# UNSTABLE OBJECTS: CORPSES, CHECKPOINTS AND 'CHESSBOARD BORDERS' IN THE FERGHANA VALLEY

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This article explores the way in which concerns about the proper functioning of new state boundaries in an area of post-Soviet Central Asia are communicated through stories about objects and their differential ability to 'flow' across borders.[lxxiii] In particular, I seek to make sense of the prevalence of references to corpses*,* and the kind of ruptured movement that such stories convey. Katherine Verdery, in her study of the postsocialist reburial of certain 'politicised corpses' in East-Central Europe, has argued that the very materiality of dead bodies is 'critical to [their] symbolic efficacy' (Verdery 1999: 27) in navigating moments of radical temporal shift and political upheaval. Whilst I draw in this article on Verdery's analysis of the symbolic power of bodies-in-motion, my focus is not on the bodies or statues of the 'famous dead', important as these have been to the legitimising of new polities in Central Asia. Rather, I am concerned with the way in which, at a much more personal and local level, accounts of struggles to bring corpses to their resting places are used to index changed experiences of mobility and the arbitrary materialisation of the 'state' associated with the intensification of a regional border regime since 1999.

I argue that in the borderlands of the Ferghana valley, corpses, as a particularly unstable kind of object—deceased but not yet at rest; very materially 'here' but also already departed; subjects of sacred authority, yet still bound by the vagaries of earthly regulation—serve to condense popular anxieties about the coherence of state law, its alarming tendency to materialise and dissolve, appear and disappear, to get 'eaten by money'. Through this exploration, based on fieldwork between 2003 and 2005, I seek to engage with some of the broader questions raised by this Special Issue: the way that objects are used to navigate postsocialist transformations; the disjunction between 'legal' circulation of goods and people and local assessments of legitimate movement; and the way that new forms of rupture and flow are shaping ideas of community and connection after socialism.

## Materialising borders in the Ferghana valley

Borders are paradoxical locations in the imagination of national space. On the one hand, territorial boundedness is central to the assertion and

the representation of the state *as* sovereign. The contiguous lines and endlessly replicated blocks of colour make the national map as emblematic of the state as flag and anthem. Indeed, it is hard for us today to imagine the concept of 'state' without a corresponding, finite stretch of territory with an unambiguous linear edge.[lxxiv] On the other hand, any brief excursion into the state's geographical margins will remind that the borders of even the most securitised of states are more porous than any map would convey—a porosity, indeed, that is central to the very functioning of the state within a global system (Heyman & Smart 1999; Roitman 2004; van Schendel 2005). The cartographic representations of the state that every school-child learns, with their finite edges and clearly graphed blocks of national territory, are thus expressive documents rather than purely descriptive ones. The extent to which the inchoate body of institutions, processes, agents and violence-invoking actions that together constitute 'the state' actually *are* sovereign over a given geographical territory varies enormously. In particular, the degree to which real world borders correspond to, or deviate from, their mapped representation (as finite, contiguous, linear and above all, *visible…*) is empirically far more contingent than conventional cartography would suggest.

For those living in the borderlands of newly nationalising states, and especially in areas where the location of an international boundary is, or has been, historically contested, this divergence between the cartographic division of national space and the everyday experience of 'border' is not merely of academic interest. Quite *how* state assertions of 'territorial integrity' should translate into the movement of goods and people across the state's edge is a question on which daily life invites reflection: how to have 'secure' borders, which nonetheless allow us freely to trade across them? How to prevent resources from being siphoned out illegally, without this entailing draconian document checks every few kilometres? How to sustain relations with friends and relatives across a border, when transport is increasingly fragmented along national lines? What to do with uncultivated territory, the jurisdiction of which is contested, in a situation of acute land shortage? How, in short, to balance limit and flow, connection and separation,

inclusion and exclusion? As John and Jean Comaroff have recently argued (2005:129), 'the border is a double bind because national prosperity appears to demand, but is also threatened by, both openness and closure' – an insight no less true for those residing at the state's edge than for those who write its laws.

The area where this research is based is one where this 'double bind' has become particularly acute in recent years. Central Asia's Ferghana valley, where Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan meet in a complex series of international boundaries, is a site where local livelihoods and policies aimed at 'securitisation' of the border have increasingly been in tension.[lxxv] When the region was part of the Soviet Union, the administrative boundaries between the three Union republics were typically only vaguely defined, and of little salience locally (marked, if at all, by roadside signs celebrating 'harmony, friendship, peace' [*yntymak, dostuk, tynchtyk*]). Previously part of the Kokand Khanate, and not demarcated along 'ethnic' lines, the cartographic divisions that now mark an international boundary were drawn up in 1924 as part of the 'national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia'. This demarcation was intended to help propel a 'backward' region into Soviet modernity by according territorial propriety to weakly-national 'nations' (Vareikis 1924).[lxxvi] The boundaries were never envisaged, however, as the borders of independent states.[lxxvii]

