

Animals, Kinship, and the State: Kyrgyz Chabans Rebuilding Herds and Reorienting Belonging after the Soviet Collapse

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Abstract: Until the end of the 1980s, the vision of the now for the Kyrgyz pastoralists was elaborated in the framework of an omnipresent state. The running of herds over mountain pastures was organized by state entities (kolkhozes and sovkhoses) and the great majority of animals were effectively state-owned. The state system maintained roads and vehicles for livestock transport, the provision of veterinary services, and the marketing of wool and meat, as well as the provision for the other needs of Kyrgyz pastoralists' livelihoods. Today, the pastoral landscape is scattered with the ruins of large livestock shelters, the doors and roofs of which have been pilfered for the needs of a much more small-scale, privately organized economy. As ownership of livestock and machinery passed to private hands in the mid-1990s, there was initially a catastrophic collapse of livestock herding as a basis of livelihood for most herders. As communities sought to reconstruct their future in the absence of the reliable state, their sense of belonging shifted from state entities to traditional concepts of relatedness remembered from their primordial past. Yet while the initial privatization was organized on the premise that collectivities based on extended kinship would replace the state organization, this proved unworkable in many ways. Such collectivities then fragmented and livelihoods became organized around families in the narrower sense. Thus, in a twenty year period, Kyrgyz herders have shifted from relying on the state organization of their lives, to an unstable primordial kinship, and now to a new set of orienting principles which hinge on complex assessments of what can assure the future. In this paper, based on fieldwork in Narin Province, we will examine how these transformations have taken place in pastoral livelihoods, as well as the challenges that have emerged in this environment of rapidly changing belonging in relation to livelihoods, kinship and the state.

Introduction

Until the end of the 1980s, the vision of the future for the Kyrgyz pastoralists was elaborated within the framework of an omnipresent state. State entities — kolkhozes and sovkhoses¹ — organized the running of herds over mountain pastures, and the great majority of animals were effectively state-owned. During the Soviet period, the Kyrgyz Republic held third place after Kazakhstan and Russia in the production of sheep and sheep products, despite its vastly smaller territory and population. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991/92, there were nearly 10 million small livestock in the Kyrgyz Republic. The state system maintained roads and vehicles for livestock transport, the provision of veterinary services, and the marketing of wool and meat, as well providing for the other needs of Kyrgyz pastoralists' livelihoods. Today, the pastoral landscape is scattered with the ruins of large livestock shelters where the doors and roofs have been pilfered for the needs of a much more small-scale, privately organized economy. As ownership of livestock and machinery passed to private hands in the mid-1990s, there was initially a catastrophic collapse of livestock herding as a basis of livelihood. As communities sought to reconstruct their future in the absence of the reliable state, their sense of belonging shifted from state entities to concepts of relatedness that were thought of as traditional, and inherited from their primordial past. Yet while the initial privatization was organized on the premise that broad collectivities

based on extended kinship would replace the state organization, this proved unworkable in many ways. Such collectivities then fragmented, and livelihoods became organized around families in the narrower sense. Thus, in a twenty-year period, Kyrgyz herders have shifted from relying on the state's organization of their lives, to an unstable extended kinship, and now to a new set of orienting principles that hinge on complex assessments of what can assure the future.

One may trace the changing situation of Kyrgyz herders through the different ways that herders coped with the risks inherent in their existence, as the state has vanished around them:

Sometime in the early 1980s, Kamchybek's wife was ill and he was forced to manage the herd himself. For reasons he didn't mention, he had to leave the yurt and herd unwatched. When he returned, he found that wolves had killed 48 of the sheep he was tending. This was a disaster that could land him in prison for several years if he was not able to pay compensation to the state. To his good fortune, he was able to replace all of the animals, beginning by giving up the few that belonged to him personally and covering the rest by animals offered to him by his fellow *chabans* [shepherds]. The state was ever-present in the lives of Soviet chabans, providing them with all the inputs of the pastoral economy and managing all of the outputs, but it was also present with a strict regime of control that gave them very little space to make their own decisions and could punish them severely for their failings.

A few years ago, Jumabai, a herder in the now privatized economy, lost 24 horses that were in his care — eight were his own and the rest he was looking after for a monthly fee from their owners. Those who lost their horses were determined to recover the lost value and were prepared to sue him for the value of his house and belongings. For several months, he relied on the help of relatives and friends for his family's survival while he searched near and far for the missing horses. Eventually, he found them being sold in the horse bazar at Toqmaq, a town some 325 kilometers away. The horses were eventually returned and the horse thieves, from a nearby village, were sent to prison. When he had originally reported the horses missing, a police investigator came and asked a few questions, but beyond that, the entire effort to recover them fell to him alone. He was able to rely on support from those in his community, but the state was woefully absent in this, as in virtually all aspects of what the herders were formerly accustomed to having in their state-organized lives.

