, most subsequently agreed to the use of the voice recorder. Only in very rare cases did an interview participant decline to be recorded; in these cases, only written notes were taken. Most of the interviews were conducted in either the Russian or, more commonly, Kyrgyz languages. Some were conducted in English. Recordings of interviews in Russian and Kyrgyz were transcribed by a native speaker. The resulting transcripts were then translated into English.

The texts analyzed for this research included popular Islamic literature, which is widely available in Kyrgyzstan. Much of this literature, which comes in the form of books, pamphlets, and brochures, can be found at bazaars, in book stores, and from

merchants selling their wares on the streets or in stalls constructed on the sidewalks. Most of this literature is available only in Kyrgyz, but some of it also existed in Russian translation, and it was the latter that I referred to. I also relied on television programs, newspapers and online news sources, the official websites of organizations like the Muftiyat of Kyrgyzstan, museum exhibits, monumental spaces, and college textbooks, which promulgate an “official” view of Kyrgyz history and culture, and are approved by the Ministry of Education. Such sources provided a rich cross-section of both “official” and “unofficial” perspectives on a variety of issues relating to religion and national identity, and shed light on the disparate sites at which definitions of what it means to be Kyrgyz are being contested, negotiated, and reshaped.

Participant observation made up another crucial aspect of my research. At different times, this included being part of discrete events, such as attendance at religious ceremonies at mosques, visiting *mazars* with a group of *shaykhs*, attending Independence Day celebrations in Bishkek, and witnessing performances of the epic *Manas*. At other times, participant observation simply meant experiencing everyday life in Kyrgyzstan: sharing bread with pilgrims at *mazars*, saying “*omin*” after dining, conversing with Kyrgyz people over a plate of *plov*, or just being on a *marshrutka* with an Islamic amulet or a Kyrgyz flag hanging from the rear-view mirror are all part of the quotidian substance of religious and national life in Kyrgyzstan. These seemingly insignificant moments nevertheless provided an invaluable context for understanding how such abstract concepts are mobilized in peoples’ daily lives. These “everyday” experiences were thus crucial for grounding and contextualizing my understanding of the confluence of the state and the sacred.

Positionality

All researchers, when entering the field, have to decide how to present themselves and the work that they are conducting, the reasons motivating their research, and what they hope to learn from the people that they are speaking with. When interacting with people, either in formal contexts, such as interviews, or in more informal settings, I was always candid about my reasons for being in Kyrgyzstan, and I identified myself as an American, as a scholar, and as a non-Muslim. In some cases, this aroused suspicion and hesitance: one individual at the Bishkek Central Mosque demanded to know whether I was a spy, and a *moldo* who I interviewed refused to be recorded, fearing that I or someone else might edit his words and use them in the media “against Islam.” In another case, several potential interviewees in the city of Karakol, all *moldos*, refused to speak with me on the grounds that I am an American.

However, if my identity sometimes caused people to mistrust my intentions, in other cases it induced them to open up, either because they were simply glad that I was taking an interest in the subject, or in the hopes that my research might help to combat narrow and misleading stereotypes about Islam that they feel are prevalent in the media. Still others saw my presence as an opportunity to proselytize, though no one was particularly aggressive about it (in some instances, in fact, interview subjects were hesitant to talk about religious matters because they feared they might be seen as *daavat*, or proselytization). In one instance, an interview participant welcomed our chats as a chance to practice his language skills, since he wanted to be able to conduct *davaat* in English.

In most cases, then, interview participants were strikingly forthcoming, even in settings where I would not have expected such enthusiasm. I was initially hesitant, for example, to approach the aforementioned pilgrim at the Baytik *baatyr mazar*. As it turned out, not only was this man eager to speak with me, but he also thanked me profusely for taking an interest in the subject, and told me that the research that I was conducting was “very important.” In another case, a woman working in a makeshift gift shop by the parking lot at the *Manas Ordo* complex gave an impromptu interview because she was surprised and thrilled that a foreigner was in her store and interested in Manas. In the end, even the man at the Bishkek Central Mosque who accused me of being a spy ended up enthusiastically trying to sell me Islamic literature and perfumes, and helped me to find contacts for me to interview.

In a more official capacity, my role as a scholar affiliated with the American University of Central Asia made it possible for me to be accepted by several local academics, including Dr. Emil Nasritdinov, Dr. Ruslan Rahimov, and Dr. Kadyr Malikov, all of whom were exceedingly gracious and generous with their time and expertise. Likewise, after a particularly long interview with an analyst at the State Commission for Religious Affairs, I apologized for taking up so much of his afternoon; the man simply replied that he himself was working on finishing his dissertation, and was more than happy to share his time with a fellow scholar.

