

## **CONTESTED IDENTITY: ENCOUNTERS WITH KAZAK DIASPORA RETURNING TO KAZAKSTAN**

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### **Introduction**

When the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia achieved independence in 1991, many observers expected social tensions and inter-ethnic clashes would soon unsettle the region. A highly multi-ethnic composition, a quasi-colonial experience of suppressed religion and identity combined with an extremely precarious economic situation seemed to offer a perfect breeding ground for conflicts. Fortunately, however, this has hitherto not been the case with the exception of the civil war in Tajikistan. In contrast to other areas of the former socialist world, ethnic relations have for the most part remained calm and all the states in question have carefully avoided making any claims to each others' territory.

The new state of Kazakhstan had been envisioned as being particularly fragile due to its multi-ethnic demographic character. After the end of the Second World War, Kazakhstan seemed to be the "most" international of all the Soviet Republics (Dave 2004). Hence, the government's decision shortly after independence to invite ethnic Kazaks from abroad to resettle within the new national borders seemed to confirm this image. This paper deals with some unexpected consequences of this policy. It presents a case of highly contested intra-ethnic differentiation and identity contestation. The relations between local Kazaks (who had lived in Kazakhstan throughout the Soviet period) and the so-called "repatriants", recent immigrants of the same ethnicity, are characterised by strong feelings of envy, mutual suspicion and prejudices. This differentiation goes far beyond a low level of social interaction, and has turned into a debate about the definition of genuine Kazakness. Thus, in contrast to many studies on ethnicity which follow Barth's (1969) seminal work, it is not the boundaries that will be dealt with but the content that they should encompass. I argue that the case of Kazak identity contestation revolves around the issue not of who a Kazak is, but how a Kazak should be.

Drawing on nationalism theories, one could argue that Kazaks of different provenance are in many ways not part of an imagined community (cf. Anderson 1983). They may believe themselves to be members of the same group, but they differ

substantially in their everyday practices of media usage and school education or in their consumption patterns. Thus, when faced with "really existing Kazaks", people are confronted with co-ethnics who do not share the same understanding of the world. Even more crucial than different perceptions of historical events or educational backgrounds are everyday norms of conduct that differ between the two groups in question. This leads not only to misunderstandings, but also to reciprocal claims that the others are not behaving like proper Kazaks. Instead of an ethnic reunion as intended by the government, the policy of repatriating ethnic Kazaks from abroad caused locals to think that it may be easier to get along with members of the other ethnic groups with whom they share a common history in the same state or republic than with the newcomers.

### **Kazak statehood and national identity**

Worldwide, the number of Kazaks is approximately 12 million. Of these, eight million reside in the state that bears their name, Kazakhstan. Another two million live in other parts of the former Soviet Union, mainly in border areas of Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation. Apart from this, the largest group with close to 1.5 million is settled in the People's Republic of China (cf. Benson & Svanberg 1988). In Mongolia, Kazaks account for the largest minority in the country with approximately 120,000 individuals. As in China they are settled primarily in the western parts of the country adjacent to Kazakhstan, where they often form the local majorities (cf. Finke 2004). Other countries with sizeable Kazak minorities are Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey. Some Kazaks, who have been living in Turkey since the 1950s, also moved to Germany, France and other western European states as part of the Turkish labour migration in the 1960s (cf. Svanberg 1989).

In fact, the dispersal of these diasporas is the result of historical events that began in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By then Kazaks had nominally accepted Russian vassalship in exchange for protection against repeated attacks by the western Mongolian Kalmyks. The repercussions, however, remained limited until the military and administrative penetration of the steppe by the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One effect was a gradual influx of Russian settlers who were granted

large tracks of the most fertile land, thus causing many Kazaks to move eastwards into Chinese territory in search of new grazing grounds. The situation continued to worsen and by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many Kazaks were extremely impoverished. The First World War brought fresh turmoil when the Tsarist government attempted to recruit the Muslim population for the Russian army. Hundreds of thousands of Kazaks fled to China again, while the number of people killed in the fighting and consecutive famines may have been even higher (cf. Olcott 1987; Pierce 1960).

