‘Bringing lights to the yurts’: Visions of future and belonging surrounding pastures and hydropower in Kyrgyzstan

Jeanne Féaux de la Croix, Zentrum Moderner Orient

Abstract: Drawing on everyday use patterns and poetry from the Toktogul valley, this article compares notions of future and belonging about two sites that embody visions of what Kyrgyzstan ought to be: hydroelectric dams and mountain pastures. There is no simple equation between hydroelectric dams and ‘modernity’, mountain pastures and ‘tradition’. The dams are viewed as a source of future wealth but also create potential liabilities, while renewed intensive use of mountain pastures arose through privatization usually described as ‘modernizing’. Both sites formally constitute state property, but ‘belong’ to citizens in entirely different ways, with government actors monopolizing access to dams while non-ethnic Kyrgyz are excluded from the use of highland pastures. A comparison of the use and imagination of the two places points to moments of conjunction and conflict between these visions and practices, and their political consequences in everyday access to these conceptual and material resources.

Keywords: chronopolitics, dams, pasture, poetry, resource access.

Dams and pastures as places, material and conceptual resources

Again the rock faces crash down by the Naryn.
That obstinate mighty river.
Shafts wall in the river
And its fiercely licking, churning foam.
...
Here the alloy of concrete, friendship, strength
And the flinty thoughts of engineers
Light up hearts with gladness,
The lights of Kurp-Sai replace the darkness
Resign yourself, Naryn! Into the tunnel, go! (Stepanovich 2007:20)

This extract from a 2007 book of poetry by Liudmilla Fedorovna Stepanovich celebrates the completion of the Toktogul hydroelectric dam on the Naryn River in the 1970s. When I visited her in 2008, as the curator of a museum dedicated to the dam, Liudmilla Fedorovna vividly described how committed people were to this grand project of improvement. Relocating some 35,000 people, the dam formed a lake of some 60 km length, and now provides up to 90 % of Kyrgyzstan's electricity. Several new dams are currently under construction further upstream, projects that are endorsed by most Kyrgyzstani citizens in principle - despite the enormous cost and scope for corruption. How come most Kyrgyzstani citizens think these mega-projects a viable option in shaping their small, heavily indebted country? In addressing this question, I will further contrast these concrete projects and promises for a better future with another space that embodies visions of what Kyrgyzstan ought to be: the stunning mountain meadows that sustain the pastoralist livelihoods of a large proportion of the population. I thereby take up the ‘analysis not only of memories of social and geographical belonging, but also of forward-looking practices of attachment to and detachment from place’ suggested by Jansen and Löfving. (2007: 3) I will demonstrate that these two places, both as everyday experiences and remote ideals, are a case of differently territorialized ‘myths of home’ (Jansen and Löfving 2007: 9)
The ethnography is based on fieldwork in the Toktogul valley since 2006, where life is dominated by the large dam reservoir and further dam construction on the one hand, and by mountain pastoralism as the backbone of the economy, on the other. I argue that it is useful to bring the two places, resources and visions together because they co-exist, not only spatially in the same valley, but also in people’s everyday life-projects, their imaginations and sense of past, present and future. But the high pastures and Naryn dams also ‘co-exist’ as symbols of particular futures at a national and discursive level. Indeed, both are heavily involved in government reforms and investments, as I will discuss below. In doing so, I have brought together two topics (hydropower and pastoralism) that are usually discussed in isolation.

Figure 1: Spring pasture on the bank of the Toktogul reservoir, with high pastures in the distance
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High summer pastures (jailoo) are actively imagined as part of an ancient and future Kyrgyzstan, celebrated by many a local poet:

Mountains are my support
They are the gift of my ancestors.
I am in the mountains ... and the mountains
Keep living in my heart. (Ramanov 2004: 72)
If mountain pastures are the object of great pride, they are also a cause for concern for NGOs and policy-makers: how to manage pastures to maintain them as a future source of wealth and beauty for all? Can anything be learnt from the way herders looked after pastures before the collectivization of herding? In juxtaposing dams and jailoos, this article explores how they intersect in Kyrgyzstani citizens’ sense of time, of past and future ways of life. The comparison of two equally important resources (both as idea and matter) allows me to highlight different sets of important practices, concepts and emotions through which Kyrgyzstani citizens articulate a desirable future. The very term ‘resource’ denotes on-going value and wealth as yet untapped, implying future use. (Ferry and Limbert 2008, Thelen, Cartwright and Sikor 2008) Hydro-electric dams and pastures are particularly important resources in Kyrgyzstan: they provide people with basic everyday needs: the meat and dairy essential to Kyrgyz diets, water for irrigation and electricity. But these two places are not only material resources: they are also conceptual resources, indexing two different families of ideals.3