Gender norms also conditioned my ability to conduct research. Although decades of Soviet rule did much to equalize the position of women in society, Kyrgyz culture has

in many respects remained quite patriarchal.²⁷⁶ Islamic gender norms in Kyrgyzstan also tend to be somewhat conservative. All of these circumstances meant that it was usually easier for me to obtain interviews with men than with women. When I conducted an interview at the house of a *moldo* in Karakol, women, with the exception of my interpreter, were conspicuously absent from the room. The *moldo*'s son, however, joined us for the interview and for our subsequent lunch. Curiously, I found that followers of what will be referred to in this dissertation as “traditionalist” Islam and practitioners of *kyrgyzchylyk* had fewer concerns about gender norms, and I was able to interview several women from this demographic. By contrast, female followers of newer “universalist” Islamic movements were more reticent to speak with me.

Visiting religious sites like the Bishkek Central Mosque only posed problems for me insofar as I, as a white American, stood out from the mostly Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Turkish men who prayed there. That meant that I attracted a substantial amount of curiosity and, in some cases, suspicion, which made it moderately uncomfortable for me to simply “blend in” and observe things. On the other hand, being a male meant I could otherwise visit religious institutions like mosques quite freely: the Bishkek Central Mosque, for example, is an almost exclusively male space. The only women to be found there are beggars, merchants selling Islamic literature and ritual necessities, and mothers with children, who as a rule remain on the street outside the mosque grounds during prayers. Similarly, when my interpreter and I visited the mosque to interview the deputy imam, we had to enter through a back door, and she, much to her vocal dismay, had to don a headscarf provided from a box by the entryway.

²⁷⁶ The institution of *kыз ала качуу*, or “bride kidnapping,” for instance, is not uncommon even though it is also quite controversial (Borbieva, 2012b; Handrahan, 2004; Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007).

Limitations of the Study

As alluded to above, one limitation encountered during the course of this research is that, due to the nature of the project itself, men are significantly overrepresented among my interview subjects. Islamic gender norms in particular made it difficult, though not impossible, to find Muslim women to participate in this research. However, women are by no means absent in the interview sample making up 28% of the total number of participants. The women interviewed included a *mazar shaykh*; two former medreseh students; a traditional healer; a practitioner of *kyrgyzchylyk* who works as a souvenir vendor at *Manas Ordo*; an employee of the Aigine Cultural Research Center; and several university students. With a few notable exceptions, the women interviewed in this study tended to come from younger generations (born after 1975). The men I interviewed, by contrast, came from a variety of generations and backgrounds.

Language was another of the major challenges that I encountered in the field. Bishkek is a multi-lingual city, where people speak Kyrgyz, Russian, English, Uzbek, Turkish, German, Chinese, and many other languages. Perhaps because of the close connection my research topic has with Kyrgyz national culture, however, the majority of my interview participants, even in Bishkek, chose only to speak in Kyrgyz, which is a language in which I have very limited proficiency. While two years of studying Uyghur, a related Turkic language, allowed me to understand some of what was being said, it was nevertheless necessary to retain the services of an interpreter to facilitate interviews in Kyrgyz; while I am conversant in Russian, I also used an interpreter for longer interviews in Russian in order to ensure accuracy. I myself conducted interviews with English speaking participants. These linguistic challenges had a moderate impact on my ability to

independently collect data without the assistance of an interpreter, but I do not believe that they severely hindered my overall research efforts.

Appendix 2: Glossary

Akyn: A bard who recites oral stories about the ancestors and Kyrgyz history.

AO: Autonomous Oblast (region); a small-scale political-territorial unit in the Soviet Union.

ASSR: Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic; an autonomous republic within a Union Republic in the Soviet Union.

Ata: Literally, “father”; also a sign of respect.

Ayan: A dream or premonition. People who ignore their *ayans* often become ill.

Baïke: Literally, an older male cousin; can also be used as a general term of respect for an elder.

Basmachi: “Bandits.” Name given to Central Asians who resisted Russian and Soviet rule in the early twentieth century.

Bata: Blessing.

Batachy: A spiritual figure who specializes in giving blessings.

Bid’a: “Unwelcome innovations” in Islamic belief or practice. These can include ancestor cults, visiting the graves of saints, belief in spirits, etc. Many Islamic reformists argue that Islam must be purified of *bid’a*.

Bozui: Kyrgyz word for a yurt.

Daavat: A form of missionary activity that involves calling or inviting Muslims back to the mosque. Not engaged in among non-Muslims. Prevalent among the Tablighi Jama’at.

Daavachilar: Members of Tablighi Jama’at.

Eje: Literally, “older sister”; also a sign of respect.

Elechek: Tall, cylindrical headgear worn by Kyrgyz women.

Ene: Literally, “mother.”

Iman: Faith.

Jadids: Early twentieth century Islamic reformists in the Russian Empire.

Jailoo: A summer pasture, usually high in the mountains. Kyrgyz livestock herders would often retreat to their *jailoo* in times of danger.

Kasiet: Spiritual energy. Ignoring an *ayan* can corrupt a person’s *kasiet*, leading to illness.

Komuz: A fretless stringed musical instrument. A Kyrgyz national symbol.