In China the arrivals settled in the northern steppes of what is today the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, an area which had been depopulated after the defeat of the western Mongolian Jungar Empire in 1757 (cf. Olcott 1987; Benson & Svanberg 1988). Other Kazak diasporas stem from these groups. From the 1860s onwards, in their search for new pasture lands Kazaks started to move into western Mongolia, which had been equally depopulated with the near-extermination of the Jungars. They continued to cross the Chinese-Mongolian border until this became impossible in the 1950s (cf. Finke 2004). In the 1930s and 1940s bloody turmoil in many parts of Xinjiang and growing Chinese interference in local affairs caused other groups to flee south towards India. On their way the majority of them perished from frost, hunger, and hostile attacks. Only a small group survived, finally being accepted as refugees in Turkey (cf. Altay 1981; Svanberg 1989).

By that time, the situation in what is today Kazakstan had worsened still further. Animals were confiscated with the utmost ruthlessness as part of the forced settlement of nomads, and many herders responded by slaughtering their livestock. During the late 1920s and early 1930s almost 90 percent of the herds disappeared and an estimated 40 percent of the population (close to 1.5 million) died of starvation since the newly founded collectives were unable to provide them with a means of subsistence.<sup>xvii</sup> Hundreds of thousands again fled to China, wherever possible taking their remaining livestock with them. During the same period other Kazaks fled south towards Iran and Afghanistan. A few years later, in 1936, the Kazak Soviet Socialist Republic was established and the steppes became more firmly embedded into the new state structure (cf. Pierce 1960; Olcott 1987). In the following decades the majority of Kazaks increasingly came to an accommodation with the Soviet system and learned to take advantage of its benefits.

In 1991, when Kazakstan gained independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the diasporas abroad became an issue for state

policies. Besides political and economic challenges, a particular concern for the new state was its demographic composition. Due to the tremendous loss of life among Kazaks in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the ongoing immigration of European settlers, Kazakstan had been the only Soviet Republic in which the titular group accounted for less than 50 percent of the population.<sup>xviii</sup> By 1939 the proportion of Kazaks had declined to 30 percent. In later years their percentage started to increase again due to higher birth rates. In 1989, shortly before independence, Kazaks outnumbered Russians for the first time since 1926 but still accounted for less than 50 percent of the population. Since then the proportion of Kazaks has further increased due to the out-migration of millions of Europeans, in particular Russians and Germans responding to deteriorating living standards in Kazakstan and the opportunity to return to a “native homeland”. According to recent estimations, Kazaks became an absolute majority in 1997 (see Table 1).

At the same time, a steady process of Kazakisation has begun. As in all newly independent Central Asian states, the search for national symbols and heroes is in full swing. The renaming of countless towns, villages, and streets is one visible expression of this. Within this scenario a particular place was assigned to Kazaks abroad, officially referred to as “diasporas”, who gained the status of “repatriates” (oralman in Kazak) after their migration to Kazakstan (cf. Mendikulova 1998; Diener 2005). There is little doubt that their invitation to resettle was primarily intended to increase the percentage of ethnic Kazaks. Most of them were settled in the Northern provinces where Kazaks form a minority, sometimes less than 20 percent of the population. A second role which it was envisioned they would play was to support the revival of traditional Kazak culture, since this was said to be better preserved among the diasporas. A superior knowledge of the Kazak language and familiarity with Islam are the criteria most commonly cited in this context. The migrants were thus expected to play a key role in the process of nation building.

So far, the resonance among the diasporas has been somewhat disappointing for the government. Around 200,000 Kazaks had arrived by 2002, the vast majority of them coming from Mongolia and Uzbekistan. Smaller groups came from China, Turkey, and Iran. Their integration proved to be more difficult than expected. The economic and social conditions facing the migrants in Kazakstan were often worse than those they had left behind. The government found it difficult to provide them with the jobs and homes they had been promised.

Aggravating the already strained economic circumstances was the fact that most of them had only a poor knowledge of Russian, still the dominant language in everyday life in Kazakhstan. Many of the migrants, especially those from Mongolia, decided to return. Those who remained often sought refuge in other parts of the country populated primarily by Kazaks (cf. Finke 1999 & 2004; Diener 2005).