Jailoos and hydro-dams materialize ideas of the past and future, materialize dreams and hopes in projects and places. I suggest hydro-power and pastoralism are important dimensions of Kyrgyzstani visions of the future, but I am not suggesting they are the only ones. The two represent concurrent ideals of a both peaceful pastoral and electrified, technologically empowered life. Judging by a wide variety of conversations with Kyrgyzstani citizens, as well as parliamentary debates, apparently a viable and prosperous future for Kyrgyzstan is hardly imaginable without an anchor in pastoralism and water power. Directly or indirectly, each and every citizen is connected and dependent on pastures and dams, lays claims to them or pays for their use. In both types of places, the role of state agencies in regulating water, electricity and pasture access is heavily disputed. So what place are dams and pastures given in state policies and how do these impact pasture and water users? What decisions are made about the management of such important resources and to whose benefit?4 In other words, who do these sites belong to, in principle and in practice? But also: what hopes for and through dams and pastures are expressed in poetry or song and constructed in people’s life-projects? How do people express notions of belonging that fuse collective property, forms of solidarity and individual aspirations and affections linked to these places?

In the above, I have described dams and jailoos as resource-ful, vision-suffused and project-oriented. Each of these describes a more or less strongly expressed aspect of these objects, which I will here treat as places. Discussing them as places allows me to draw on a theoretical tool-kit that can encompass all these aspects, allow them to co-exist to different degrees. Dealing with dams and pastures purely as resources would likely miss out, for example, on the emotions expressed in the poetry discussed here. To investigate these ‘lieux de future’, I draw on the anthropological and archaeological discussion of temporality, space and place.5 By ‘temporality’ I mean the kind of relationships people create between past, present and future. (Ox and Gingrich 2002: S3) It is also useful to think of the ‘chronopolitics’ of a place: I follow Johannes Fabian (1983) here in asking how places (or groups, objects and ideas for that matter) are ‘timed’, how they are associated with particular kinds of pasts and granted a place in the future – or not. As in the case of Liudmilla Fedorovna’s contemporary celebration of dams as part of building Socialism, these threads create relations between past and future. Dams and pastures are thus situated not only in a geographical, but also a temporal imagination: they are tangible, powerful places in Kyrgyzstan. And while they solidly co-inhabit the Toktogul valley, they also serve as ‘archetypal elsewhere’. In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere, one must speak of multiple frames of temporality, which I only have time to explore partially here.6 Witnessing the momentous historical breaks of the 1980s and 1990s, anthropologists working in the post-Socialist region have been acutely aware of historicity, addressing themes of a sense of

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collapse and nostalgia, lost collective futures and their re-invention under different auspices. Authors like Verdery (2004) or Kaneff (2004) have shown how a new way of writing history and counting time goes hand in hand with resignifying space e.g. by raising up and tearing down statues, or new accounting for relations to land as property.7

I take this well-established theme further to show that this everyday variety in notions of the past is also closely mirrored by differing reference points in the future, taking the example of the visions of pastoral and hydro-electric futures. In the following I aim to contribute to an anthropology that goes further in examining links between the past and future, critiquing their conceptual isolation. Dams and jailoo often serve as models of both the past and future: but which ideal past is to serve as the basis of the future: who is to share it, belong to it and how might such visions be realized? A comparison of the two allows me to point out moments of conjunction and conflict between these visions and practices - and their everyday political consequences. I argue that the national future associated with hydropower, and that associated with jailoos constitute and re-create different citizenries. As I will show below, these two sites, the everyday practices and soaring dreams associated with them imply different levels of belonging and of collectivity: collective effort, pride and also ownership. I use the term ‘belonging’ here in the sense of attachments, sharings and commonalities that come about through practice. (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011: 201) Clearly, in the case of pastures and dams, these notions and practices are closely tied to senses of ‘belonging’ in the sense of property rights.

In the Toktogul valley, I mainly worked with ethnic Kyrgyz, using the Kyrgyz and Russian language. I came to know these places very differently: I lived and worked as a young woman for eighteen months on jailoos and taught at village schools. I visited dams and dam-workers half a dozen times. For both, I followed the relevant political debates and the press up to 2014. In the following I use two kinds of ethnographic material: I discuss both what Toktogul residents do with jailoos and the Naryn hydro-dams, as well as how they speak about them in poetry and song. I also link these to national projects of reform and projections into the future, both on the part of successive governments as well as a wider Kyrgyzstani public. The everyday actions and politics I describe reflect everyday economic survival strategies and decisions concerning pastures and dams. Following on from the introductory extracts, I pay particular attention to the poetry and songs associated with these sites. I do so because poetry and song are traditional genres of expressing hopes and dreams, but also disillusionment and despair. While even pop songs can present a desired alternate reality and portray aspirations, these art forms have also long served as modes of moral instruction in Central Asia. (Beliaev 1975, During 2005) I present here poems and songs by amateur artists of the Toktogul region, who understand their work very much in the terms described above. Looking at these two streams of relating to two essential places, visions and resources allows for an ethnography of imagining and constructing futures with practical effects in the here and now, in shaping boundaries of belonging and entitlements in Kyrgyzstan. Before attempting a comparison along the axes of temporality and belonging, I describe dams and then jailoos as sites of the future and belonging in more detail.
Soviet and post-Soviet Dams