Korenizatsiia: Literally, “rooting.” The Soviet process of creating

- nations, along with national languages, histories, traditions, etc.
- Kyrgyzchylyk:** Literally “Kyrgyzness.” A broad concept referring to the various aspects of Kyrgyz ethnic identity, including spiritual traditions, traditional healing methods, connection to the natural environment, etc.
- Manas epic:** An oral epic of indeterminate age. Recounts the life of the eponymous hero, Manas, as well as that of his son Semetei, and his grandson, Seitek. Often called “the encyclopedia of the Kyrgyz people” because it describes numerous Kyrgyz customs and traditions, toponyms, etc.
- Manaschy:** A bard who specializes in reciting the **Manas epic**. People often become *manaschys* after receiving an *ayan*, and many report encounters with Manas or the spirits of deceased *manaschys* as turning points in their lives.
- Manasovedenie:** “Manas studies.” An academic subject in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.
- Mankurtism:** A term popularized by the Soviet Kyrgyz writer, Chingiz Aitmatov. Refers to a person who has forgotten his or her national identity, roots, language, etc.
- Mazar:** A sacred place. Can be a gravesite, a place associated with legendary figures, part of the natural environment, etc. Visiting mazars (*ziyarat*) is one of the focal points of Kyrgyz religious traditions.
- Moldo:** Kyrgyz word for “mullah,” or a religious figure.
- Muftiyat:** The Islamic governing body in independent Kyrgyzstan. Officially called the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (*Kyrgyzstan Musulmandarynyn Din Bashkarmalygy*), it is one of the “national” descendants of the Soviet-era Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (**SADUM**)
- Musulmanchylyk:** “Muslimness.” Often used to refer to the practice of strictly adhering to Islamic customs
- Namaz:** Islamic prayer ritual
- Namazkhana:** A room specially set aside in a public place (a bazaar, university, etc.) for the performance of **namaz**.
- Narodnost’:** Nationality, in the sense of ethnicity.
- Natsional’nost’:** Nationality, in the sense of a political nation.
- Nur:** Literally “light.” Also refers to holy energy, which is said to bless **mazars**.
- Razmezhivanie:** The process of national delimitation in Central Asia. Occurred alongside *korenizatsiia* and resulted in the drawing of the political borders of the Union

- Republics that later became independent states.
- RSFSR:** Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.
- SADUM:** Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. An official Islamic governing body established in 1943 for the purposes of administering Islamic life in Central Asia. Similar institutions operated in the North Caucasus, the Transcaucasus, and the European parts of the Soviet Union.
- Sanjyra:** Semi-mythical personal and communal genealogy. Retold by *akyns*.
- Sblizhenie:** “Coming together.” The process of consolidating economic, political, and cultural ties between the separate nations of the Soviet Union.
- Shaykh:** The guardian of a *mazar*.
- Sliianie:** “Merger.” The process of amalgamating of all separate nationalities of the Soviet Union into a consolidated socialist nation that incorporated the progressive aspects of each of its parts.
- SSR:** Soviet Socialist Republic. Also known as a “Union Republic.” Each SSR became an independent nation-state after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- Subha:** A string of prayer beads.
- Tablighi Jama’at:** A transnational Islamic group whose mission is to engage in *daavat* (from the Arabic, *dawa*), or inviting fellow Muslims to strengthen their faith.
- Tengrism:** A pseudo-religious nationalist ideology that venerates ancient Kyrgyz traditions, including the sky god, Tengri. Tengrists are often vehemently anti-Islamic, since they do not consider Islam to be indigenous among the Kyrgyz.
- Toi:** A celebration, such as for a wedding. Also a religious ceremony at which people read Qur’an and sacrifices livestock.
- Tülöö:** A ritual ceremony involving in which a person sacrifices an animal and prepares a meal for his or her relatives and neighbors
- Tyndyk:** Smoke hole in the top of a yurt. A characteristic Kyrgyz national symbol, it is depicted in the Kyrgyz flag, in architecture, and in many other places.
- Umai ene:** A pre-Islamic Kyrgyz goddess associated with fertility. Still venerated by Kyrgyz who practice *Kyrgyzchylyk*.
- Urkun:** The 1916 “exodus” across the mountains into China after rebellious Kyrgyz tribes suffered reprisal attacks from Russian colonial authorities. Often considered in contemporary Kyrgyzstan to be an instance “genocide.”

Wahhabism: A purist form of Islam based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Followers of Wahhabism are known for their intolerance towards any interpretation of Islam they believe has been corrupted by *bid'a*, or “unwelcome innovations.” Accusations of “Wahhabism” are often leveled by Central Asian governments against Islamic movements they see as destabilizing, whether they are truly Wahhabists or not.

Zhogorku Kenesh: The Kyrgyz Parliament

Ziyarat: The practice of visiting *mazars* and reading from the Qur'an. A characteristic feature of Islam as traditionally practiced by Kyrgyz. Increasingly controversial, as more purist forms of Islam become more popular in Kyrgyzstan.

Appendix 3: Map of Kyrgyzstan



Figure 28: Political map of Kyrgyzstan (public domain).