Subsequent building and resettlement projects and the institutionalisation of social life tended thoroughly to ignore the republican borders – indeed, even to shift them entirely in practice through the leasing of land from collective farms on one side of the border to those on the other. Pastoralist Kyrgyz populations were resettled into 'planned villages' [*planovye sela*] further down the valley, such that summer migration patterns now traversed the land of the neighbouring republic. Reservoirs and canals were built completely ignoring the republican boundary-line (Bichsel 2006); tractor stations nominally under the jurisdiction of one republic were built on the land of the neighbouring one (Mamaraimov 2006); new Tajik *mahallas* (neighbourhoods) that were subordinate to state farms in the Tajik republic were built on the outskirts of villages that were themselves administratively part of the Kyrgyz SSR.[lxxviii] Such arrangements, motivated in part by acute water and land shortage and in part by the fact that the delimitation of the 1920s had left several Tajik collective farms with minimal room to increase in size, were entirely pragmatic within the context of broader Soviet state-formation. It was never assumed, for instance, that a long-term land-lease from one Union republic to its neighbour would result in the creation of what are now, juridically, enclaves of one independent state inside another.[lxxix]

Yet, with the collapse of the Soviet Union this has been precisely the result. The borderlands of the Ferghana valley have become a cartographic and administrative conundrum, with dozens of villages now situated in such a way that travel along the single road connecting villagers to their nearest source of water, their local bazaar or their place of worship entails the crossing of an international boundary. In many areas, the interspersion of private land plots belonging to villagers of one state with those of its neighbours creates a boundary that is not linear at all – a 'chessboard border' [*shakmat chek arasy*] as it is known locally that tacks forth multiple times between the two jurisdictions. This complex formation, recently likened by the head of Kyrgyzstan's commission on border delimitation to a 'sieve' [*sito*] (Alamanov in Mamaraimov 2006) has resulted in swathes of so-called 'contested land' [*talash jer*], the jurisdiction of which is indistinct; an increase in local contestation over the ownership and regulation of cross-border canal networks, and the more pervasive transformation of nationally unmarked 'land' into politicised 'territory' (see Figure 1).

Perhaps most importantly from the perspective of local farmers and traders, it has resulted in a proliferation in the number of low-level state employees – often poorly-trained and poorly-paid – stationed in villages to guard the border and regulate movement across it. Uzbekistan currently operates a visa regime with both of its Ferghana valley neighbours, and whilst there are agreements in force to allow people who live in one border district [*raion*] to enter the immediately contiguous district of the neighbouring state for up to five days without a visa, in practice the regulations are complex, ambiguous in their precise specification of who can travel where, and largely irrelevant to local spatial and social imaginaries charted through kinship.[lxxx] Encounters with 'the law' are frequently negotiated through appeals to common ethnicity or religion, or trumped through the law-dissolving agency of the bribe. As a result, the border guards and customs officers who notionally guard the border are often perceived by border villagers less as a guarantor of security than as a threat – extracting tribute arbitrarily, sending much of it 'upwards' to those higher in the chain of 'stately' command. 'There goes another brick in Akaev's villa' was the comment from Valijon after paying a 50 som [$ 1.20] 'fine' to enter a Kyrgyz *raion* where his local residence permit [*propiska*] should technically have prevented him. Cynical banter about the edges of villages having

been taken over by 'goats in uniform' and emotive discussion alike served to probe the great paradox of borderland militarization – quite who was providing 'security' to whom?

In short, then, the Ferghana valley borderlands are an area which have been 'taken over by [the] thought of the state' in Pierre Bourdieu's evocative idiom (1999: 53), and become central to discursive elaboration in the respective capital cities concerning the state's proper territorial 'stretch'. Yet they are also an area where the authority and legitimacy of those nominally personating the state are profoundly contested in practice. From the perspective of villagers such as Valijon, the border is less the natural territorial correlate of 'state sovereignty' than a zone of negotiation, where the divergent claims to authority of law, money, familiarity and locality compete to 'frame' the nature of interaction with state personnel and the outcome of the encounter.

### Indexing difference, measuring flow: the efficacy of objects

The changing status of these borderlands in domestic politics and public culture has been well documented elsewhere.[lxxxi] My aim is not to examine the complex of local and international factors that have led, since 1999, to a heightening of border security, or the considerable cross-border tensions that have resulted from such a shift.[lxxxii] Nor does space allow a detailed examination of the contrastive policies towards such issues as market trading, land ownership, media regulation and informal, non-governmental activity that have led to radically divergent experiences of state control and public space in each of the three valley republics.[lxxxiii]

I am interested, rather, in the way in which the effects of such changes are discursively navigated. Often condensed through discursive binaries of the form 'in Kyrgyzstan the state is poor and the people are rich; in Uzbekistan the state is rich but the people are poor' played on through jokes that exaggerate the different presidential styles, or narrated through gossip about high-level corruption, the different political and economic models pursued by the three Ferghana valley states are converted into meaningful comparisons, managed through talk. The state of roads, the convertibility of pensions, the cost of meat, the size of garden plots (*uchastki*) and the availability of corruption-free higher education are just some of the ways in which different state projects are locally indexed. I was frequently struck during fieldwork in 2004-5 by the depth of knowledge about relative costs on either side of the border, and the ability, even of young children, to negotiate and inter-convert three, and sometimes even four quite

different currencies (Kyrgyz som, Uzbek sum, Tajik somoni and Russian rouble[lxxxiv]). Small differences in the cost of petrol on either side of the border, or more substantial variation in the cost of second-hand cars and building materials were the scales through which the relative costs and merits of these different economic paths were measured.