In this article, based on fieldwork in the Song K l area of Naryn Province, we examine these transformations of pastoral livelihoods, as well as the challenges that have emerged in this environment of rapidly changing belonging in relation to livelihoods, kinship, and the state. The literature exploring the ways people have reoriented their social world as a result of the economic changes following market reforms in post-socialist countries has focused mainly on two issues: the problem of coping (e.g., Kandiyoti 1998, Werner 1998, Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004) and the implications of changes for political organization, administrative arrangements, and power relations (e.g., Petric et al. 2004; Jacquesson 2010: 114-115). This study focuses instead on the changing frameworks of belonging from late Soviet times to the present. In our fieldwork, we focus on one pastoral community consisting of a year-round settlement and mountain pastures. This case is not meant to be representative of the experience of all or even a majority of pastoral communities in Kyrgyzstan, and indeed our fieldwork suggests that there is great variability in the experience of privatization, despite the uniformity of economic reform policy for the country. But this case shows the kinds of conceptual frameworks that people appeal to, and these are undoubtedly shared by many herders throughout Kyrgyzstan.

The bulk of the material for our study derives from sixty three interviews and participant observation in the village of Kurtka and in the pastures around Song Köl conducted in four visits between August 2008 and November 2009. Baktybek Isakov is himself from Kurtka and hence is a member of the same single lineage group (*uruu*) that unites all members of the village, so gaining access to those whom we studied was greatly simplified, though it must be said that Kyrgyz herders are known for their openness and hospitality to visitors. While the chabans have a reputation as people few words, they were nevertheless very responsive and willing to share their experiences.²



Map 1: Location of Kurtka village (B. Isakov)

The main characters in our story are the chabans, who spend a large part of their lives in the pastures with their livestock, often in very rough conditions. The Kyrgyz herders were forced to abandon their semi-nomadic lifestyle under the collectivization of the livestock economy in the 1930s. Yet throughout the subsequent decades, while a large part of the rural population has led a settled existence in agricultural villages and most livestock herders bring their herds back to such villages in the winter months where animals are fed with harvested hay, the chabans have continued to take village's cattle to remote pastures for most of the year. Kyrgyz herdsmen live a vertical existence, moving up in summer to lush pastures at the feet of glaciers amongst the peaks of the Tian Shan, and coming down in fall to graze on stubble in harvested fields in mountain valleys and foothills. Only a minority of men in the village spend their time with the herds, but these men, living mainly in felt yurts, take their wives with them to help harvest animal products in all seasons, and school-age children also join their fathers, uncles or other extended kin during summer months.

This article is structured in three major parts. The first part presents a short overview of the changing situation and the threads that run through the entire period. The second demonstrates how Soviet types of belonging took shape in the context of the planned economy, and the collectivity of the kolkhoz and village community. The third shows how the Soviet belonging collapsed with the sequence of events from the late 1980s to the early 1990s and how new senses of belonging and the future are being molded, based on the experience of post-Soviet Kyrgyz chabans.

Pastoral Livelihoods

During late Soviet period, being a chaban was sometimes a lucrative and relaxed profession. In the warm summer months, the chabans from the village of Kurtka, an *aiyl*³ with a population of 2270, lived a slow-paced life of tending herds in the abundant pasturelands around Song Köl, a large lake (29 km in length, 18 km in breadth) at an altitude of 3013 m, some 24 km north of Kurtka. Kurtka is located in Kyrgyzstan's mountainous Naryn Province, some 400 km from the capital Bishkek. Herding had its challenges: keeping the animals alive and healthy through the sometimes very harsh winters; fending off predators; milking the horses, cows and yaks; shearing the sheep; tanning sheep pelts; and maintaining one's own subsistence of bread, noodles, and potatoes provided by the kolkhoz and meat that they slaughtered and processed into sausages and dried meat products or simply ate, usually sharing a sheep among their fellow herders.

When the Soviet government forcibly settled the Kyrgyz semi-nomads in the 1920s and 1930s, it sought to impose control and integrate their economic and social lives into a state framework with a modernization agenda, but it did not wish to bring an end to their livestock economy. Furthermore, despite considerable efforts, it was unable to eliminate the kin-based social organization that was sometimes even used by the state as a means of control but often existed as a parallel social system that could address some of the needs that planned economy was unsuited to address. Livestock herding in the late Soviet period, as today, had dual orientations: 1) to provide the subsistence needs of the herders, and 2) to produce meat and other animal products for the wider economy. To provide for subsistence, the Soviet state allowed herders to have their own private animals,⁴ and herdsmen typically also looked after the animals of their relatives, who for the most part were forced to abandon herding during collectivization and came to fulfill other functions on the collective farm, such as growing hay, potatoes, and other crops, operating trucks and other equipment, serving as teachers, agronomists, and veterinarians, and serving in Communist Party and administrative roles. Meanwhile, the vast majority of animals belonged to the kolkhoz.