### **The village of Aq Zhol: A Soviet model enterprise**

The village of Aq Zhol is one of the major settlements of *oralman* in south-eastern Kazakhstan. Located some 120 km to the east of the former capital Almaty, irrigated agriculture provides the basis for most people's livelihood in the region. Aq Zhol was built as a model village in 1984 with the aim of establishing a small town in order to demonstrate to the world that in the developed socialist system there were no differences between urban and rural lifestyles. All the houses were exceptionally well equipped with infrastructure and had electricity, central heating and hot running water. Houses were constructed according to different architectural styles attributed to various ethnic groups. A second aim of the village was to exemplify the multi-national character of the Soviet system. Like Kazakhstan in general, Aq Zhol was to become a parable for harmonious inter-ethnic relations. For this purpose villagers were recruited from all over the Soviet Union, and in its heyday the population included Kazaks from all parts of Kazakhstan as well as Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, Koreans, Moldavians, Azeri and others. During the second half of the 1980s there were close to 400 families residing in the village. In spite of its small population Aq Zhol had its own separate state farm, a *sovkhos*. Its economy was based on the production of grain and tobacco, on the one hand, and a large dairy farm, on the other. The state farm was honoured several times as a prime producer of milk and tobacco.

After Kazakhstan became independent economic reforms were launched with the aim of fundamentally changing people's lives. The implementation of privatisation was, however, left largely to the individual state or collective farms and thus differed widely across the country. In many cases it was delayed for several years, leaving former managers sufficient time to take out much of the moveable property such as livestock and machinery. As in most of Kazakhstan, land in Aq Zhol was redistributed equally per head. What was left of the livestock was often promptly slaughtered or sold on very poor business terms because people had no other way to make a living.

The economic collapse had special consequences for a village like Aq Zhol, designed as

a model village in the middle of a desert steppe and more dependent than others on infrastructural inputs. Since the early 1990s running water has been cut off and electricity, heating and public transport are at best irregular. The kindergarten, public bath, and other facilities have been closed. As a result the inhabitants began to leave the village. They had received land on lease but felt unable to make proper use of it due to high taxes and the lack of infrastructural support. Most of those who came from other republics or distant provinces within Kazakhstan returned to their home regions or moved to Almaty as they had only loose ties within the village. In 1996 only 150 of the formerly 400 families remained, mainly Kazaks who originated from neighbouring villages and districts. The others tried to sell their houses before leaving, but due to excess supply prices were very low or the market almost non-existent. In order to make at least some money the owners began to tear apart their houses and sell the parts. Others destroyed or damaged the empty houses of their neighbours, either selling the materials or using them for their own ends. A period of decay set in, and by the mid-1990s the former model village had almost turned into a ghost town.

### **The oralman: Migration, motives and the economic situation**

At this time the first wave of *oralman* came to Aq Zhol. They had previously lived in Mongolia, Iran and Uzbekistan, and after spending some years in Ak Zhol all of them left again for various reasons. Subsequently, in 1997, a new group of *oralman* arrived in Aq Zhol, this time from the provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang in the People's Republic of China. Both of these populations were descendants of the Kazaks who had left the territory of the contemporary state in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many of them left Xinjiang, ending up in Mongolia, Gansu, and Turkey (cf. Sancak & Finke 2005). In Gansu some 4,000 Kazaks had been settled since the 1940s in the district of Aqsay close to the borders with Xinjiang and Tibet, an extremely arid and cold mountain region best suited to nomadic livestock rearing.

Once the reform process in China reached the western provinces in the early 1980s living conditions improved remarkably. Pastoralists seem to have particularly benefited from this upturn. All those interviewed in Aq Zhol reported owning livestock holdings of 500 or more animals before their arrival. The situation in Xinjiang is described as having been superior to that in Ak Zhol because the Kazaks there benefited from the developed infrastructure and new trade relations across the formerly closed border. Those Kazaks who were

employed by the state or in local industry or who were active as small-scale entrepreneurs were also quite positive about their economic situation in China.

In spite of this, in the early 1990s people started to make plans for leaving China. Asked about their motives, they first cited Kazakhstan's new independence and their desire to "return to the native homeland". Other reasons mentioned included health problems due to the high altitude in the Gansu region, which was thought to cause heart, lung and other kinds of diseases. Many also mentioned the proximity of the Chinese nuclear testing ground at Lop Nor, situated some 300 km away from their settlement. Political and economic motivations, although rarely mentioned, were apparently of great importance. In interviews people balanced the present hardships against their future prospects and hopes. The restriction of birth rates in China – two or three children in the case of minorities – was mentioned by most interviewees and seen as endangering the future of the entire community. What is more, while Kazakhstan may be facing serious economic problems at the moment, the future is considered to be relatively bright because of the sheer space available to the country. According to my informants, there is no land left in China on which to expand (e.g. if one had more than one son and wanted to acquire property for them).