This discursive use of objects and their shifting value to measure difference across a border is a commonly-noted feature of border zones, and in no way unique to the Ferghana valley. In his ethnography of the Georgian-Turkish border, for instance, Mathijs Pelkmans demonstrates how a *social* boundary was reproduced by Georgians, even as the once-closed territorial border was reopened, through the discursive rejection of the 'cheap and flimsy' Turkish goods which had flooded Georgian border markets in the 1990s (Pelkmans 2006: 178-194)[lxxxv]. In the Ferghana valley, too, material objects were used to mark social boundaries, just as they were used to calibrate the different economic opportunities on either side of the border. Yet the kinds of 'border talk' occurring in and around Batken and Sokh during my period of fieldwork suggest that objects were being used to animate other kinds of concern as well. In particular, the troubling sense that wealth was seeping, or being siphoned invisibly out, away from 'us' and to distant bank vaults, was often animated through rumours and jokes featuring the most concrete kind of wealth – gold bars, suitcases of dollars, sacks of apricots with opium concealed inside. Such stories typically entailed lucrative commodities being whisked, unstopped and unchecked, through a series of Central Asian border posts in state-registered cars by high-ranking officials who could 'trump' the state's attempts to regulate movement.

During the months leading up to the March 2005 overthrow of President Akaev in Kyrgyzstan, such stories in Batken took on almost mythic proportions, weaving in fragments of newspaper stories, opposition slogans and rumours that percolated through from Bishkek. Such narratives, in their local, Batken variant, were more than just commentaries on a presidential 'clan' that had sucked the country dry. In their emphasis on the way in which such commodities crossed borders unstopped, they also served as reflections on the differential permeability of the international frontier itself. State-owned cars filled with contraband goods passing unchecked through the state's own borders acted as a powerful metaphor for the mysterious, invisible flows that had catapulted certain well-connected officials to enormous wealth, even as the 'state' itself was plunged in debt.[lxxxvi]

**Corporealities**

If gold and drugs were used to articulate the borders' excessive flimsiness to those in positions of power, it was a very different kind of object – the corpse – that was used to communicate their impermeability to 'proper' human flows. Bodies, more generally, were often invoked in the Ferghana valley to talk about the border and the violent practices of stately verification that proliferate along its length. Women from Sokh, an enclaved administrative district [*raion*] that is part of Uzbekistan but located entirely located within Kyrgyzstani territory, used to describe in hushed tones the lengths they went to in crossing the border in order to avoid the risk of body searches from rudely 'disrespectful' [*hurmatsiz*] Kyrgyz border guards who would 'pretend to check for drugs'. Kyrgyz newspapers, for their part, would often lament the humiliating strip searches that put up an (ethnicized) 'iron curtain' between Kyrgyz and Uzbek 'brothers' in the south of the country.[lxxxvii] Accounts of sexual violation of 'our women' by 'their men' across the border – the violent, gendered remapping of territorial transgression – were some of the most powerful and emotive modes for relating the violence of the checkpoint.[lxxxviii]

For all the anger that surrounded accounts of violations of living, gendered bodies, it was dead bodies, however, that seemed to have particular salience as symbolic vehicles. As Verdery (Verdery 1999:27-8) has argued, the very corporeality and polyvalence of the deceased makes them 'important means of localizing a claim', and that is perhaps especially true in situations where every moment of delay before burial is recognized to be one of torment [*kiinalish*] for the deceased. In the Ferghana valley, more so than in less observant areas of Central Asia, the Hadithic injunction to bury the deceased within hours of death means that funeral rites acquire enormous salience as indices of distance and connection, as well as of filial piety and relational harmony [*yntymak*]. The unburied corpse is thus a multiply unstable object – polluting and tormented, collapsing social relations until harmony can be restored in the act of burial.

One funeral story that I heard during fieldwork articulated this sense of arbitrary closure with particular force. It stuck in my mind both for the emotion with which it was recounted, and the dramatic context of its narrating, in a stretch of waterless wasteland just inside Kyrgyzstan, close to the point where the three republics met. I was travelling between the Kyrgyz towns of Batken and Osh with a group of Tajik students from Khujand, the

city in Tajikistan that marks the Western end of the Ferghana valley. We were being taken to Osh, at the other end of the valley, by Dastan aka, the eldest brother in the Kyrgyz family with whom I lived in Batken, and busy father of four. Dastan aka was well-connected and moderately well off, having previously made a good income importing petrol from Uzbekistan and selling it at a mark-up of one or two *som* across the border in Batken. Dastan aka's uncle still sells petrol, though neither he, nor Dastan himself, does the importing. This has become altogether riskier in the last few years, as customs controls have been stepped up along the stretch of border that he used to 'run', with a concomitant rise in bribes. Dastan aka still profits from the different regimes of value that the border creates, by 'ferrying Tajiks', as he puts it, across the unmarked scree and sand that constitute the 'detour route' [*ob"ezd jol*] north of Uzbekistan's Sokh enclave. Citizens of Tajikistan who are not in possession of an Uzbek visa (which includes virtually all of those who would be making the journey from Khujand) are not permitted to cross the 15 kilometre stretch of the main Batken-Osh road where it crosses through Uzbekistani territory in Sokh. As a result, the only way that they can travel West to East through the Ferghana valley is along this sandy detour, which traces the length of the Soviet-era Bürgündü canal, before splitting into a series of unmarked tracks that cross-cut each other in otherwise empty, uncultivated territory for another sixty kilometres.