Figure 2: Fellow passenger posing in front of Kurp-Sai dam on Naryn River
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Liudmilla Fedorovna Stepanovich told me how she had come to Central Asia as a young teacher, one of the many professionals brought from Russia to provide expertise, develop Kyrgyzstan and integrate it into a successful Communist future. In later years, she worked in the Communist Party apparatus in the workers’ town of Kara Kol, built at the foot of the dam. Her investment in the Toktogul dam project was a way to share and continue to build Socialism in Central Asia. In the 1970s, the completion of the Toktogul hydroelectric dam was hailed as a triumph of the friendship of peoples in ‘bringing lights to the yurts of Central Asia’, as Lenin had promised in the 1920s. To Liudmilla Fedorovna, this sense of achievement and solidarity (‘the alloy of concrete, friendship, strength’, as she puts it in her poetry) was still of ongoing importance in 2007. As Liudmilla Stepanovich remembers fondly ‘there was such enthusiasm for building the power plant’.

Small mountainous countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are currently seeking to harness the rivers originating on their territory. Controlling these rivers is one of the few points where they have the advantage over larger and more resource-rich neighbors like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and China. The Toktogul dam is the largest among a dam cascade on the Naryn river (known downriver as the Syr Dariya), which regulate the supply of water to large areas of agriculture and cotton plantations in the Ferghana valley, and further on, what remains of the Aral Sea. For me, visiting the Toktogul dam in 2008 with an acquainted dam
worker was a dazzling experience: having passed through security checks, soldiers’ barracks and a long tunnel, the sunlight hit hard as we emerged onto the bridge of the dam. Both massive and fragile between the barren mountains, this concrete machine plugs a broad expanse of turquoise water upriver, and turns it into churning foam – and electricity - below. This place is a powerful vision and source of higher standards of living, but also of shady political deals, underhand electricity sales and highly publicized disputes over pricing. The timing and volume of water released has become a frequent bone of contention between neighbors Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In 2007, Soviet plans to build further dams upriver were revived under then-President Bakiev. These Kambar Ata 1 and 2 dams have become a political gambit, supported by Russian finance (promised, though not always forthcoming) and opposed by an Uzbek government fearing further Kyrgyz leverage in water and energy issues. Kambar Ata 2 was ceremonially opened in August 2010, providing a much needed celebratory moment on Independence Day, in a summer that had seen a teetering interim government come to power after a popular uprising, and subsequent widespread violence, particularly between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad. Although President Bakiev was ousted in this period, and although his family was known to be implicated in the murky energy politics surrounding the dam, there has been little sustained critique of the Kambar Ata dam project as such. Rather, funding problems have intermittently stalled construction on the larger Kambar Ata 1 and prompted the opening of smaller, more affordable hydropower projects even further upstream. In 2013 Russia agreed to fund the dams in return for a large share of the electricity produced, until the investment has been paid off. (Times of Central Asia 2013) Construction work on this joint venture is ongoing, whereas as of October 2014, Kambar Ata 2 is still awaiting the larger chunk of funding necessary to continue building.

Legacies of Soviet dam-building

In her retirement, Liudmilla Fedorovna took on the curatorship of the Toktogul dam museum. One of the displays is a maquette, which Liudmilla explains shows how the valley looked before the dam town Kara Kul was built in the 1960s: a swamp full of snakes in which a helicopter has just landed to plant a red flag.

Figure 3: Maquette in Toktogul dam museum, city of Kara Kol
This becomes one of the youngest, and as Liudmilla Fedorovna says, most kul’turnii towns in Kirgizia, with kindergartens, a museum, an orchestra and swimming pool. Just like the young Republic’s capital, the new workers’ town of Kara Kul at the foot of the dam hosts 70% Russian inhabitants, whereas now 70% are Kyrgyz, many Russians having left in the economic decline and uncertainties of the so-called ‘transition’ era. One huge modernizing project among many, to Liudmilla Fedorovna ‘bringing lights to the yurts’ literally meant bringing electricity and Enlightenment, chasing away the shadows of oppression and ignorance. (cf. on Soviet Mongolian tropes of light and electricity: Sneath 2009) Built in large numbers across the world after World War II, large dams continue to serve as symbols of human ingenuity, signs of progress, and imposing greener of the desert. (McCully 2001:17) Like current models of the new Kazakh capital Astana, (Laszczkowski 2011) and like plans of the new Moscow in the 1920s, (Benjamin 1980) the museum’s map of the Naryn dams show both existing and planned dams, with no distinction between what exists physically and what has not yet been realized - and may never see completion. I argue that this kind of depiction is a strong indication that at least on the state level, these projects stand for, and index the future.