Leaving China was described as being very difficult because there is no mutual agreement between the two states (as is the case for Mongolia or Uzbekistan). Hence, people came as individuals and not on a quota system intended to assist with the organisation of returnees and provide financial aid. The exit permit was usually obtained only after several years and by no means all applicants were granted permission to leave. Several families had to leave some members, i.e. married children, behind. Upon departure the Kazaks were allowed to sell their moveable and non-moveable property such as livestock and houses. State employees received their contributions paid into pension funds. In addition, as all migrants confirmed, they were transported free of charge to the Kazakhstan border. This favourable treatment was greatly appreciated and often mentioned during the interviews, especially in contrast to the difficulties experienced in Kazakhstan. On their arrival at the border the concessions made by the Chinese state gave way to the rudeness and corruption for which officials in Kazakhstan have gained a sorry reputation in recent years. Migrants not only had to pay for their onward transport but were also charged exorbitant amounts of money by private transportation owners (often in collaboration

with custom officers). While the very first arrivals received some money or other support, the majority claim not to have been given anything.

We came here after the president invited all Kazaks to join their native country and promised us houses, work, and money. But we did not receive anything. Rather, they wanted us to pay 1,000 dollars for transport, which should have cost like 100 or 200. So, I asked the customs officer: Are you a real Kazak? Do you have any national feeling in your heart? We came here because Nazarbayev had called on us and you are asking 1,000 dollars? (Orinbay, 56-year-old Kazak man from Xinjiang)

Local officials are equally blamed by the migrants for being of very little help to them. It often takes years and endless documents and bureaucracy (as well as substantial side-payments) to obtain a Kazakhstan passport or get any other paperwork done. Local Kazaks, on the other hand, doubt the willingness of the migrants to acquire citizenship since they will then have to give up their Chinese passport – thereby forfeiting their ability to engage in cross-border trade as well as the option to return if things should not go their way.

#### **Patterns of interaction between locals and oralman**

On the whole, Kazaks from China who ended up in Aq Zhol find that the place meets their needs: it has sufficient pasture areas and moderate enough temperatures to make livestock rearing a promising option, and it is in the vicinity of the markets of Almaty. Furthermore, there is a large stock of empty and cheap housing which provides space for all those willing to come and is well suited to their economic and social needs.

In the beginning the villagers and authorities in Aq Zhol were equally pleased about the newcomers, who were expected to stop the process of decay. Soon, however, things started to change. One of the reasons for this change had to do with the population composition of the village. Its initial multi-ethnic character had already been lost earlier. The arrival of oralman heralded a new social divide which would turn out to be much more significant than the previous one. Today, the village is almost exclusively Kazak, roughly two-thirds locals and one-third oralman. Between 1997 and 1999 approximately 70 families arrived in Aq Zhol. Of these, 45 came from Gansu, some 20 from Xinjiang, and a few from the Kazak diaspora in Turkey. The latter are in fact related to the groups from Gansu and some met family members here for the first time in their lives. Together with the remaining locals, the

village population is thus approaching 230 families again.

While relations with members of other ethnic groups are smooth on all accounts, the social distance between local Kazaks and migrants (oralman) is quite visible and not concealed by anyone. The oralman tend to live in clusters within the village. Some streets have become almost exclusively inhabited by newcomers, while others are still in the hands of locals. It was also stated that people tried to stay close together, and as long as there were enough houses available the choice was theirs. Many of those who came later had their houses as well as livestock and other property bought in advance by relatives. This was, for example, true of most of the oralman from Turkey.

During our stay in the village people would sometimes walk on the streets in small groups, but these were never mixed. Locals and migrants eyed each other upon passing with suspicion and hardly greeted one another, which is quite unusual behaviour in a rural Central Asian setting. People tried to restrict contact with the others to a minimum both in public and private. Most ceremonies such as weddings and circumcisions were conducted separately. Mixed marriages have not, to my knowledge, taken place as yet. This lack of interaction frequently gave rise to mutual irritation. Funerals were a special case. According to the traditional Kazak understanding, all people from the same village should express their condolences to the family of the deceased. In Aq Zhol, however, each side avoided visiting the other's home. During our stay in 1999 an elder oralman had died and the whole migrant community as well as relatives and friends from Almaty and other places had gathered in his home. From among the locals only the immediate neighbours came to pay their respects – something which was noted with strong disapproval by the oralman community.