*Kamaz* lorries and Soviet jeeps dominate this route, their loads and their quantity a salient reminder that the 'second economy' is here a profound misnomer (cf. Rasanayagam 2002:108-111, Seabright 2000). For this technically non-existent 'road', unmarked and unmapped, constitutes one of the main routes East for the distribution of aluminium and base metals to China, Uzbek cotton for illegal processing in Osh, and Afghan opium from Tajikistan to Osh, Bishkek and beyond to Russia. Humans, too, are a lucrative traffic on this route. Dastan aka ferries Tajiks along this back-road rather than offering a more conventional taxi service on the tarmac road that crosses Sokh because the margins are higher and there is less competition from others in Batken. Soviet-era *Zhiguli* cars and the more recently imported second-hand Audis [*innomarki*] that are found in Batken in roughly equal number would both be liable to run aground on the uneven, rocky surface of the detour route. With his Soviet *Vazik* jeep, Dastan aka is well positioned to corner the market in 'ferrying Tajiks' to Osh, and since it is at the large, wholesale markets at this Eastern end of the valley that the cheapest goods in the region are found, demand typically outstrips supply in transport along

this route. The Tajik students with whom I was travelling were in little doubt that this slow, uncomfortable off-road ride, which added several dozen kilometres to the journey, was nonetheless preferable to the inevitable delays, bribes [*pora*] and humiliation that would be liable to greet them if they tried to cross Sokh without a visa.

Dastan aka's intimate, embodied knowledge of the landscape also gave him the edge over those who might try running this route for the first time. He could tell our location from tiny shifts in the landscape, a chink in the canal, a conjunction of rocks. And it was this that made him king of the road, racing through the landscape, *Syimyk Beshikeev* singing at full blast on his tape recorder, enjoying the chance to practice the off-road leaps as we in the back covered our eyes to avoid being stung by the dust. Dastan aka was conscious that his livelihood depended on knowing this road intimately, just as it did on the absurd rules that made citizens of Tajikistan *persona non grata* in the neighbouring state. Every bump of this route was an indignity to them – for him it was a chance to practice freedom. Like the Shabe traders described by Flynn (1997) who 'run the border' between Nigeria and Benin, his livelihood depended on the particular opportunities generated by the productive configuration of gaps and limits that the borders here present to a well-connected, car-owning Batken man. Indeed, the normally reserved father of young children seemed to be at his most animated here in the dusty no-man's land at the unmarked and largely un-policed edge of the state.

### Disgracing the dead: Zulaikho's story

The contrast between Dastan's sense of freedom, and the story of entrapment that was related to me along its route by Zulaikho, one of the Tajik students, could not have been more pronounced. Indeed, the very fact that we were making this 'detour' to avoid entering an enclave that was, as one of our passengers put it, 'Tajik land since time immemorial' seemed to incite a proliferation of 'border talk'.[lxxxix] Unable to put pencil to paper to make jottings of Zulaikho's story during the journey, I took her to a café once we reached Osh, and there, slowly readjusting to the delicious motionlessness of land, she recounted her story of the corpse and its journey.

The deceased man was the father of a childhood school teacher with whom she was still in close contact. Originally from a small Tajik village just inside the Uzbek SSR, he had moved in his youth to Stalinabad (later renamed Dushanbe), the then capital of the Tajik SSR, initially to study and afterwards to work as a journalist on one of the main

Tajik-language newspapers. Like many of his generation, this aspiring journalist did not see this change of republic as constituting a move 'abroad': Dushanbe was closer than his 'own' capital, Tashkent, and was the natural choice for someone wanting to undertake journalism training in Tajik. His daughter, Zulaikho's school teacher, had grown up in Dushanbe as a member of the post-War Tajik intelligentsia, studying in Kiev ('Europe') before returning to her native city to teach. Although she had not gone to her father's village in many years, and identified little with what she saw as a 'backward region' [*otstalyi raion*], she knew that her father's overwhelming wish, repeated on his deathbed, was that he be buried in his ancestral land, inside what was now independent Uzbekistan. So it was, immediately after her father's death, that she set off with a small group of relatives on the 120 mile journey to the village of her father's birth. Zulaikho told me about her teacher's journey:

> So they'd got as far as the post; they were carrying the corpse in their hands since they knew they would have to leave the car [on that side of the post]. They had come all the way from Dushanbe in the heat. They were just a few kilometres from his *mahalla*. And then they were told they can't enter. Can you imagine? All that distance in the heat. So they explain to the border guards that he is from this district [*raion*], that his fathers were buried in that *mahalla*, that they were such-and-such a family, all the things his parents had done for the raion. And you know what the border guards said? They were Uzbeks, they weren't even local [*Oni dazhe ne byli mestnymi*].[xc] They said to that group of relatives who were in mourning, they said, 'what do we need your corpse for? Don't you think we've got enough corpses of our own? [*u nas svoikh trupov ne khvatayut, chto-li?*]

I pressed Zulaikho on the meaning of such a response from the border guards. Was this a concern about a real lack of room in the burial ground? Or perhaps motivated by fear about contamination from a corpse that had been transported all day in the heat? Zulaikho dismissed such explanations. It had nothing to do with the paperwork, nor even to do with money, she told me. They knew that they would have to offer money: they were prepared for *that*. And they were wealthy [*sostoyatel'nye*], so that ought not to have been a barrier. No, Zulaikho continued firmly, this was about something else, about 'nationality' [*natsional'nost'*]. The border guards were Uzbek, she repeated, they were doing this to remind that this was the territory of Uzbekistan even though Tajiks have always lived in this particular region. She continued,

They said to [my teacher's relatives], 'if he is Tajik, bury him in Tajikistan!' But Tajiks have always lived in [this *mahalla*]! And her relatives were pleading with those border guards; they tried to get them to call through to some high-up people in the raion. They said to them, 'be a Muslim. All the same you're a Muslim. Let's not have this, 'you're [fame.] a Tajik, I'm Uzbek'. But they just kept on telling them to go back and bury him in Dushanbe […] So they ended up taking the corpse all the way back to Dushanbe and they buried him there the next day. But that is a disgrace! [*pozor*]. We have to bury the person the same day, not the next. And there they were going backwards and forwards, trying to get the border guards to listen to them. You know how painful it was that they couldn't bury him according to custom? Really painful […] So you see, in the end [the guards] broached the bounds of Nazism when they didn't let them in. Because apart from that everything was in order. They had money with them and everything.