Kinship

In pre-Soviet times, the Kyrgyz led a semi-nomadic way of life, and *uruu* [lineage] structure provided the primary sense of belonging. Each lineage was divided into hundreds of *uruk* [lineage sub-group] and thousands of *bir atany baldary* [the progeny of a common "father"] (Abramzon 1958: 28-31; Aitbaev 1957: 51-52). In the years of collectivization starting in the 1930s, all Kyrgyz communities were sedentarized. During the settlement process, they preserved their traditional structures and patrilineal kin groups made up the new kolkhozes (Yoshida 2005: 220-226; Abramzon et al. 1958: 215-216; cf. Roy 2000: 85-100). The formation of the kolkhoz at Kurtka also exhibits this pattern; the kolkhoz territory is divided into four parts: *Jamanak*, *Sokuchu*, *Jonaryk*, and *Omoldosh* (Figure 1). These spatial names derive mainly from the names of the uruks that have inhabited the four areas for many generations.

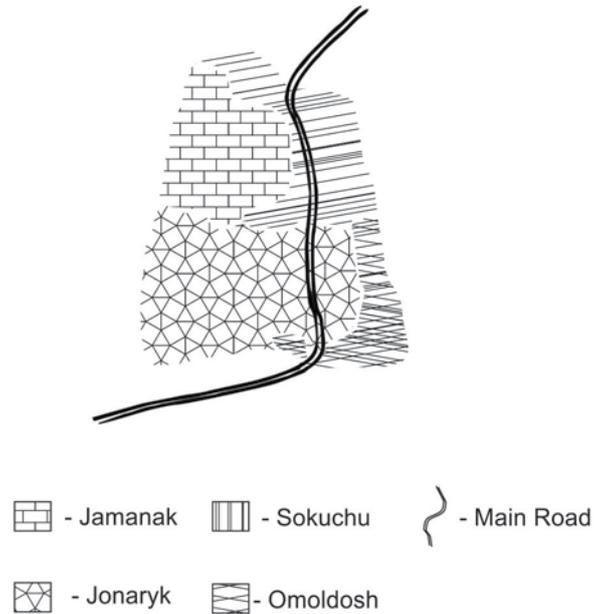


Figure 1: Spatial division of Kurtka village according to *uruk*-lineage groups (B. Isakov)

In many ways, the formation of the kolkhoz was more a matter accommodating the existing social order than of imposing a new one. As a village elder from Kurtka said, the Kyrgyz people, after being settled in the Soviet kolkhozes, learned easily how to work together in accordance with the principle of the collective farm, since they had lived with a similar understanding of unity before Soviet rule and their livelihoods were customarily based on work within a collectivity. A Kyrgyz ethnographer, Mukash Aytbayev, connected this with the idea that the nomadic lives that Kyrgyz led before Soviet times were closely integrated with nature. Thus they faced together natural disasters, predators, and sudden enemy attacks (Aitbaev 1957: 51-52). This lifestyle enabled the Kyrgyz to act and react in unity within kin groups (*uruu* and *uruk*), so they adapted easily to the kolkhoz organization, integrating their kinship belonging into kolkhoz life. While people formally belonged to the collective farm and its brigade structure, informally the operative basis of belonging was their *uruk*, in which lineage seniors had great influence. While their work was understood in relation to their identity as “kolkhoz worker”, many aspects of their lives — even including activities related to work — continued to be organized based on their *uruk* identity. Indeed, it seemed impossible to live without this kinship framework, which remained the basis of family and community life. In particular, social events such as weddings, birth rites, and funeral commemorations always relied on the moral engagement and material support of lineages.

Friendship

In the Soviet context, important phases of life, including work, education, military service, and leisure, developed alongside the kin-based societal framework. Friendship within a kolkhoz was mostly “workplace-related” (Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004: 27), but other important contexts of solidarity emerged, as well: *klashtashtyk* [classmate-hood], *polchandyk* [army friendship], and *kollegalyk* [colleague-hood] all became bases for mutual support in pastoralists’ lives. Male classmates who graduated from the same school typically continued

to maintain friendships over the long-term, and even as some left the village, many would gather for ten-year reunions, and informally, more often. For many kolkhoz chabans, relationships with classmates, army friends, and colleagues were sustained as a focus of social as well as economic relations. For example, Jyky, a shepherd from Kurtka, keeps, free of charge, the private animals of some of his classmates who live in the provincial center or in Bishkek. Moreover, Jyky's eldest son, a student, stays with the family of one of his classmates in Bishkek.

Expectations placed on the state

In the Soviet era, people in Kurtka imagined their future exclusively in connection with the Soviet Union. The late Soviet years were experienced as very stable, and many people in Kurtka took their future for granted, hardly thinking about it at all. For them, state slogans, such as "The People and the Party Are United" and "Everything for the Benefit of the People, Everything in the Name of the People", sounded compelling and accompanied a sense that a bright and comfortable future would be provided them. Despite the remoteness of their pastures, the state felt near and reliable, as the kolkhoz regularly sent specialists to inspect the animals and help solve any problems that would arise.

