

# CASCA

CENTRE FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES ON CENTRAL ASIA II

[Ed. Aida Aaly Alymbaeva]



FOOD AND IDENTITY  
IN CENTRAL ASIA

HALLE (SAALE) 2017

MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
**DEPARTMENT 'INTEGRATION AND CONFLICT'**  
FIELD NOTES AND RESEARCH PROJECTS XIX

MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
DEPARTMENT 'INTEGRATION AND CONFLICT'  
FIELD NOTES AND RESEARCH PROJECTS XIX  
CASCA – Centre for Anthropological Studies on Central Asia II:  
Food and Identity in Central Asia  
[http://www.eth.mpg.de/pubs/series\\_fieldnotes/vol0019.html](http://www.eth.mpg.de/pubs/series_fieldnotes/vol0019.html)

Published by Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale)  
P.O. Box 11 03 51  
D-06017 Halle/Saale (Germany)  
Phone +49 (0) 345 2927 0  
<http://www.eth.mpg.de>

ISSN 2193-987X

Editor: Aida Aaly Alymbaeva | Series Editor: Günther Schlee

Assisted by: Viktoria Zeng and Robert Dobsław

Cover Photo: How to eat *tandyr samsa* (Osh City, Kyrgyzstan), 2015

© Baktygul Karimova (U. Abdrashitov)

Printed 2017 by Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale)

© 2017 Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Series Editor's Preface (Günther Schlee) .....	iv
Foreword (Bettina Mann) .....	v
Introduction (Aida Aaly Alymbaeva) .....	vii

## MINORITIES' CUISINE AND DIFFERENTIATING PROCESSES IN MULTICULTURAL SETTINGS

Internationalism on the Table: Dining Ethnicity in One's Homeland Kazakhstan (Rita Sanders) .....	1
"We do not eat their stuff!" White Food and Identity in Inner Mongolia (Merle Schatz) .....	14
When Food Talks: Insights from Southern Kazakhstan (Indira Alibayeva) .....	21
Food as Marker of Identity in Chelpek, Kyrgyzstan (Aida Aaly Alymbaeva) .....	31
"The only organ which has nothing to do with politics is the stomach": Kyrgyz and Uzbeks Negotiate their Food as Markers of Identifications (Baktygul Karimova) .....	49
Eating and Body Practices among Contemporary Dungans in Kazakhstan (Soledad Jiménez-Tovar) .....	61

## SMALL AND BIG SCALE RITUAL FOOD SHARING

The Nexus of Cuisine and Social Life among Rural Uzbeks of the Ferghana Valley (Russell Zanca) .....	71
The Role of Food in Identification Process: Examples from Central Asia (Rano Turaeva) .....	93
The Ritual Economy of Bread and Women's Identity in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Louise Bechtold) .....	103
Sharing Food in Southern Tajikistan (Wolfgang Holzwarth) .....	117
Meat Distribution Rules and Significance of Radial Bone ( <i>kar zhilik</i> ) in Kyrgyz Traditional Knowledge (Amantour Japarov) .....	127

## 'TRADITION', CHANGE, AND 'INVENTION' OF FOOD HABITS

Changing Food Habits in Western Mongolia (Peter Finke) .....	141
The Career of a 'Healthy Drink' Aktyk in Today's Kyrgyzstan: Meanings and Uses of Tradition (Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka) .....	155

Index .....	171
Other Volumes in the Series .....	176
Book Publications .....	178

# SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

(GÜNTHER SCHLEE)

## ABOUT THE SERIES

This series of *Field Notes and Research Projects* does not aim to compete with high-impact, peer-reviewed books and journal articles, which are the main ambition of scholars seeking to publish their research. Rather, contributions to this series complement such publications. They serve a number of different purposes.

In recent decades, anthropological publications have often been purely discursive – that is, they have consisted only of words. Often, pictures, tables, and maps have not found their way into them. In this series, we want to devote more space to visual aspects of our data.

Data are often referred to in publications without being presented systematically. Here, we want to make the paths we take in proceeding from data to conclusions more transparent by devoting sufficient space to the documentation of data.