Zulaikho's account had something didactic about it, something almost theatrical. At the time, sitting in the café, inscribing what she said, I chided myself for not having a better memory and therefore ending up with a second-order ethnographic artefact – a dramatized reconstruction of a story that had burst out spontaneously during our earlier journey, as we had been tossed along the bumpy detour route around Sokh. I was struck by the fact that although she was recounting this in the third person, her account was dotted throughout with a narrative 'we', as though she personally had been there accompanying the body back to Dushanbe. This, coupled with the dramatic overstatement and the instinctive slippage from this narrative into discussion of other Tajik losses – the loss of historic Samarkand and Bukhara, the assimilation [*assimiliatsiia*] of Tajiks into Uzbeks, the closure of Tajik schools – left me wondering why it was *this* message that she was so keen that I take from the story – a narrative of discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, a story of nationalism trumping over other kinds of identification 'as Muslims', as fellow 'locals'.

Part of the answer lies, no doubt, in the post-Soviet prevalence in Tajikistan of a discourse of loss and historical injustice – one in which Zulaikho and her generation would be well versed. Accounts of the de-stabilizing consequences of being left with a 'rump state' excised from historical centres of Tajik culture in present-day Uzbekistan are codified in official histories[xci] and have received scholarly elaboration from the Tajik Academy of Sciences (Masov 1991, 2003). Particular instances of 'discrimination', such as that encountered by

Zulaikho's teacher, could thus be inserted as indicative instances into a much larger, state-sanctioned narrative of historic offence [*obida*].

However, to understand why this refusal of entry was understood to be an instance of nationalism that 'broached the bounds of Nazism', the pervasiveness of an appropriate 'narrative slot' into which it could be inserted is only part of the answer. We also need to bring the question of the borders' perceived (il)legitimacy into the picture. For what is striking in Zulaikho's narration was that she saw the border guards *not* as the mere transmitters of official Uzbekistani policy towards non-citizens, nor of 'upholding' an unjust but externally-derived 'law'. She didn't see them, in other words, as merely the last in a chain of command stretching coherently from a capital city to its margins, their authority an instance of more encompassing sovereignty that lies with the state. Her accusation, rather, is one of *personal*, ethnically-based malice, which overrode any coherent relational appeals (to common Islamic identity, to shared Tajik-Uzbek cultural heritage, to money, to respect for the dead…). The ethnicity of the border guards mattered in this encounter – their 'non-localness' – precisely because they weren't interpreted as mere state functionaries dutifully enacting the law, embodying the state's rational-legal authority. Indeed, it is in the border guards' very refusal to do the 'cooperative' thing and accept a bribe to let the body through that they are understood to have demonstrated their true nationalist intent. What is technically an act of legal exclusion based on citizenship can *only* be made sense of in terms of salient categories of ethnic discrimination. 'State sovereignty' here collapses into the fact that 'we' are stuck here unable to pay our last respects, whilst a youth with a Kalashnikov dictates to us 'as though' he were the law, effecting a triple subversion of the proper rules of valley decorum – of the living before the dead, of the young before the old, of the host towards the stranger-guest [*meikhmon*].

## Overriding the law: sirens and the impersonation of the state

In Kyrgyzstan, this symbolic work of the corpse – materialising and rendering explicit the dilemma of openness/closure, security and permeability – has recently found cinematographic elaboration in a realist drama that has striking parallels with Zulaikho's narrative (Alykulov 2006). A fictional portrayal of an encounter at a small, rural checkpoint, the drama conveys the absurdity of the contemporary Central Asian border encounter, in which four Kyrgyz labour migrants who are transporting the recently deceased father of one of their number home for burial are refused exit from

Kazakhstan, where they have been working, because the corpse is not in possession of a migration card. Denied passage across the bridge where the checkpoint stands because of this minor administrative error, the men are forced to carry the deceased on foot across the freezing river separating the two countries, virtually under the eye of the border guards who refused them exit.

The structural and thematic similarities between the realms of local borderland rumour, the popular myths that are animated in newspaper talk and filmic portrayals such as Alykulov's are not, of course, unique to this particular post-Soviet context. As Begoña Aretxaga (2000:46) argues of the way state violence in Spain became 'emplotted' in local narratives, 'state violence, especially the kind that circumambulates the law, that transgresses the law from within […] is deeply wrapped in fictional plots and phantasmic images'. Akil Gupta has shown how in northern India, local commentary upon newspaper-mediated accounts of official corruption is central to the way in which the 'state' comes to be imagined as translocal, despite the always local instantiations through which it is encountered (Gupta 1995). Similarly, in the South African context, John and Jean Comaroff have demonstrated the complex inter-tangling of crime as it is 'experienced' and crime as it is narrativised in the post-apartheid state (2004: 801).