Shepherds saw almost all of their basic needs fulfilled by state means: healthcare services, veterinary services for their animals, roads and trucks, winter shelters, slaughterhouses, etc. In turn, shepherds were expected only to look after the animals well. The attentive state could be felt in many realms. Like women throughout the USSR, shepherds' wives were not allowed to work for 56 days before and after childbirth, and their salary was paid throughout.⁵ The state worked to improve animal breeds: every two years, high-quality stud horses and bulls were brought and the number of selectively bred animals increased. In the 1980s, sheep and goats began to be kept in separate herds for improved wool, and shepherds who delivered high-quality wool were awarded cash prizes, congratulated in special meetings, and given vouchers for holiday resorts.

Soviet types of belonging: The state-run economy

"It was the middle of 1980," recalled Kapar-Ake, "and I had just returned from military service. But after a month, the kolkhoz chairman came home with a policeman and said, 'You need to help to prepare winter hay for the kolkhoz animals.' At that time they just said 'do it'; it was impossible to refuse. So I started to work on that day. The next day I was late for work. The boss came to me and said, 'The working hours are from 5am to 7pm. 380 kg of hay is the allotment for a day.' I worked that way a full four months. I barely managed to meet the daily quota of 380 kg. There were 11 [school] students with me; they worked really hard and were always the first. They even went traveling somewhere as a group after the hay season finished, saying they would travel to the seven hero-cities."⁶

Today, most of these students still live in Kurtka village and some told us this story as a part of their cherished Soviet memories. Middle-aged and elderly inhabitants in the village still hold the Soviet Union in high esteem. When asked why, they usually recall the 1980s: though their lives were closely controlled, there was social and economic equality, and they did not know the meaning of hunger and unemployment.

For animal herders in Kurtka, the demands of fulfilling the plan were tough: producing 101-105 lambs from each 100 head of sheep every year and producing 30-35 liters of milk daily from each cow. Meanwhile, the state provided incentives to stimulate this key sector of the economy. Those who fulfilled the plan were given prizes, monetary rewards, and better

living and working conditions. Successful shepherds were given the best winter shelters, the best winter fodder, and the best sheep. The kolkhoz chairman received personal incentives to help the most successful herders: medals of honor, time at health resorts, and other benefits. Not only the kolkhoz chairman, but also the *ferma* [animal brigade staff] and *zootekhnik* [breeding manager] were especially keen to support the more productive shepherds, since they all benefited from the same chain of rewards.

In the 1980s many services that today can be difficult to obtain even in the village or district center were provided to the chabans in their remote pastures around Song Köl. The encampments were routinely visited several times a week by state officials. The *ferma* staff and *mal doktor* [veterinarian] would visit every two or three days to keep an eye on weak or pregnant animals, provide medicines and advice, etc. In the 1980s, for the ca. 85-90 shepherds working on the Kurtka kolkhoz, there were 17-18 *ferma* staff who provided a regular point of contact between chabans and the kolkhoz administration. The senior kolkhoz administrators, including the *bashkarma* [kolkhoz chairman], *bashky zootekhnik* [chief breeding manager], and *bashky mal doktor* [chief veterinarian], made monthly visits. Moldobay Malchiyev, the chairman of Kurtka kolkhoz in the early 1980s, is said to have inspected the shepherds settlements and animals with his binoculars from a position on the mountainside. Kolkhoz staff, such as the *dükönchü* [shopkeeper], *kassir* [cashier], *gezitchi* [newspaper deliverer], and *daryger* [doctor] also visited every month. The Kurtka shopkeeper used to come together with the cashier, who provided chabans with their wages.

Close links between the community and state-organization

“Here the winter lasts six months. The cold is always below [minus] 32-33 degrees. Weak animals die. This is not only harsh for the animals, but also a very difficult situation for shepherds.” Thus reflected Kumar-Aba from Kurtka, who had been a shepherd for about 28 years during the Soviet period. He described how shepherding was a family undertaking. All year round, when he was busy looking after animals during the day, his wife and their children were busy with household chores. He also often got help from his parents and brothers, who came to visit from the kolkhoz center, particularly when it was time to migrate between seasonal pastures.

Kolkhoz organization actually came to subsume some aspects of family organization, even though the state policy generally sought to diminish the role of the extended family in favor of greater dependence on the state. Kin-based mutual assistance was an essential part of how needs were met and problems were solved. The story we told at the beginning of this article, about how Kamchybek lost 48 sheep to wolves and, to avoid imprisonment, restored the loss to the kolkhoz with the help of donations from friends and family, shows how this operated under crisis conditions. But the kolkhoz administration also relied on kin-relations to address labor mobilization needs on a routine basis when more hands were needed to move the herds between spring and summer pastures, for example, and at shearing time.