This was fuelled by the following incident: the migrants refused to bury their dead in the existing cemetery of Aq Zhol because a long time ago a Russian had also been laid to rest in the graveyard. The migrants therefore established a separate cemetery, which in turn the locals perceived as being very offensive – having two cemeteries for 'different' Kazaks. It was one of the prime examples cited by both sides to explain why it was so difficult to deal with the others. For the locals, it demonstrated the conservative and arrogant attitude of the migrants. For the oralman, it was yet another indication that the locals had given up everything that is central to the Kazak culture and way of life by burying their dead with non-Muslims.

Nevertheless, the arrival of oralman from China initiated a partial economic recovery. Not only did they buy houses and renovate them (in this way also contributing to a renewed rise in prices), they were also considered to be more industrious and entrepreneurial. Following the oralman, several investors also showed up in the village. Among other things, they set up two wheat mills, opened shops and tried to reactivate the nearby sanatorium. This kind of entrepreneurship is extremely unusual in Kazakhstan and must be seen in the context of the arrival of the migrants: most of the investors are either Chinese citizens or of Chinese ethnicity, or both. The machinery for the mills had in fact been brought from China, as were the other tools (cf. Sancak & Finke 2005). The savings brought from China play an important role in the migrants' investment power, but they hesitate to spend them for consumption or to pay bribes. Some told us that their savings had been exhausted during the first few years in Kazakhstan because of livestock theft in their previous locations and their consequent move to Aq Zhol. The locals, however, doubt this and accuse the migrants of greediness, claiming that they still have substantial savings hidden "under their cushions". All the villagers, however, agree on the poor state of politics in Kazakhstan as far as taxes, the lack of marketing opportunities and corruption are concerned. In adjusting to their new economic situation the migrants were not only able to draw on 20 years of experience with market-like systems in China, they also benefited from a greater degree of cohesion and mutual trust within their community in the former place of residence. The migrants have very tight-knit networks among themselves, building on genealogical and affinal relationships, some of which were created only after their arrival in Kazakhstan. During critical periods of the year, such as seeding and harvesting, families pool their labour force to cultivate fields in quick succession. This is not the case among locals, who have only very loose networks within the village.

#### *Negotiating Kazakness*

The low degree of mutual interaction within the village goes hand-in-hand with strong mutual prejudices. To some degree these are the outcome of successive misunderstandings that arose in their interactions with each other. The two parallel cultures – if we can refer to them this way – not only different ways of expressing themselves and their interests but were also often unable to communicate the behaviour expected in a given situation. This led to feelings of insecurity when they encountered each other and exacerbated the already existing trend towards avoidance. Each side held the other responsible for this:

We Kazaks are generous and hospitable. If you approach the house of a Kazak and start to talk with him, he will inevitably invite you inside. He will serve you tea and give you food. This is not the case with the locals here. You come to their house. You stand at their garden fence and talk to them. But they do not invite you to come in!  
(*Beysen, a 45-year-old oralman*)

An almost identical remark was made by a local Kazak, this time referring to the misbehaviour of the migrants. Hospitality is a trait which is considered very central to the Kazak character. A frequently heard phrase among all – local as well as migrant – Kazaks is that one can travel all the way from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border and beyond without any money because one will always meet a Kazak who will offer accommodation and food. After some time these mutual misinterpretations and uncertainties came to be the “custom”; now they are not only taken for granted but are even deliberate because neither side expects or wishes to be invited. Since the others are seen as being non-hospitable, there is no need to invite them to one’s own place either.

What these prejudices and misunderstandings gave rise to is a debate over what it means to be a Kazak. This may be defined in different ways and in each case one group will be closer to the default image. In other words, the outcome of such a dispute is not neutral and each side tries to influence it in a way that will make them look the better match. Hospitality and honesty rank very prominently for both groups and are commonly used to differentiate Kazaks from other ethnic groups in the region such as Russians or Uygurs. Other criteria, however, are less unambiguous and have become the object of intense contestation. The major accusation voiced by migrants against the locals is that they are Russified (“oris bop ketti”; literally: they became Russians). This is substantiated first of all by their ignorance of traditional culture and their poor mastery of the Kazak language. During Soviet times Kazakstan had become the republic where Russian influence penetrated most deeply into every aspect of social life. In the cities many Kazaks were hardly able to speak their native language at all, and even in the countryside the mixing with the Russian language was quite far advanced (Fierman 1998). Many of the locals acknowledged that even in the villages Russian was spoken very widely before 1991. Children had to be sent to a Russian school in order to enhance their prospects. This state of affairs has changed since independence but many urban Kazaks are still more fluent in Russian, which also dominates the media. As many of them reported, for the migrants who are hardly able to read Cyrillic this came as an early

shock when they arrived. It also makes life difficult for them as soon as they leave the village.