Yet if the slippage between the realms of fact and fiction is in no way unique to this particular post-Soviet moment, the recurrence of the corpse-as-trope should nonetheless give us pause for reflection. After all, notwithstanding its discursive portrayal in the English-language conflict-studies literature as a zone of considerable 'danger', the Ferghana valley is not an unusually violent place. Stories of bodies and checkpoints were not, therefore, a simple commentary on rising crime or the kind of *social* breakdown or 'chaos' [*bardak*] that has been deemed to characterise Central Asia's urban centres (Nazpary 2002). To understand why funerals figure so frequently in discussions of ruptures to cross-border sociality (compare Megoran 2002: 131) we need to focus, rather, on the symbolic work that corpses were doing. Above all, we need to pay attention to their salience as discursive objects at a time when everyday experiences of the border regime made a mockery of official discourses of 'control'.

As an area that has been progressively securitized and militarised since 1999, the borderlands of the Ferghana valley have been the subject of a powerful *discourse* of security, accompanied by often draconian practices of bodily regulation. Local mobility has been transformed by border controls and visa regimes that have materialised a previously largely invisible boundary.

The problem is not the presence of borders *per se* but their unequal and ineffective functioning: the fact that borders 'dissolve' to those in positions of stately power, even as they appear in the form of monstrous and irrational limit-points to many who live in their midst.

To illustrate, I turn to another fieldwork incident, which I recorded in May 2003 in the town of Kara-Suu at the eastern end of the Ferghana valley, where a 12-metre wide canal marks the boundary between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Solih, an Uzbek who lives on the Kyrgyzstan bank of the canal, made a living at that time by transporting people and goods across the canal-border on a large inflatable tyre [*ballonchik*]. He saw his (technically illegal) job as a risky but eminently ethical one: an informal route for maintaining cross-border trade at a time when the main passenger bridge between Kyrgyzstani Kara-Suu and its smaller Uzbekistani neighbour had been dismantled, making access to the large wholesale bazaar on the Kyrgyz side fraught with difficulties for citizens of Uzbekistan.[xcii] (See Figure 2).

Like Zulaikho, Solih used an account of a disrupted cross-border funeral party to illustrate the obstacles that the border closure had caused to maintaining expected practices of kinship. His narrative began with a conventional contrast between the fates of those 'who pay' and those who don't:

> For instance, take my father… My father has a sister here, close to the big customs post. She died this year, just at the time they closed the bridge. Her relatives are on the Uzbek side, and we called them to the funeral. And there, the soldiers, all those lads standing there - they wouldn't let them through. You see, who do they let through? Those who give money, who pay. Up to three thousand [Kyrgyz som] they can make in a day.[xciii] All those… how to say… soldiers, they are just there on the crossing waiting for people. They're just making money [*prosto dengi delaiut*], that's all.

Solih's narrative seemed to suggest that it was all just a matter of 'money'. Yet when I pressed him on this his answer was revealing. The real problem was not so much people paying their way across – after all, he joked, he too, paid his 'due' [*dolia*] to make sure that his small role in the cross-border economy would not be disrupted by the border guards who monitor this section of canal. The problem, rather, was the way in which appeals to a higher stately authority were invoked to make the border completely 'invisible' to certain categories of people. Solih explained to me in the following way:

You see, the kind of guy who sits wearing a tie[xciv] -- he needs to get somewhere? There! On the car, on the roof, they attach a siren, they put a flashing light, and he can get about just where he likes. And ordinary people [*prostoi narod*], what about them? Even on foot they can't get through! That's humane, is it? […] It's like a joke [*kak anekdot poluchaetsia*].

The real threat, in other words, does not lie in the low-level bribe-giving that serves to lubricate social relations in an area of ruptured movement. It derives, rather, from the way that 'stately authority' gets invoked to override and ignore the instructions of those who ought to be upholding the 'law' at the border: the state 'trumping' the state. Solih was alert to the performative dimensions of such a claim. His imitation of the portly, tie-wearing official and his image of the removable siren (a symbol, *par excellence,* of the way that stately authority is able to be turned on and off for personal gain) emphasised the arbitrary nature of cross-border regulation, which disappeared entirely for those successfully able to 'play' the state. As though to reinforce this absurd inequality of movement, Solih then turned from individual law-subverting officials to the fate of the country as a whole:

> And what's their problem with us? Are they scared of Kirgiziia, or something?! There's nothing to be scared of from Kirgiziia. Now, for example, with Afghanistan, earlier, there used to be a border [*ranshe u nikh byla granitsa*]. But now they've re-…, re-built bridges, something like eighteen bridges to Afghanistan.[xcv]
>
> [MR] And here..?
>
> Here it's the opposite. Here they are taking them away. We're probably 'better' than Afghans?! They probably think so!

Solih's discursive linkage of the funeral party, the official who overrides the law, and Uzbekistan's opening of the 'wrong' bridges point to the real anxiety that stories of objects-in-motion serve to index. As for Zulaikho, the problem is not just that borders are closed, but that they have come to crystallise in the wrong place, between the wrong people, and in so doing have placed a considerable strain on cross-border sociality. Border controls here are a *performance,* Solih suggests (one that makes him hesitant even about according the 'lads on the bridge' the status of 'soldier'), because if ensuring protection from flows of drugs, terrorists and weapons were really the objective, why were 'something like eighteen bridges' to Afghanistan opened in the preceding few months? The narrative structure hints at the reason: it is the very vulnerability of the state to corruption from high-ranking officials, who appeal to stately authority for personal gain, which fosters this paradoxical situation. For Solih this is captured in the 'joke-worthy' predicament that whilst relations here, between Uzbeks on two sides of a canal, have been disrupted by the vagaries of state control, Afghans (the archetypal 'other' of popular Uzbek discourse, whose movement 'ought' to be controlled) have had multiple bridges opened up to them. It is the weakness of the state itself that the cynical siren-wearing, state-invoking, border-crossing official comes to symbolise.