In addition to facilitating critical evaluation of our work by members of the scholarly community, stimulating comparative research within the institute and beyond, and providing citable references for books and articles in which only a limited amount of data can be presented, these volumes serve an important function in retaining connections to field sites and in maintaining the involvement of the people living there in the research process. Those who have helped us to collect data and provided us with information can be given these books and booklets as small tokens of our gratitude and as tangible evidence of their cooperation with us. When the results of our research are sown in the field, new discussions and fresh perspectives might sprout.

Especially in their electronic form, these volumes can also be used in the production of power points for teaching; and, as they are open-access and free of charge, they can serve an important public outreach function by arousing interest in our research among members of a wider audience.

# FOREWORD

(BETTINA MANN)

*Nobody, not even anthropologists or other researchers, can go without food, and it should be obvious that food is somehow part of any attempt to understand social life and relationships. (Coleman 2011:1)*

*Taking part in food sharing was one form of participant observation. Learning the etiquette of food consumption and ideas related to food offerings was a way of understanding culture and people beyond the special research topics the authors have pursued in their fields.*

(Alymbaeva in her introduction to this volume, p. viii)

The confrontation with a whole new and unknown universe of food, rules of hospitality and etiquette, taboos and dietary regimes can be one of the first challenges of the ethnographic encounter that takes place during fieldwork. It is a central element of participant observation and interaction with the people in the field. Even anthropologists require their daily bread – or functional equivalents – and it is usually necessary to adapt to the local culinary conditions. At the same time, commensality and food sharing are central parts of hospitality; they integrate the researcher as an accepted guest in the local social world and open up pathways for further communication and exchange. By incorporating local food, the researcher is bodily and socially incorporated in his/her field site, learning how eating and cooking is organized along the lines of gender, age, social hierarchies, and sharing practices.

What is the daily diet, where does the food come from, what social, economic, symbolic, and ritual contexts are alimentary practices embedded in, and how do food practices change over time? For many regions of the world, there is still even little knowledge regarding the basic question of what people eat. In recent decades, more and more ethnographic research has been dedicated to answering these questions. Whereas there is a growing body of empirical studies on foodways in European countries and to a lesser extent in Africa and some parts of Asia, systematic anthropological research on culinary cultures of Central Asia that considers the dimensions of time and space is still rare. The collection of fieldwork-based contributions presented in this volume therefore provides excellent insight into food and foodways of an ethnically diverse region which has historically been a cultural and social crossroad, exposed to Chinese, Iranian, Arabic, Indian, Mongol, Ottoman, and Russian influences and encompassing nomadic and sedentary lifestyles, and Islamic heritage and practices. Historical processes of diffusion, migration, trade, and economic and political change are reflected in food habits and preferences.

In addition to describing food items – colourfully depicted in numerous pictures – as part of the material culture, the authors point to the social functions of food in processes of identification. They show how food is used as identity marker in drawing group boundaries, and what role it plays in the context of hospitality and feasting. With its focus on food and identity the volume shows how certain dishes and rituals become a material and symbolic expression for ethnic or village identities in a multicultural setting and how ‘traditions’ are reinterpreted in the face of political restructuring and economic transitions. But the ethnographic insights presented here also demonstrate that processes of differentiation and appropriation often take place within the frame of a shared culinary idiom.

I hope that this collection of essays, which arose from projects that did not necessarily start out with food as a central research question, will stimulate not only further research and a deeper understanding of the historical processes underlying the culinary cultures and current food practices of Central Asia, but will also be an invitation to anthropologists working in other regions of the world to look on their own research through the lens of food. In the spirit of sharing and comparing of ethnographic data – one of the aims of the *Field Notes and Research Project Series* – this volume convincingly demonstrates that even ethnographic by-catch can give us food for thought and does not have to be returned to the open waters of neglect; instead, it can provide fruitful material for comparative thinking.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Coleman, Leo. 2011. ‘Introduction’, in Leo Coleman (ed.), *Food. Ethnographic Encounters*. Oxford/New York: Berg, pp. 1–16.