In her admiration for the awesome technological achievements of the Soviet people, Liudmilla Fedorovna is not alone. Her confidence in this kind of future also rubbed off on e.g. the vet posing in front of the Kurp-Sai dam. (Figure 2) In 2006, this fellow passenger insisted on being photographed in this way, and that people abroad should learn about this monument. Like Liudmilla, Maksat was intimately involved with the Soviet dam project. He worked as a brigadier and welder at the dam until his retirement in the early 1990s. When I showed him some archive photographs of the dam being constructed, his eyes lit up as he recognized many of his colleagues. Living in the workers’ town Kara Kul, he had decided to speak nothing but Russian with his daughter. To him, the future was that of Russified Soviet citizens. When the family’s fortunes declined after independence and they returned to Maksat’s Kyrgyz-speaking village, his daughter struggled with this decision. More recently, Maksat was glad to take on work at the new Kambar Ata building site, until empty state coffers halted construction work yet again.

But enthusiasm is not the only emotion voiced about the old Toktogul dam project. Local residents recounted that although they were forced to relocate and lose land to make way for the dam reservoir, they did not feel able to voice their discontent loudly in the late Soviet period. After all, the new reservoir had not only required moving 35,000 people, but also swallowed large amounts of pasture and agricultural land, the mainstay of people’s livelihoods in the valley. Now there is a string of petitions for outstanding compensation and subsidies, spear-headed by local elites such as the editor of the regional newspaper. In the ‘new’ villages around the dam reservoir, feelings of grief and resentment are regularly aired, if not always with the conviction that they will have an effect. Bitter feelings are particularly acute in resettled villages like Köötörmö, which was placed in a waterless plain above the lake, dependent on electrically-powered water pumps. The frequent electricity cuts deprive the village of both water and electricity. Displaced for the sake of water, many people in Köötörmö complained bitterly that they are regularly left without either. To some, mega-dam projects continue to fulfil their promise: to others, they have spelled sacrifice and disappointment.

Hope in contemporary dam-building

The new Kambar Ata dams seems to elicit less enthusiasm, than that induced in the 1960s and 70s by the Soviet state and carried through to today by people like Liudmilla Fedorovna and Maksat. However, I have yet to hear voices rejecting the re-initiated dam project outright: rather, I mostly found cautious approval among Toktogul residents. One reason for this is that unlike the 1970s project, the new Kambar Ata dams will not displace
many people or sink homes, property and graveyards. Citizens generally welcome the new project, this despite the crippling costs and frequent diversion of ear-marked funds for the dam, and despite the fact that it was revived under a president ousted in a popular revolution in 2010. The otherwise very critical attention of Kyrgyzstani citizens and politicians is currently attuned to other political issues, such as the financial benefits and environmental costs of the Kumtor gold mine. I argue that this is partly because dam projects continue to fit the expectations of what a good state takes in hand. The dam projects thus live off the otherwise jettisoned Soviet model, to the point of using some of the same mechanical equipment prepared in the 1980s. Recently, it has sometimes seemed there is little else that Kyrgyzstani can be terribly hopeful about.

Although the old and new dams both reflect aspirations to modernize Kyrgyzstan and generate regional influence, the Kambar Ata project officially continues under very different ideological auspices than the ones Maksat and Liudmilla Fedorovna look back to. Rather than talk of the Friendship of the Peoples, there is now emphasis on a different kind of modernity: independence, privatization and asserting regional power. This is no longer a worker state emphasizing the spirit of international friendship driving the workers. The old and new dams belong to ‘the people’, their state and their future in quite different ways now. Government promises and citizens’ confidence in the future in this arena hinge on plans and projects to promote modern, national greatness. As we will see in the next section, mountain pastures also suggest national greatness and citizens’ welfare, but in an entirely different constellation of temporality and belonging.

**Jailoo: back to the future in livelihoods and dreams**

Rosa, a prominent NGO activist, told me with anguish about a recent struggle she had with her teenage son: they were passing by car through the famous mountain pasture of Suusamir at over 2000 meters, when Rosa suggested they get out to appreciate the jailoo. But her son was not interested: ‘Oh Mum, it’s not that pretty here, and it’s cold. What does it have to do with me?’ he asked. Rosa was shocked by his cavalier dismissal of jailoos as part of what was important to her, and what she felt should be important and familiar to every Kyrgyz person. She felt terribly guilty about having failed to inculcate in her city-bred children the appreciation of pastoral beauty and ways of life. The incident led her to make greater efforts to transmit Kyrgyz culture to her children, and to further discussions with them about why this was important – an effort which her son agreed with, in principle. They both felt that Kyrgyzstan would only have a bright future if knowledge of the past and its traditions, particularly that of ethnic Kyrgyz nomads, was safe-guarded. But the seasonal migrations with livestock to high pastures are not just a museumified or romanticized relict. The jailoo is the backbone of the rural economy, from which many city relatives like Rosa’s family receive their most prized foodstuffs: meat, dairy and the national drink kymyz (fermented mare’s milk, widely praised as a ‘super food’). Many an office worker pastures some goats, sheep or even a prestigious herd of horses with his relatives for these purposes. (For a detailed analysis of the social networks involved, see Isakov and Schoeberlein in this issue) Representing a huge chunk of Kyrgyzstan (depending on what is included, 40-80 % of the territory), high pastures are the only place your livestock will fatten enough to provide quality food and to survive the harsh winter.