The collapse of Soviet belonging

“We did not understand how the privatization started. We were hearing that privatization will start and property will be privatized. But no one understood what privatization meant.” These were the typical views of a Kyrтка inhabitant. Familiar only with the Soviet system, the villagers had little understanding of the meaning of “private property” and “privatization.” One herder in Kyrтка reported that at one point, amidst the unfolding wave of privatization in the country, the head of the district administration came to the kolkhoz and said, “Privatization is a wrong process. Neighboring villages have already

started it, and now you see what a poor situation they are in. I've come to warn you." People listened to him and decided to observe those neighboring kolkhozes for a while. But, while the people wanted to adopt a wait and see approach, in 1993 the Kurtka kolkhoz was nevertheless officially dissolved and replaced by the Kurtka Shareholder Community (*Kurtka aksionerdik koomu*). Thus in Kurtka kolkhoz began the process of "*prikhvatizatsiia*" — a term widely used at time, spoofing "*privatizatsiia*" (privatization), based on the Russian word "*prikhatit*," meaning "to seize (for oneself)." This involved a variety of dubious activities, including the formation of independent farming enterprises (*dyikan charba*) through which collective property could be transferred to individuals, and barter of equipment which one did not actually own (Bichsel et al. 2010, Konstants 1997: 106; Koichuev 2002: 20, and Osmonalieva 2002: 8). A month later, thousands of kolkhoz animals were "bartered" without any documentation, taken as a "debt" from the State Property Fund, and sold for private profit.⁷ Of the 48,000 sheep, 600 horses, and 1,200 cows and yaks on the Kurtka kolkhoz prior to privatization, only 3,000 of the sheep were privately owned by the villagers.⁸ In neighboring kolkhozes, where the people resisted this early type of privatization, the collectively owned animals were later distributed in a much more equitable way and the village herds were much less severely decimated. This "wild privatization" (Kozubekov 1996: 5), which so much depended on the integrity of local officials and the ability of villagers to recognize and defend their interests, marked the start of the collapse of Soviet belonging.

In a study of political trust in China, Patricia Thornton found that citizens who do not trust local government may nonetheless trust the central authorities (Thornton 1999). Whereas people in Kurtka entrusted their future to the Soviet system, this trust began first to dissolve with a loss of faith in local officials. This crucial link with the state system was broken and people in Kurtka felt that they were on their own to solve the many problems that previously were addressed through the most local manifestations of the state at the kolkhoz level. Left without a state support framework, the villagers instinctively looked to kinship and friendship frameworks to fill the gap.⁹

Division of property based on uruk (lineage) groups

Ymankalyi Urkunchiyev explained how in the spring of 1994 they met for the first time as a lineage group. "One day, a guy came to me and said, 'This evening all the people of Jonaryk [the section of Kyrтка inhabited by the Jonaryk uruk] will come together in Malik-Ata's courtyard, and you, too, are invited.'" Malik-Ata was the oldest man of Jonaryk uruk, about 90 years of age. That evening a large group gathered. Many influential Jonaryk men gave speeches, like Toktobek Kalenov (from the Joosh uruk), Ymankalyi Urkunchiev (from the Kuttukseyit uruk), etc. The discussion focused mainly on choosing a leader for the Jonaryk uruk, because they had heard that the people in neighboring kolkhozes like Akkyia and Aktal had already met and selected leaders for each lineage group, and were preparing for the distribution of the collective property of the kolkhoz.

Ymankalyi's story captured the moment when, after 70 years of relying on the official structures for leadership, people of Kurtka brought their problems to be solved on the basis of the lineage authorities rather than state institutions. The other lineages organized the same kind of meeting, as well. Many of them chose their own leaders, and in the following days they all came together in the House of Culture (*Madaniyat üüü*) under the leadership of the kolkhoz administration to start the privatization of the kolkhoz property. The meeting concluded with a consensus that property would be distributed to the uruks and within the uruk it would be allocated by drawing lots (*kara kötön*). The Kyrgyz government had offered

several methods of privatization, including auctions, leasing with subsequent purchase, transformation into a joint stock company, and direct sale to individuals (Jermakowicz and Pankov 1994: 7; Abdymalikov 2010: 40). But in Kurtka, they opted for the principle of kinship and drawing lots, as this was a method that was comprehensible (Yoshida 2005: 227-228).