# INTRODUCTION

(AIDA AALY ALYMBAEVA)

The central theme of this volume is food and identity in Central Asia. Food is understood in a broad sense covering representations of food, cooking, serving and sharing the food, feasting and everyday food, as well as political economy of food. With this collection of notes from our fields we start to outline comparative patterns in food and foodways of peoples in Central Asia. The volume highlights the commonalities and diversities of Central Asian food and foodways conditioned by historical change and cultural exchange.

Early detailed descriptions of Central Asian food come from nineteenth century scholars, such as Nalivkin and Nalivkina (1886), which recently have been made accessible to the English speaking scholarly community via an English translation (e.g. chapter on food from Nalivkin and Nalivkina 2016).

A number of Soviet ethnographers have been describing food traditions and have been investigating into the correlation of ecology and food systems (see, for example, Abramzon 1971; Shaniyazov 1972; Zhukovskaia 1979). In some respect they have also been contributing to the ‘construction’ of Soviet nationalities. Some post-Soviet ethnographers continued the tradition of capturing ‘vanishing’ food traditions and contributing to the accounts of national and ethnic cuisine and hospitality (see, for example, Kochkunov 2010; Zununova and Nazarov 2011). Others attempt to study food and hospitality in the contemporary post-Soviet space from the perspective of tradition and modernity (Arutiunov and Voronina 2001, 2004).

Food of various regions of Central Asia has been described and studied, among others, by Dorje (1987) and Bamana (2011). Mack and Surina (2005) present a broad picture of food culture of Russia and Central Asia in its historical and regional contexts. Anthropological studies of post-socialist transformations in Eastern Europe and Russia through the lens of food, including the role of food practices in various types of identity is presented in a reader edited by Caldwell (2009). There is also a closer look at food and hospitality of particular locations as part of everyday life in Central Asia. Zanca (2003, 2007), for example, observes the influence of Soviet and post-Soviet transformations on life of Uzbeks via food and the larger political and social connections that food talks lead to. Michaels (2007) considers Kazakh hospitality as a way to understand the social values in connection with economic and gender relations in Kazakhstan. Cesàro (2007) describes Xinjiang Uighur food as an actively developing combination of Central Asian and Chinese cuisines.

It has been suggested to consider food and cooking as a means of communication. Levi-Strauss proposed to study local languages of food and how they translate the structure of a society ([1996] 2008: 43). Fischler developed

further this approach proposing to look at the ‘complex grammar and syntax’ of a meal as it were a ‘language’ (1988: 286). Murcott, too, adopts this approach, by viewing food as language that can be learned, and by looking at food as medium of communication that is ‘universally available, accessible, and, at some level, unavoidable’ (1996: 63–69). Keating (2000: 303) studies food sharing and language as sign systems expressing and producing ideas of inequality.

When we consider ethnography as a theory of description to explain social and cultural phenomena (Nader 2011), this collection of ethnographic descriptions and reflections on food and identity should serve to understand social life of Central Asia in its internal and wider connections. Coming back to the metaphor of food as a language, the authors contributing to the volume propose various ways of how local food cultures have ‘spoken’ to them on the relations between food and identity.

This volume suggests that inquiring on, and thinking of food in Central Asia is a way to understand other phenomena and social relations. Though for the majority of the authors food was not the main focus of their study, it was an unavoidable part of their experience in the field, pleasant with its taste and variety and sometimes also heavy due to its huge amount. Taking part in food sharing was one form of participant observation. Learning the etiquette of food consumption and ideas related to food offerings was a way of understanding culture and people beyond the special research topics the authors have pursued in their fields. Moreover, food is a topic that seems to be remote from politics or other sensitive issues but, still, through talking over and about food one can learn of what people may think about subjects which are otherwise not discussed publicly or inquired directly. The ethnographic descriptions open up a way to understand Central Asia with its regional commonalities of food cultures, its differences and particularities at each village and even every family. All of the contributors are illustrating their observations and reflections with their own photographic material.

The chapters of this volume are not arranged geographically or country-wise but thematically. Three different approaches can be discerned in the volume. One group of papers touches minorities’ cuisine and how food is being brought into differentiating processes in multicultural settings (Sanders, Schatz, Alibayeva, Alymbaeva, Karimova, Jiménez-Tovar). Another group deals with insights into small and big scale ritual food sharing and its preparation (Zanca, Turaeva, Bechtold, Holzwarth, Japarov), while yet another one focuses on the themes of ‘tradition’, change, and ‘invention’ of food habits in post-socialist times (Finke, Penkala-Gawęcka).