**Conclusion: of crystallizing borders and solid states**

It is in this context, I believe, that we can return to the significance of the corpse in popular borderland discourse. Dead bodies, of course, are very material symbols of social connection, and obstacles in getting them across borders thus speak powerfully of ruptured relationships and severed kinship ties. Yet in a setting where daily life reminds that borders are *unequally* permeable, and where local talk plays on, magnifies, and dramatises this contingency, it is the very instability of corpses that makes them such powerful symbolic vehicles. For a corpse is, on the one hand, the ultimate 'passive object'. It must be moved and located, and quite *how* it is emplaced (as deceased relative to whom respect must be paid, as commodity [*tovar*] that can be let through the border for the appropriate 'fee', or as potentially contaminating threat to public health that must be subject to administrative ban) dramatises the variable, and profoundly unequal opportunities that exist for crossing state borders and transporting goods across them.

On the other hand, however, for all its materiality the corpse is also a very spectral, absent kind of presence. As Michael Taussig puts it, in a work alert to the 'sacred power' of the dead in fostering fantasies for the state, the corpse is 'charged like a spring compressed', collapsing into itself competing temporalities and rationalities (Taussig 1997: 167). Its ambiguous state raises questions that normally lie just below the surface of everyday consciousness, in the work of rumour, joke and fantasy: questions about the ultimate authority of the 'law'; about the coherence and stability – or contingency and vulnerability – of the state itself. Questions, above all, about the tense, ambivalent relationship between boundedness and connectedness, sovereignty and dependence. I have argued in this article that the particular social, geographical and economic realities of the Ferghana valley in the early new-century gave unusual urgency to these questions, making the 'double bind' of which

the Comaroffs write not just a theoretical abstraction, but a dilemma on which daily life invites reflection. Work patterns, lived geographies, landscape itself recall the attempts by the state to assert its sovereignty over space – just as they bring to mind the real fact of profound social, spatial and economic interdependence. Dead bodies, like disappearing gold bars, mythic, tie-wearing officials and state cars that slip unchecked through borders are, I have suggested, one element in the economy of signs through which such shifts get navigated. As a dramatically unstable kind of object – here and not here, sacred yet polluting – corpses may be particularly well-suited to enabling such paradoxes to be apprehended. By exploring how they are used to navigate new forms of (dis-)connection, we may be better positioned to grasp the ambivalence of 'independence' and its ruptures in the Ferghana valley.

## Notes

[lxxiii] This article is based on research conducted on both sides of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border in the Batken and Sokh *raions* [districts] of the Ferghana valley in May 2003, and from March 2004 to September 2005, supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Portions of the argument developed here have been presented in Cambridge, Madison and Ann Arbor. I am particularly grateful to Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, Maja Petrović and John Heathershaw for insights and conversation that have helped to shape the argument here. All names of informants have been changed.

[lxxiv] It is indicative, for instance, that Max Weber, in his much-cited definition of the state as 'a human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of the legitimate physical violence within a certain territory' (1994 [1919]: 310-311), did not problematise the concept of 'territory', even as he subjected the other dependent concepts of 'force' and 'legitimacy' to rigorous analytical critique. On the 'pervasive taken-for-grantedness of territoriality among most twentieth-century social theorists', see Brenner, Jones and MacLeod (2003: 2); Agnew and Corbridge (1995: 78-100).

[lxxv] On the impact of increased border controls in the Ferghana valley on cross-border relations, see Megoran (2002: 212-256), Dolina Mira (2004), Reeves (2005:73-78).

[lxxvi] Thus, for instance, the Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR declared on October 14th 1924 at the start of the national-territorial delimitation that '[t]he peoples of Turkestan, who formerly under Tsarist rule existed as powerless colonial slaves [*bespravnykh kolonial'nykh rabov*],

and who today are free and equal, are building their states through the strengths of their workers. Having achieved national liberation [*natsional'nogo osvobozhdeniia*], and strengthened the foundations of workers' and peasants' power, unswervingly developing and broadening their cultural and economic construction, the peoples of Turkestan have reached a condition that will allow them to transform the Autonomous Turkestan Soviet Socialist Republic into mono-ethnic-national states [*v gosudarstva natsional'no-odnorodnye*]'. Nationhood, in this rendering, was a historical achievement, not an enduring historical fact (Dzhumanaliev 2003: 185-6).

[lxxvii] For historical analysis of the debates surrounding the territorial delimitation of Central Asia, see Masov (1991), Koichiev (2001), Haugen (2003), Hirsch (2005: 160-186).

[lxxviii] For instance, the village of Kök-Tash, administratively part of Kyrgyzstan, contains within it a Tajik neighbourhood [*mahalla*], Somonion, which is administratively part of the neighbouring Tajik republic. The two schools in the village, 300 metres apart, operate on different time-zones and celebrate different independence days, though no-one in the village is able to say with any confidence where the territorial border lies – 'if it's a Tajik house, then it is probably Tajikistan'.