The pitfalls of broad kinship

After the meeting in Malik-Ata's courtyard, the people of the Kuttukseit uruk met again separately and decided to form their own independent cooperative named *Karager*, another name associated with their ancestry. This newly established farm included nine very closely related families with 62 people. They obtained 40 hectares of farmland, 62 sheep, 2 animal shelters, and some small farm vehicles. As it was spring, the members pooled their efforts to plow 16 hectares, while one herder among them took care of all the sheep. However, within about five months, the cooperative was well on its way toward collapse. Some of the members proved too lazy to contribute to the work, while a few were not physically able to do agricultural labor and instead worked in the village or district center. By the time the autumn work season began, a number of young people had left to find work in the city, and only a very small number remained to do all of the farm work. By the beginning of the next year, the *Karager* cooperative was dissolved and its property was distributed among the households. More successful cooperatives in Kurtka lasted as long as five years. The largest one, *Jamanak*, functioned until it went bankrupt in April 1998. From it, five small, independent cooperatives were formed: *Jamanak-I*, *Askarbek*, *Kudayberdi*, *Tynchtyk*, and *Tynshtykbek*.¹⁰ In the end, the cooperatives failed due to the inability to sustain the commitment of their members, as well as their lack of experience with management and business plans, accounting, development strategies, and even the concept of private property (Farrington 2005: 175). It is possible that the uruk could have served as a viable basis for reorganization if the new market conditions had not been so unstable with people scrambling in all directions to survive. Now the farms are run more successfully with acquired experience and more stable conditions, and with teams of closer relatives, where a sense of mutual responsibility is more realistic.

In the absence of the state: Strategies of the market, kinship, and self-reliance

In the early 1970s, Rysbek began work as a shepherd. After he graduated from school, the head of the village called him and said, "Be a shepherd, look after your aged mother, do not go to town leaving the kolkhoz." Motivated by a concern for his mother, he accepted this path. So he worked for many years, earned good money, and helped his five siblings as well. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, he became unemployed. The only profession he knew was animal herding, since he completed only secondary school. He tried to survive for several years by selling some of his animals. For a couple of years he could afford to live in this way, but ultimately decided to become a shepherd for hire. He went from house to house in the village saying, "I am gathering animals for paid herding in the pastures."

It is noteworthy that Rysbek's trajectory toward pastoral entrepreneurship began in a nexus of the influence of local authorities and kinship obligations, but this gave him the basis of skills that would enable him, once the market stabilized somewhat, to find his place in the new conditions. For the village inhabitants, a new era now began in which they had to rely on themselves and build their future with their own hands (Farrington 2005: 178). Some people continued to wait in vain for state support to be restored. Gradually, the number of people

like Rysbek who strove to manage on their own increased. They formed a new segment of society who relied on one another, sharing knowledge and pooling resources.

In the first years after independence, kolkhoz inhabitants spent long hours meeting and discussing the new problems and sharing solutions. Now, they have accumulated experience and their meetings are regularized as semi-annual affairs at the local House of Culture. This “meeting of all villagers” is organized in spring and autumn and focus on matters that require collective decisions, and on making arrangements between the animal owners and paid shepherds. In the spring meeting, people revise the rates to be paid to herders, vehicle rents and plan such seasonal tasks as plowing, breeding of animals, provision of fuel, etc. Animal owners and paid herders negotiate rates according to prevailing market conditions (Kupuev 1993: 6). The table below shows some of the provisions that were thus negotiated at the spring meeting, on March 1, 2008¹¹:

1	Charge for herding one head of cattle, per month	Cow or Calf	40 soms (\$0.9)
		Sheep, Goat, Lamb	8 soms (\$0.18)
		Horse	no charge
2	If the herder loses an animal or it is killed by a wolf, he must compensate its value.		
3	If an animal gets sick, the herder must immediately notify the owner. Otherwise, if the animal dies, its value must be compensated.		
4	Agreements between the herders and animal owners must be settled by April 1.		
5	All the animals must be moved out of the village before April 20.		

These meetings reflect the precariousness of herders’ livelihoods today. Local figures who are important for the livestock economy, including the veterinarian, tax officials, accountants, participate while the village head mediates. The widely fluctuating market conditions, and such problems as shortages of services, unreliability of key inputs, and the shortcomings of infrastructure that sometime put the pastoral existence on the edge of collapse, mean that the rates of compensation and the conditions of work are toughly negotiated every year.¹²

Chabans in Kurtka have had to make a radical adjustment to self-reliance. Looking at an analogous process in socialist Albania, Berit Backer notes the slogan, “There is no road *to* self-reliance, self-reliance is the road,” but remarks that this presumed unity between means and ends seems somewhat too facile for practical purposes (Backer 1982: 355). Two decades have passed since herders in Kurtka were thrust onto this path, and the process of adjustment has not been smooth and is still in progress. While reliance on traditional principles of mutual support seemed the “obvious” immediate response to the withdrawal of the state, it is a testimony to how far that was from a being an effective panacea that today most herders will affirm that things worked better under the socialist state. Still, reliance on close kin has been more effective than any radical individualism and self-reliance that the market might seem to favor. Those who are currently running herds in the Song Köl basin make their living primarily from herding fees, but the animals they herd belong to close kin, and only secondarily to non-kin or to themselves. The reason for this is that, with the unstable position that most everyone is in, both herders and owners feel that they are less vulnerable if they can fall back on kinship frameworks rather than the less flexible and forgiving conditions of the market to cope with situations where animals are lost or fee payments are not made on time. The ability to rely on support from close kin serves as a means to reduce risks that ensue from Kyrgyzstan’s very unstable market environment and from a profession filled with its own risks. The mutual support of kin takes other forms as well. Herders typically set up encampments near their close kin in order to help one another look after animals and fend off predators. Recently, a pack of wolves appeared around Song Köl and was preying on the

herds. Amongst the herders, there were no skilled hunters, so they pooled their resources and sent for hunters from the district center some 140 km away. Still, before the hunters came a month later, much of the stock had already been decimated and the wolves had left the area on their own.