A variable of equal significance is religion. The locals, so it is generally claimed, have more or less abandoned the Muslim faith and behave like “Russians”. The consumption of alcohol and the neglect of fundamental religious prescriptions such as praying or fasting are key issues in this respect. Nominally, all Kazaks are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafite tradition (except for a few Christian converts in recent years), although it has always been claimed that Islamisation was of a relatively late and superficial character (cf. Krader 1966). Traditionally, there had been few mosques in the steppes and these had been closed down in Soviet times. The practice of religion was severely restricted, something which seems to have had a much more profound impact on Kazak society in the Soviet Union than it had in China. The migrants from Gansu, for instance, drink alcohol very rarely; even wedding parties were free of vodka. It became an important symbol, however, as an identity marker between locals and oralman. For the latter, it underlines a feeling of purity and superiority that allows them to demand a central place in village life. As an external expression of this, they converted an old café into a mosque.

A major disappointment for the migrants was the fact that the locals showed no interest in the traditional Kazak handicrafts that they had brought with them all the way from China. Handmade felt carpets and decorated chests, they had heard, were difficult to find in Kazakstan. The locals, however, are fonder of Russian-style furniture and factory-made tapestries. In the eyes of the migrants this proves once again how far they have moved away from being “real Kazaks”. The oralman thus view themselves as the sole preservers of tradition, language, religion and handicrafts.

The argument of tradition and purity is countered with that of modernity and cosmopolitanism. The locals assert that they are “more civilised” and better educated. Superior hygiene and modern clothing are prime indicators of this. This is seen as a positive result of the very same Russian influence that the migrants identify as the source of cultural decay.

Russia is in Europe. Russians learned so many things from Europe and we lived with them together. This means we learned so many things from Russians, like civilisation and cleanliness. So, we also learned many things from Europe.  
(*Patima, 52-year-old local Kazak woman*)

From this perspective, openness towards the modern world as well as towards other cultures is a

fundamental trait of Kazakness and can also be seen in the willingness to allow other ethnic groups to settle in Kazakhstan.

We Kazaks are keng [*wide, open*]. We allow everyone to come here and settle down. We are as wide as the land, as the steppe. As long as we act this way, it will feed us all. (*Qadir, 62-year-old local Kazak man*)

Many of the above-mentioned prejudices are acknowledged by both sides. The locals do not deny that the influence of Russian culture on their drinking habits as well as their language use and religious attitudes has been tremendous. The migrants, on the other hand, accept that they may have to catch up in terms of what both groups call “civilisation”. The question, however, is whether traditionalism or modernity – when balanced against each other – constitutes the prime criterion for being a “proper Kazak”. For the migrants, the emphasis on their superior Kazakness has become a central part of their self-image and a means of self-defence in their position as newcomers. Locals, in contrast, view their closeness to Russian culture as part of their open outlook on the world, which they see as a fundamental Kazak trait. After 70 years of socialist cohabitation they view the presence of others as a matter of fact and deny the migrants any rights that would conflict with those of others.<sup>xciix</sup>

The dispute over appropriate behaviour and real Kazakness does not, however, entail a mutual denial of belonging to the same group. The notion of Kazak ethnicity is very much tied to ideas of genealogies and blood relations, which are reflected in a kinship system built on patrilineal clans and lineages. There can never be any serious doubt that someone whose father is a Kazak will also be a Kazak, whether or not they speak the language or exhibit seemingly uncorrelated behaviour. In fact, this has made it so difficult for both sides to accept the cultural and social differences. Kazakness is believed to have a quasi-biological substance such that people assume there must be something wrong with others who do not behave “properly”.

### **Aq Zhol in 2002**

As mentioned above, the arrival of the oralman was initially welcomed by most of the locals. What is more, in spite of the social distance and mutual prejudices there is still a sense that the village might be even worse off without them. The economic and physical decay has been stopped and to some degree new perspectives have emerged. At least some job opportunities were created, which is more than most Kazak villages can claim for themselves. On the other hand, people became more and more

annoyed by the constant complaints made by the oralman about the state in Kazakhstan.

In 2002 the migrants were still deeply disappointed about both the government and local society. Corruption seemed omnipresent and laws appeared to exist only on paper. They hesitated, however, to call their decision a mistake and continued to hope for a better future for their children – the opportunity to grow up in a country that they can call their own, without fear of assimilation, and with sufficient land to expand on. The lack of land in China and strict birth control policies were mentioned as important factors for leaving China. They also shared with the locals some hope that the future of Aq Zhol might be brighter than that of other villages in the region.