Since independence, livestock has also proved the safest form of storing wealth, with a more stable exchange value than any currency. Not only in the great crises of the 1990s did the free availability of jailoos provide a safety net for the population. Migrating with livestock is often the only available employment in the countryside, whether one looks after one’s own herds or is hired as a shepherd. Although agricultural land and other assets like hydropower stations have gradually been privatized as sellable property, pastures have remained state-
owned. (For more detail on the ‘revolutionary’ moment of privatization, see Isakov and Schoeberlein in this issue.) Attempts to legislate for pasture leasing have recently been abandoned, so the vast state-owned meadows are not governed particularly forcefully by the state. As a result, pastures are the objects that come closest to communal ownership and a sense of entitlement prevails among pasture-users.

But these highly valued jailoos are also the object of concern for city intellectuals like Rosa, for NGOs and some policy-makers: did the Soviet livestock economy irredeemably damage pastures and erase practices that maintained their quality? If a quickly growing population is so reliant on livestock for subsistence and a way of storing wealth, how to avoid overgrazing? The 2009 pasture law removes much of the control over pasture management and taxes from centralized bureaucracies to ‘pasture user associations’ and the local commune. How these associations are created and how effectively they work varies hugely, according to the local political landscape. Herders themselves tend to be skeptical of their benefits: the disappointing experience of post-soviet collective endeavors and increasing corruption leave them with little confidence in efforts to safeguard pastures. Who will enforce rules about protecting pastures? Will the rich and powerful not by-pass regulations anyway, they ask.

There is an on-going tension between the assumption of many herders that grass will always grow on the vast expanses, and the concerns of those not immediately dependent on fragile pastures that they should be safeguarded for future generations. Herders are unlikely to claim their pastures are damaged by over-grazing because they are directly dependent on using them as fully as possible. They rarely feel they have any alternative, as Isakov and Schoeberlein show. (This issue) Some pastoralists and policy-makers feel the urgent need to protect the jailoo economic safety net, vision of beauty and symbol of nationhood for future generations. Others rely on a sense of the strength and continuity of pastoral life: they argue it endured despite Soviet sedentarization campaigns, and believe such ‘rich’ lands will always provide. In the following section, I will examine what such quasi-communal ownership means in everyday life.

The daily cycle of caring for livestock and producing dairy products in the mountains is very demanding. The pastures can be dangerously far from medical care and relatively isolated from roads or information channels like TV. On the other hand, summer socializing with neighbors, visitors and passers-by in the mountains may be more intense than in snow-bound villages in winter. Actual use of pastures by livestock is mediated through already established use-rights of certain villages and families, who are exclusively Kyrgyz. Even if the thought of working all summer on the jailoo does not make everyone’s heart beat faster, those who spend the summers there may say laconically ‘there is no alternative’ (aila jok).
There are however many pastoralists, whose eyes do shine at the mention of the jailoo: unlike Rosa’s son, many villagers and city children look forward eagerly to spending the summer months in the clean air of the mountains. Despite the hard work, all the livestock herding families I lived with and their neighbors would wax lyrical about the waterfalls, carpets of flowers and raspberries at high pasture. In contrast to trade or policing for example, mobile livestock herding integrated in the family network appears 'clean' and a properly Kyrgyz way of making a living. To my knowledge, though every jailoo user trades his animals for money on the market, this is never described as trade. Despite people’s economic dependence on the rich meadows, neither herders nor people like Rosa tend to comment on this existential role of the jailoo. Instead, they wax lyrical about the beauty and tazalyk (cleanness, wholesomeness, honesty) of jailoo, and describe them as a place of rest and rehabilitation. Karabai Ramanov, a recently deceased Toktogul writer expressed his yearning for them eloquently in a poem. Ramanov was locally well-respected as an intellectual, and many households displayed his books with such poetry on their living room side-board.

There is snow and ice even in summer
Wherever you look, there is beauty.
These are the mountains
Where there is always complete happiness.
...
Mountains are my support
They are the gift of my ancestors.
I am in the mountains ... and the mountains
Keep living in my heart.
(Ramanov 2004: 72)

The above poem describes beautiful mountains as an ancestral gift and homeland. To someone like Rosa or Karabai Ata, the presence of felt yurts, horsemanship and the production of the national drink kymyz all signify the jailoo as a properly ethnic Kyrgyz, 'nomadic' space. Such spaces are commonly displayed as oil paintings in better-off Kyrgyz households. (Figure 4)

Figure 5: Anonymous, mass-produced oil painting of a summer pasture © Jeanne Féaux de la Croix 2008