While the uruk system proved a disappointment as a basis for cooperation, networks made of the sorts of narrower kin-relations and friendships that were important during Soviet times continue to serve as the main fallback in the absence of a reliable state and other stable alternatives. The character of such networks is evident in the account of Zarylbek-Ata:

We are like a kolkhoz, with my sons, daughters, and sons-in-law. We do not want anything from anyone. One of my sons-in-law, with my daughter, takes our animals and gets paid to drive other peoples' animals to pasture every year. Two married sons live in the village with me and look after our whole family's crops and preparing of winter hay for the animals. My unmarried sons work in the city and send money for family needs. I'm right here heading them up. Each fall, I marry one [son] off, or provide a dowry for one of the girls, or buy a house for one. Today we need to rely on relatives, daughters, and sons.

Zarylbek-Ata's network is focused on the members of his large immediate family. For others, more distant kin and friends may play a more important role. The shepherd Jyky offered such a case: one of his cohort of 11 close friends, Nurbek married late because his father was very sick for many years. His friends helped him cover the cost of his father's medicines. And when he eventually married, his friends each provided him a sheep to get him set up. He sold five of the sheep for wedding expenses and kept the remaining six, which since have increased year by year until now he has nearly thirty sheep. Without the help of friends, he would simply have had no way to survive the current pastoral economy and get to where he is today.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union had a way of putting things in their places. From a Western perspective, this thorough-going rationalization of the society into rigid compartments has often been seen as regimented and oppressive — like a futuristic nightmare where the state is unconstrained and the individual's interests are subordinated to the will of a distant state. While there was some social mobility in the system, for the people of Kurtka, most were faced with situations like Rysbek's and Kapar-Ake's where local representatives of the state came to them and told them what their choice of profession should be. There was some scope for choice — whether to become a herder, a tractorist, a mechanic, a schoolteacher, an urban industrial worker, etc. — and indeed in the 1980s the state provided real incentives for people to choose herding and help increase the production of meat and other animal products. This meant that the chaban occupied a relatively comfortable socioeconomic niche, for though he had to live in rough conditions and cope with the predations of wolves, he had better chances than his village-bound neighbors to acquire a car or build a home for his son and most of his personal and professional needs were relatively well taken care of by the state. The place of the shepherd was a relatively comfortable one, and it seemed that that place was assured by the Soviet state for perpetuity. No one in Kurtka in the mid-1980s had any inkling of the devastating collapse that they would soon endure, and the dramatically more complex conditions that they would have to negotiate a decade later. For most herders and others in Kurtka, the comparison between then and now is like day and night, and the precarious market conditions, while perhaps “freer” from a Western perspective, have done little to replace the assured future that Soviet system offered with anything but a future of uncertainty

and struggle. Some people still hope that somehow the state will “return”, while others, whether by spirit of initiative or force of circumstances, have shifted their hopes for the future to what they can achieve with support of close kin and friends.

Despite the Soviet rationalization of the pastoral economy — in some ways, even because of it — Kyrgyz chabans did not forget the importance of their kinship and lineage descent groups. Though, it was not included in the state plan, kinship and other kinds of non-institutional belonging continued to play a vital role in meeting the needs of chabans working in the planned economy. In the late Soviet years, throughout the Soviet Union, there was a pervasive public discourse that modernization and rationalization had gone too far, and traditional culture should be revived. And all across Kyrgyzstan, one of the main forms that this discourse took concerned the role of uruu/uruk lineage groups in society. What Soviet official discourse had condemned as *klanovost'* — clannishness, with connotations of nepotism and backwardness — was recast as a worthy, traditional basis for social morality. As Soviet belonging was collapsing, the uruk was eminently available as a framework for reimagining a crumbling future. It had not, however, remained intact in its pre-Soviet form and could not provide a viable framework for mutual obligation and trust. Villagers in Kurtka, after first trying to reintroduce these broad uruk kinship networks as a basis for economic reorganization, quickly found that the more narrow kin and friendship networks that had remained important during Soviet times would be a much more reliable basis for adapting to the new, unstable conditions.