[lxxix] It is often assumed (mistakenly) that enclaves were deliberately drawn during the 1920s as part of a policy of 'divide and rule' in order to ensure dependence upon Moscow (see, e.g., Slim 2002). The historical record suggests that the course of events was more complex. Early Soviet maps indicate a more contiguous border in the Ferghana valley than is presently the case. Whyte (2001) argues on the basis of early Soviet maps that today's enclaves in southern Kyrgyzstan (Vorukh, Sokh and Shahimardan) arose as a result of internal boundary movements from the 1930s onwards – they were not originally drawn as such. See also Koichiev (2001: 88-9) and Belavin (1928) for illustrations of the original Ferghana valley borders.

[lxxx] On the normative acts regulating cross-border movement, see Ismailov et al (2005); Kiutin (2006).

[lxxxi] On the significance of territorial securitisation to nation-building projects in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, see Megoran (2002). On declining cross-border trade since 1999, see Megoran, Raballand and Bouyjou (2005).

[lxxxii] For summaries and assessments, see ICG (2002), Slim (2002), Passon and Temirkulov (2004), Musubaeva and Moldosheva (2005).

[lxxxiii] For an overview of challenges to regional cooperation, see Linn (2005).

[lxxxiv] Russian roubles, although not formal tender in Central Asia, are often the most 'inter-convertible' of currencies in this part of the Ferghana valley. Rates of labour migration to the bazaars and building sites of Russia are such that even women and children who have never been to Russia will often use the Russian rouble as a more 'stable' currency than the currency of their own state.

[lxxxv] It is a striking indication of just how socially mediated is the evaluation of commodities and their provenance that in Kyrgyzstan, Turkish goods, even those sold in market stalls, are seen as being of high quality. In the largest consumer market in Bishkek, which is divided into 'European' and 'Asian' sections, the Turkish goods are located firmly in the European section.

[lxxxvi] Three indicative examples of news stories about borders 'letting the wrong things through' that circulated (in modified, rumour-fed way) during my period of research involved Gulnora Karimova, the daughter of the Uzbek president, whisking 'suitcases of money' to the Middle East for a spending spree (see, e.g. Muhammed-Mamatov 2003); military vehicles being used to transport opium from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Russia (Knox 2004), and members of the Akaev 'clan' being involved in the illegal transportation of large quantities of Kyrgyz gold to Swiss bank vaults (Sydykova 1997 and 2003: 258-304). After the Kyrgyz 'revolution' that overthrew President Akaev in March 2005, the search for smuggled gold and money moved from the realm of gossip and opposition newspaper-talk to state television news. The drama continues to this day. See, for a recent example, Kyrgyzskoe zoloto (2005).

[lxxxvii] See, for instance, the striking and provocative photo montage on the front page of Bishkek's main Russian-language newspaper at the height of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border crisis, in late 1999, with the sub-line 'at the border they undress you till you are naked just to look at your face' – a comment, and accompanying image that allude to the ethnic, rather than legal, basis for everyday border discrimination (Khamidov 1999: 1).

[lxxxviii] Such stories figured, I dare say, on all sides of the border, though the versions I heard most often were narrated by Tajik men from Sokh during the winter social gatherings [chilu] of neighbourhood men. Typically referring to women from nearby Sokh mahallas who had been working as hired day labourers [mardikor] on the fields of wealthier

Kyrgyz farmers across the border, these accounts fused ethnic and sexual slurs with remarks about the fragility of law on the Kyrgyz side to articulate a categorical social boundary between 'us' and 'them'.

[lxxxix] A reference to the fact that although Sokh is administratively part of Uzbekistan, the population identifies itself overwhelmingly as Tajik.

[xc] A reference to the fact that the region, although part of Uzbekistan, was predominantly inhabited by Tajiks.

[xci] See, for instance, the formulations in Khaidarov's university textbook on the history of the Tajik people in the twentieth century (Khaidarov 2001: 126-8), or the school textbook on the contemporary history of Tajikistan (Jahonov and Tukhtaeva 2002: 27-8), which describes how during the delimitation of 1924, as a result of the actions of 'pan-Turkist' commissioners, 'all of the large Tajik towns […] went to the Uzbek republic'. Although some were later 'returned', as a result of the formation of a separate Tajik republic in 1929, 'the main centres of Tajik culture still remain outside Tajikistan in the territory of Uzbekistan and they continue to represent an object of territorial discord between these two nations (or republics)'.

[xcii] The closure of the bridge was ostensibly to protect against the spread of SARS from one republic to the other. It remained closed, however, far after this particular public health concern had subsided. Solih estimated that 10-15,000 people would previously have crossed from Uzbekistan to use the Kara-Suu bazaar. At the time of our interview, he would transport anywhere up to 100 passengers per day on the inflated tyre-tube.

21 Around $60 at the time of interview, roughly equal to the official average monthly salary.

[xciv] A reference to a state official, [*chinovnik*]. Dress (suits and ties) and size (big [*chong*] or fat [*semiz*]) were often used idiomatically to refer to state officials.

[xcv] A reference to Uzbekistan's (internationally pressured) decision in late 2001 to re-open a bridge with Afghanistan as part of the 'War on Terror'. The bridge had been closed since Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan over a decade earlier. I have found no evidence to suggest that there *are* in fact 'eighteen bridges' across the Uzbek-Afghan border, as Solih suggests. What is significant, of course, is his perception of multiple bridges having been opened, at the same time that restrictions on movement and trade across the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border were becoming more severe.

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**Figure 1:** The 'chess-board' border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (taken from Orto-Boz village, Kyrgyzstan. The cultivated land tacks back and forth between the jurisdictions of the two states.



**Figure 2**: Solih's ferry across the Sharikhan-Sai canal, Kara-Suu, 2003. Note the border fence on the far bank.