On national television, such mountain panoramas broadcast in program interludes seem pleasant and inoffensive. But there is also a political message: on occasion, mountains and their jailoos can be conflated with the titular nationality: ethnic Kyrgyz, the state and current government. As well as being an important source of livelihoods, the jailoo is where Kyrgyzness is imagined to have an eternal home. It serves as proof of the common assertion ‘biz köchmönbüz’ - we are nomads (still)! Part of the enthusiasm about taza jailoos may stem from a sense of refuge – refuge from the harsh property conflicts of town and valley, from a predatory state, from cosmopolitan city stresses, moral, environmental - and possibly cultural - ‘pollution’. I argue it is a combination of the above features that makes the jailoo such a taza, awe-inspiring and good place: in the tenacity and relative security of pastoralism, in the genuine quality of life it can provide, in the ease with which invoking mountain beauty merges with notions of ethnic nationhood allied to state and territory. In consequence jailoos have a privileged position in people’s moral geographies. All these aspects come
together in Karabai Ramanov’s assertion that ‘the mountains live in my heart’: jailoos come to look like the secure, eternal essence of Kyrgyzstan. This assertion may however be especially necessary because most pastoralists do not expect the majority of their children to continue as livestock breeders: they sell their livestock to fund university education, and just as for Rosa’s son, the pull of cities and locations abroad for the young is huge. On the other hand, the remittances workers send back from cities or from abroad are often invested in livestock, as well as enlarging houses for comfort and prestige purposes. (Schmidt & Sagynbekova 2008)

Conclusion: comparing the chronopolitics of dams and jailoos

I have endeavored to describe how Toktogul residents and their successive governments interact with two crucial types of places dominating their valley: hydro-electric dams and high pastures. As I have shown, Liudmilla Fedorovna, Maksat or Rosa and her son have quite different senses of past and future, ‘investments’ in life-projects and sense of connection and entitlement to places, resources and people. They present very different views of what is important in Kyrgyzstan: some of them are potentially complementary, others clearly exclusive of each other. This correlates with a different range of emotions, senses of belonging and entitlement voiced by the citizens and poets I mentioned: Ludmilla Fedorovna’s maquette of the Soviet civilizing mission, Rosa and Karabai Ramanov’s awe at the ‘mountains of our ancestors’, Maksat the dam worker’s confidence, investment and disappointment in a Russian, urban future. I will now draw out the contrasts in these relations, highlighting firstly, how they create and reflect particular ways of accessing the two resources, secondly, the associated chronopolitics and thirdly, the kind of collectivities dams and pastures imply.

The differences in management of such collective resources as hydropower and pastures are partially generated by the different materiality of water and grass; on the one hand, concentrated concrete and technological expertise, on the other, widely scattered and remote valleys. The secluded location of the old Toktogul dam up a guarded gorge means that to those who do not work there, the dam is only visible on TV or in publicity leaflets. The same is also true of the new Kambar Ata dams. In this sense, to most users of water and electricity, the dams are as remote and close as images of Moscow or New York. Such physical differences result in much greater control of resources and their centralized distribution from the dam, and conversely, much weaker state capacities in relation to the pastures. Nonetheless, both remain state property. Paradoxically, the power stations have formally been privatized, but the state retains a majority of the stock shares, and nobody doubts the company’s dependence on ministerial directives. Hydropower may ‘look’ more private than outright state-owned pastures, but the effect of this ownership regime is different. Dams are national resources in the sense of establishing regional power and financially profiting the state and state actors through legitimate and illegitimate means. In the case of pastures, state bureaucrats such as village agronomists struggle to recuperate what land and livestock tax they are legally entitled to, through pasture user associations. Although both are formally the same kind of collective (i.e. national, state) property, dams and pastures ‘belong’ to citizens in entirely different ways. The nature of these objects is different in further ways: while dams are celebrated as man-made projects, ‘natural’ pastures can suggest an eternal and essential Kyrgyzstan.

This comparison of dams and pastures as material resources and ownership regimes leads us into the differing temporality of the two sites. Both pastures and dams are places of grandeur, somewhat removed from the everyday experience of mud and brick village houses or the pot-holed roads that all citizens have to deal with. Both the completed Toktogul dam and the new Kambar Ata dam projects were inaugurated in the Soviet era, and still benefit
from the population’s general approval of Soviet-type projects. What the established Soviet dam and the renewed building of Kambar Ata - rising from long abandoned building materials - hold in common is a state-sponsored vision of modernity that somewhat incongruously, still realizes Lenin’s promise of ‘bringing lights to the yurts’. To speak with Fabian, objects such as the Toktogul dam are predominantly timed as ‘Soviet’, their contemporary relevance derives from their continuity with Soviet time. As a still functioning and powerful project, the dam embodies the achievements of a now defunct ideology. While dams are integrated into a narrative of the march towards modernity (both the Socialist and capitalist version), jailoos appear as a kind of timeless, authentic paradise. The eternal-ancient mountain pastures and future-modern hydro-power can thus be seen as examples of Fabian’s topoi, where a move from place to place is also a move between co-existing ‘evolutionary’ stages. (Fabian 1983:109-112)