In some respects, current conditions have much in common with those of late Soviet times. The planned economy had inefficiencies — limitations on access to goods and opportunities — that people compensated for by mobilizing informal networks in the various spheres where they needed them. Just as Jyky sent his son to stay with friends while studying in the city during Soviet times, Zarylbek-Ata's post-Soviet family network crucially includes sons who are earning money in Bishkek. The mobilization of kinship to create the kind of unity that is necessary to sustain mutual support networks of this kind in order to cope with uncertainties has been observed in many unstable and marginal situations (e.g., in Africa, Nel et al. 2000: 26-27). It is particularly younger members of the network who are able to see opportunities and adapt to changing conditions. While the fact that many young people were leaving the village was a factor in the collapse of the Karager cooperative soon after its formation, by going to work in the city, they were able to help sustain their closer kin in the village. It is precisely by extending their networks into several spaces — urban, village, and pastoral spaces — that kin groups have been able to survive best. The pastoral space sustains the animal economy, while the village space ensures a supply of winter feed and other important inputs (veterinary care, transport, etc.), and the urban space provides cash, education and other resources not available in rural areas. This kind of diversification strategy, required for survival in the new, uncertain conditions, is only possible when members of a mutually reliant group can occupy positions in these different spheres.

The two decades since the Soviet collapse have been characterized by a struggle to replace the lost sense of Soviet belonging with a new sense of something that can carry Kyrgyz chaban communities into the future. The first attempts in the early 1990s to reimagine the future were based on the broad concept of uruk kin belonging that was remembered as having provided a comprehensive social order in pre-Soviet times, but this framework proved unviable. It was the closer forms of belonging with kin and friends — the same ones that animated much of the herders' social and economic life in the Soviet period — that eventually have come to serve as a framework for imagining some sort of future, if only a tenuous one.

Notes

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¹ The *kolkhoz* (*kollektivnoe khoziaistvo*), or collective farm, and *sovkhos* (*sovetskoe khoziaistvo*), or state farm were organized somewhat differently, the *kolkhoz* having a collective character whereas the *sovkhos* was essentially like an industrial state enterprise, but both forms were closely integrated into the state-run economy and involved obligatory fulfillment of state plans.

² The fieldwork for this study was made possible by a grant to Baktybek Isakov from the Central Asian Research and Training Initiative of the Open Society Institute's Higher Education Support Program. We are grateful to OSI, as well as to the chabans of Kurtka. Most of our interviewees were men, the heads of the herding households, though some were also women. Much of the material for this study was conducted during joint fieldwork by both authors; because John Schoeberlein has a limited command of spoken Kyrgyz, his questions were posed in Russian and usually translated into Kyrgyz, while the answers were recorded in Kyrgyz. Baktybek Isakov's questions during all of fieldwork were in Kyrgyz.

³ *Aiyl* traditionally meant village community and now also corresponds to a local rural administrative unit.

⁴ According to the charter of Kurtka *kolkhoz*, each household was allowed to have one cow, one calf up to six months old, sheep and goats up to a total of ten, one mare with one foal and any number of domestic birds ("Ustav *kolkhoza* Kommunistchil, Ak-talinskogo raiona". *Narynskii oblastnoi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Kirg. SSR*, Fond 419, opis 1/53, 1960, p. 12).

⁵ "Ustav *kolkhoza* Kommunistchil, Ak-talinskogo raiona. *Narynskii oblastnoi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Kirg. SSR*. Fond: 419, opis-1/53. 1960, p. 9.

⁶ Hero-city (*gorod-geroi*) is a title awarded to cities in the western USSR for their heroism in repelling the Nazi invasion. There were actually 13 places awarded this title by the mid-1980s, though Kapar-Ake is perhaps remembering the number of the original group of seven awarded in 1965.

⁷ Doo Aryz. In: Kyrgyz Respublikasy, Naryn oblusu, Ak-Talaa rayonu, Kurtka Aiyl ökmötü. February 22, 1998.

⁸ Menchikti mamlekettin ajratuu jana privattashtyruu ishterinin jurguzulushu jonundo. *Ak-Talaa Rayonduk Mamlekettik Administratsiyasy*, Buyruk, 86. May 3, 1994.

⁹ Jumagulov, A. 1994. Ob itogakh razgosudarstvleniia i privatizatsii v 1991-1993 godakh i o programme razgosudarstvleniia i privatizatsii gosudarstvennogo imushestva v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike na 1994-1995 gody. In: *Postanovleniye Pravitel'stvo Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*. Bishkek: Dom Pravitel'stva. March 14.

¹⁰ Aktalinskaia raionnaia gosudarstvennaia administratsiia (from the archive of Kurtka village). Reshenie b-139. April 19, 1997; Aktalinskaia raionnaia gosudarstvennaia administratsiia (from the archive of Kurtka village). Reshenie b-47. February 10, 1998.

¹¹ Ustav iz Obshego sobraniia zhitelei sela Jany Talap (from the archive of Kurtka village). No. 3. March 1, 2008.

¹² Ustav iz Obshego sobranii zhitelei sela Zhany Talap (from the archive of Kurtka village). No. 3. March 1, 2006; Ustav iz Obshego sobranii zhiteley sela Zhany Talap. (from the archive of Kurtka village). No. 3. April 25, 2012.

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