By that time, expectations and tensions had cooled somewhat. Several families from Turkey had arrived and were prominent in the establishment of the village mosque. The families from Turkey whom I interviewed in 2002 described a feeling of “sitting on a fence”. Personally, they felt more attached to their relatives from China, but they shared the locals’ judgements about their low “standard of civilisation”. The elders were driven by an almost missionary vision of reviving the importance of religion in Kazakhstan. The younger generation, however, is highly Turkified and experienced their new home as anything but a desperate place. The daughters-in-law, in particular, had joined the migration only reluctantly. In relative terms, this group of migrants had probably lost more than any of the others after living in one of the world’s largest metropolitan cities - something which they did not hesitate to express.

Other than that, relatively little migration had taken place. A few locals had left and some new families from Gansu or Xinjiang had arrived. Some of the locals voiced their broad understanding for the hardships that migrants had gone through, but they felt that they should stop complaining. Aq Zhol in 2002 was still anything but an idle place, but the situation was less tense. Interaction remained at a very low level, especially for those who had come later, and there had not yet been any marriages (or more precisely only one, by abduction, between an oralman and one of the Kyrgyz female workers). One of the key areas of dispute, namely the Muslim religion, had lost some of its intensity. By late 1999 construction of the mosque had been completed, and some of the locals had started to rethink their religious attitudes.

Yes, some of us started to pray once in a while. Actually, we stopped praying again. But after all we should. Let’s say it like this: we had a look around the corner to see what’s going on there,

but we didn't really make a move. (*Aygul, 47-year-old local Kazak woman*)

The decrease in tensions certainly had a lot to do with the ongoing economic recovery in Kazakhstan. Salaries had increased, new shops had opened and corruption had been reduced. Everyone described their current situation as much better than it was three years earlier and, even more importantly, this increased trust and confidence in the future – which also seemed to have a positive influence on mutual relations. The *oralman* learned, to some degree, how to “behave” in their new social world and how to get things done, but this did not improve their perception of the village, state or local population. Aq Zhol is still a deeply divided place with restricted mutual interaction, a split over perceptions of proper Kazakness, and locals who believe that Russians or Uygurs are far easier to get along with than migrants from one's own ethnic group.

### Conclusion

It would be difficult to see Aq Zhol as a typical or standard kind of Kazak village due to its particular history of being a fairly new centrally planned settlement and its recent population movements. The tensions described here between locals and *oralman*, however, seem to be characteristic of a more general pattern. According to some casual information obtained from *oralman* from Mongolia, it seems that they have had very similar experiences with local Kazaks (cf. Finke 2004). This case may also provide some insights into general processes of identity construction and patterns of inter-group relations in Central Asia. In the course of several decades Kazaks of different provenance developed partially different cultural and institutional patterns. As they now encounter each other, some have started to think that long-term common residence may be a better criterion for getting along than shared ethnicity. What distinguishes both groups and makes many local Kazaks feel more comfortable in dealing with Russians or Uygurs is the lack of a common history and the mutually internalized “rules of the game”. The Kazaks of different countries were in most respects not an “imagined community” in Anderson's sense. This is not only relevant on an abstract level of identification but also becomes apparent in everyday life. Yet the experience of a similar mode of socialisation, which enables local Kazaks from Aq Zhol to interact with Russians or Uygurs from Almaty or northern Kazakhstan, differentiates them from their co-ethnics from Gansu. This lack of established rules of interaction between locals and *oralman* creates social distance and mistrust.<sup>c</sup>

Ethnic as well as other social groups are not merely agglomerations of individual actors but entail systems of rules for interaction. Ultimately, they are built on the individual experience of others' behaviour. Mutual trust can be based on norms or ideas of fairness, but equally important are expectations concerning the strategies of other actors and the probability of their fulfilment – since this facilitates predictability in social life. Ethnic boundaries, then, are institutional frames that are constantly re-structured according to the diverging interests and experiences of the actors involved, in this case members of the same ethnic group with different concepts of Kazakness. Both the boundaries themselves and what is contained therein are the product of constant bargaining and (re-)negotiation. “Pure” or “superior” Kazakness can be regarded here as a cultural property that is keenly contested between locals and migrants. The struggle, therefore, is not who is a Kazak, but how a good Kazak should be.