People like Rosa or Maksat would however not, I think, reject either wholesale as ‘backward’ or ‘inauthentic’. They certainly weight each of these visions differently and place themselves differently in relation to them. But neither would deny the value of each: these are concurrent visions, and certainly at a national level, collective projects. The ancient/eternal-modern dichotomy of these sites is further disturbed by such people’s perceptions of risk and resulting life-strategies. In everyday terms, many people recently experienced the high pastures as a safety net, a last resort: it offers security for a future where the ‘master plans’ of governments on hydro-power, or even simply staying in power, can quickly be derailed. The simple equation of hydroelectric dams with ‘modernity’, mountain pastures with ‘tradition’ also falls apart elsewhere: the dams are viewed as source of future wealth but also create potential liabilities such as new political frictions and dependencies, debt and perhaps even earthquakes. Renewed intensive use of mountain pastures meanwhile has arisen in an era of privatization usually described as ‘modernizing’. As we have seen, there is a contradiction between the jailoo embodying a time, place and resource that endures, with worry that fragile mountain pastures, perhaps already beyond repair, and should be safeguarded for future generations.

The temporal associations explored above, and evoked in the poetry by Ramanov and Stepanovich also imply emotions of belonging, security, yearning and hope. These clusters are part of citizen-state relations and also of individual structures of opportunity and life choices, as in Maksat’s commitment to the Russian language. I have argued that the national future associated with hydropower, and the future associated with jailoos constitute and re-create different citizenries: the first, praised by Liudmilla Fedorovna, implies a citizenship of work and collective endeavor mediated by the state, the second implies an ethnic constituency, who can take pride in the eternal beauty of jailoos and pastoral lifestyle, and are in a position to take economic advantage of them too.18 While jailoos appear as a definitely Kyrgyz future and past, the Soviet Toktogul dam is associated with the friendship of peoples, led by Soviet Russia. The new incarnation of Naryn dams currently under construction equally receive Russian funding, but under quite different, ‘foreign policy’ conditions. Though most people think the new Kambar Ata dams a good idea, they know from bitter experience that such grand state schemes do not always deliver on their promises. They may well benefit politicians first and foremost, concentrating access in the hands of energy companies and ministry technocrats.

The pastures on the other hand are, for good or ill, in many ways beyond the grasp of the state. Any citizen or tourist can stroll the mountain meadows. As I discussed, actual grazing of pastures is mediated through already established use-rights of certain villages and families, who are exclusively Kyrgyz. Unlike the Kyrgyz Rosa, the Russian Liudmilla Fedorovna is unlikely to have relatives willing to herd cattle and sheep for her for free, or to be able to do so herself. An ancient/eternal version of Kyrgyzstan with its yurts, Kyrgyz language and kymyz is not really inclusive of someone like Liudmilla Fedorovna. Such
notions of belonging therefore shape who pastures and dams belong to in economic terms, and who can take pride in them. I maintain that attention to these visions associated with special places like jailoos and dams helps us understand current conflicts relating to a ‘national’ future, but also to ‘international’ resources, access to jobs or land, as in Reeves. (This issue)

The discussion of dams and pastures has shown up two points that bear real conflict potential and may shape some of the background to the traumatic legacy of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, a legacy that has altered imaginations of the future. The first are regional disputes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan about how to regulate and use the flow of the Naryn. Such disputes were muted in Soviet water management practices, which created large dam and irrigation projects as an effort of brotherly Soviet citizens in forging a common infrastructure. The second point is the association of the dream of jailoo life with Kyrgyz statehood. Nomadism and ethnic Kyrgyz are frequently portrayed as fundamentally different from sedentary farmers and traders like Uzbeks, Russians and many others. If we ask after who these vast areas are thought to ‘belong’ to, it is certainly one particular ethnic group: the Kyrgyz. If one glories in these areas as the best of Kyrgyzstan - then one is by implication excluding other kinds of citizens. This paper has argued that asking after people’s long-standing images of the future and belonging, their ‘lieux de future’ is a useful way into understanding present tensions. I have dealt with questions of materializing ideas of the past and future in sites and resources – of what is desirable and attainable. It is clear that the two models of a good life described here sometimes intersect, and sometimes deny each other. Whether a Kyrgyz jailoo or Soviet era dam is deemed to represent a viable and desirable future - by state actors or public opinion - impacts people like Maksat or Rosa who are associated with these places, those who gain their livelihoods from them, or claim rights over them.

I have suggested here that contrary to our disciplinary conventions, orientations towards the past and future need to be studied together, rather than in isolation. They need to be studied at the level of the vernacular, of everyday survival strategies and hopes, and also at the political level that authorizes and funds particular plans. Plans are, after all, little else than dreams in uniform. The connection I have shown above between hopes, group belonging and access to resources clearly demonstrates that in the case of dams and pastures as sites of the future, people’s sense of emotional attachment, economic dependency and future hopes are mutually constitutive. These notions are rarely integrated into a holistic vision, both on the personal and the political level. Discourses about a range of positive futures can quite easily run parallel to each other, even while as I have shown, they may clash on occasion: building dams requires drowning at least some grazing land, after all. These days in Kyrgyzstan, it is in fact rare to find someone wholly committed to a single, all-encompassing program for the future, like Liudmilla Fedorovna’s. Persistent talk of such a situation as an undesirable ‘xaos’ (Nazpary 2002) and the desirability of a national leader who would chart a clear path, show that people are not necessarily comfortable with such visionary pluralism and multiplicity of individual and collective projects or ‘elsewheres’. Nevertheless, concurrent dreams need not jar: we are all quite capable of holding on to contradictory values and stories at the same time, and applying them in different ways. ‘Incoherence’ may only show up in the categorizing mood of scholarship.

Notes

Biographical Note:

Jeanne Féaux de la Croix leads a junior research group on the cultural history of water at the University of Tübingen. She completed her PhD on moral geographies in Kyrgyzstan at the University of St. Andrews in 2010 and held a number of research fellowships at Zentrum
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Moderner Orient in Berlin on concepts of knowledge, development, youth and age in Kyrgyzstan. She is currently pursuing research on new dams in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Féaux de la Croix is also active in the Central Eurasian Scholars and Media Initiative.

Concrete figures on this vary according to source, between around 70 and 90 percent: this is because of the ongoing change in the national energy mix, as well as seasonal fluctuations in the sources of electricity and hydropower capacity.

Being ‘in or on the mountains’ (toodo) in Kyrgyz usually implies being on a pasture or perhaps in a national park rather than a peak. Indeed, when people speak of migrating to or visiting high pastures, they simply say ‘men toogo baram’: ‘I’m going to the mountains’.

By talking of conceptual and material resources, I do not mean to suggest an economics model of human dreams and aspirations. Rather, the term resource is useful in drawing the material and notional aspects of a place such as a dam together. The term resource can also invoke the ‘resourcefulness’ these ‘sources’ harbor.

The literature on the contestation of dam and pasture management and ownership is vast. More detailed information on these questions in the case of Kyrgyzstan can be found in Féaux de la Croix 2010, Jacquesson 2011, Japarov 2009 and Steimann 2011.

I use the term ‘lieux de future’ with a nod to Pierre Nora’s engagement with ‘lieux de memoire’ (1989), but without wanting to adopt his argument over the replacement of ‘true’ collective memory with memorial sites.

Some of these are explored in the companion articles in this collection. To name but a few more from the locally available repertoire: religious teleologies directed towards life after death, popular ideas of evolution, and social stagnation, and the hopes pinned on work or education abroad.

Authors like Pine (2007) and Rofel (1999) have framed their enquiry in the post-socialist world around the term modernity. This is a starting point for examining an ostensibly clear bifurcation in the ‘traditional’ jailoo versus the ‘modern’ dam. However, my discussion below complicates this picture, and is also orientated to a different discussion.

Lenin’s address to the 8th Party Congress in 1920. (Lenin 1959)

This disjuncture of local sacrifice for (promised) benefits elsewhere or at larger scale is a feature of any large-scale construction project, but particularly stark in the case of dams. (World Commission on Dams 2000, cf. also Bromber, Féaux de la Croix & Lange forthcoming 2014)

I here draw on interviews with herders 2006 - 2008, as well as work with NGOs concerned with pasture management between 2010 and 2012.

In the Ferghana valley, Uzbeks and Tajiks used to give Kyrgyz herders their livestock to herd on the mountain pastures in the summer. According to local administrators in these regions, these relations of trust broke off sharply after the 2010 violence and showed little sign recovery in 2012.
It is important to note that jailoos are not used much by the very poor or the very rich. The poorest do not have livestock to take there, rich people get someone else to do this work. So on the jailoo, there is a relative equalization of living conditions and income groups.

This is not to say nobody wished for more conveniences, entertainment and less arduous work.

In this role as places of rest and peace, jailoos share a similar role to mazars. (Féaux de la Croix 2010)

Although people generally imagine uninterrupted continuity in jailoo use, it should be noted that in the early 1990s almost no-one used the very highest mountain pastures: with the privatization and catastrophic decline in livestock numbers, such journeys were not worthwhile. Now livestock numbers are approaching those of the late 1980s again, bringing the highest pastures back into use, frequented especially by those with the biggest herds.

Recent contexts for ‘hardening’ such associations are detailed in Reeves. (This issue)

It is possible that both the very real economic constraints of the herding life, as well as the very idealization of such ‘vast’ and ‘generous’ lands e.g. in the poem above, are motifs that work against the government and NGO-led drive to protect them.

Other cases of Central Asian governments’ attempts to shape citizens are depicted in Adams (2010) and Edgar (2004).

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