It is not that the locals question the migrants' superior knowledge of the Kazak language and traditions. Rather, they view their own closeness to Russian culture as an indication of their open outlook on the world and “multi-cultural” attitudes, which in their view are central elements of Kazakness. In a similar way, the *oralman* do not deny their “backwardness”, but for them the stress on traditionalism becomes an important part of their self-image and the main criterion that makes them appear superior to the locals. Both sides thus have different cultural resources and each promotes those that put themselves in a better light. The issue of language is of particular importance in this context, partly because the migrants hardly speak any Russian – which hampers their access to resources – and therefore have a strong interest in discrediting its use in public. Since they experience themselves in a weaker position it is essential for them to portray themselves as “more authentic” and the locals as betraying the national heritage. In part, it is their respective bargaining power that will eventually determine will become the basic markers of Kazak ethnicity, which in turn will influence their respective status in society.

It is clear that this is not only a fight over status and prestige but also over economic resources. At this moment, access to land would not seem to be an issue because much of it is not used at all. Economic differences are, however, observed and attract some envy. The migrants, as mentioned, display greater entrepreneurship, which may be attributable in part to their longer experience with market-like structures in China as well as to the fact

of migration itself. They see themselves as confronted with a situation in which they cannot afford to sit and wait. At the same time, the experience of migration has generated confidence in “being able to make it” (cf. Sancak & Finke 2005).

State politics, obviously, play a highly prominent role in this scenario. It was initially the government that called the oralman to “come home” and promised them support. The disappointment of those who came is therefore understandable. Their ongoing complaints, however, have become a source of annoyance for the locals because they are perceived as also being directed against them (as a part of that state). On the other hand, official statements about the importance of the diasporas for the revival of national culture give the latter a strong argument. The locals, however, seem not to be really interested in this revival. Similarly, officials have not displayed any serious concern and the migrants do not feel appreciated for their “revivalist mission”. This results in a further distancing from Kazakstan society vis-à-vis China as a point of reference. Strong transnational connections had never existed between Kazaks of different countries, but today it seems that if these are to be established it will not be along ethnic lines – as is commonly expected. Rather than common Kazak ethnicity across boundaries, it is shared citizenship that shapes people’s networks.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The case study presented here is based on field research conducted jointly with Peter Finke in a village in south-eastern Kazakstan in the summer and autumn of 1999 followed by a return visit in 2002. Most of the data stem from participant observation and life histories collected among locals and migrants in the village. In addition, we mapped the village in order to study settlement patterns and conducted interviews with key informants such as the local mayor.

<sup>xcvii</sup> This figure does not include the victims of the Stalinist purges in the late 1930s, which wiped out a whole generation of Kazak intelligentsia (cf. Olcott 1987).

<sup>xcviii</sup> Besides Russians and Kazaks, Kazakstan officially hosted more than 140 ethnic groups including Ukrainians, Germans, Uzbeks, Uygurs, Tatars and Koreans. Some of these came voluntarily in search of land or employment, while others were deported by force during World War II.

<sup>xcix</sup> Both sides regard the migrants from Xinjiang as being closer to the locals and their notions of modernity than those from Gansu. This is attributed

to their higher level of education and greater degree of cleanliness and “civilisation”, which is nevertheless still rated as secondary to the locals. In everyday life, however, the Kazaks from Xinjiang feel closer to those from Gansu, with whom they share their disappointment about Kazakstan.

<sup>c</sup> Obviously, this is also a question of the time horizon. People believe that ultimately they will get used to each other. After all, the very concept of Kazakness is fundamentally a genealogical one. Judging from the fact that earlier “repatriates” who came back from China during the 1960s are still occasionally referred to as “Chinese” right up to the present day, this may take some years.

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**Table 1.** Major ethnic groups in Kazakstan, 1959–99

	1959 (%)	1970 (%)	1979 (%)	1989 (%)	1999 (%)
<b>Kazak</b>	30.0	32.6	36.0	40.1	53.4
<b>Russian</b>	42.7	42.4	40.8	37.4	29.9
<b>Ukrainian</b>	8.2	7.2	6.1	5.4	3.7
<b>Belorussian</b>	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.1	0.8
<b>German</b>	7.1	6.6	6.1	5.8	2.4
<b>Tatar</b>	2.1	2.2	2.1	2.0	1.7
<b>Uzbek</b>	1.5	1.7	1.8	2.0	2.5
<b>Uygur</b>	0.6	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.4
<b>Korean</b>	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7

*Source:* Dave (2004, p. 442).