There are a number of other cross-cutting themes in this volume. The authors show that many aspects of social life can be analysed through careful attention to food and foodways, such as the contrast between rural and urban settings, hospitality and etiquette (Japarov, Zanca, Sanders), gender and



labour distribution (Bechtold, Turaeva, Zanca, Jiménez-Tovar), everyday life and festivity (Alibayeva, Bechtold), health and consumption (Penkala-Gawęcka, Jimenez-Tovar), ethnicity (Alymbaeva, Schatz), economy, and politics (Finke, Karimova).

The volume opens with Rita Sanders contribution, tracing the concept of ‘internationalism’ in the food sphere. Describing a dinner with a German family in Kazakhstan, Sanders points to ‘ethnic labelling’ of dishes, which she suggests to perceive as a heritage of the Soviet past. Sanders also considers some connections between food in local and larger contexts, where the taste and smell of food recall memories and feelings of survival, security and well-being.

Merle Schatz focuses on how people tend to highlight their differences in food in a space where people of different cultures live together and influence each other. In Inner Mongolia, where Mongols and Han Chinese live in close and long-term social and cultural interrelations, ‘white food’, that is dairy products, is conceived as a boundary marker. Mongols highly appreciate white food but Chinese relate it to notions of Mongol ‘barbarism’. In our days, the perception and consumption of milk products among Chinese seems to be changing, obviously inspired by ‘western’ ideas about health.

Indira Alibayeva presents her observations on a banquet in southern Kazakhstan where Kazakhs and Uzbeks live side by side. Drawing on statements of and descriptions among the guests, she shows how people attribute particular food preferences to ethnic difference in spite of common kinship or language.

Aida Aaly Alymbaeva shows that food and food sharing in Kyrgyzstan’s Chelpek village, which has been associated with the Kalmak minority, are very similar to those in nearby Kyrgyz villages. Yet there are three dishes that people of Chelpek consider to be specific for their village and serve as their markers of identity.

Baktygul Karimova explores how ‘ethnic food’ has become politicised in the town of Osh in the Fergana valley with its mixed Kyrgyz and Uzbek population after the violent clash in 2010. Osh is famous in Kyrgyzstan for its tasty cuisine which is known to be developed and offered by Uzbek food producers. Karimova outlines various approaches of Kyrgyz people of Osh to the consumption of the meat pies *samsy* within the frame of diverging ideas of Kyrgyz-Uzbek inter-ethnic relations, ranging from food boycott of nationalists to the affirmation of friendship and reconciliation by others.

Soledad Jiménez-Tovar writes on another aspect of integration of a minority into a host society that can be understood through food and ideas connected to it. She focuses on sexual division of labour in food production and the domestic life in the case of Chinese speaking Muslim minority – Dungans – in Kazakhstan. While Dungan dishes, such as dumplings, have diffused into the cuisine of neighbouring people, Dungan cuisine seems to be

less affected by influences from the outside world. Jiménez-Tovar considers the values and practices connected to food – ideas of intimacy and hierarchy within a family.

Russell Zanca writes about the male sphere of social life and food among Uzbeks in rural Ferghana. He describes the preparation of a wedding pilaf as a predominantly male domain and social event. Besides gender relations and social norms, Zanca also outlines ideas of wellbeing expressed and understood through food in connection to its amount and particularly amount of meat and bread. He looks at Uzbek identity from the perspective of food throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet period and suggests to consider a ‘humanity of food’ that includes all aspects connected to food and social life of food.

Rano Turaeva gives an overview of three main dishes that have been ascribed as highly typical for Central Asian food, although mostly known as Uzbek or Tajik dishes. Turaeva describes varieties of bread, pilaf and a special spring dish, their regional differences and the ways people may bring those differences into identification processes.

Bread and pastry are important in Central Asian food culture, as Louise Bechtold shows in her ethnography of bread economy in southern Kyrgyzstan. Bechtold describes bread production, its perception by young women, and the ritual role of bread. The case of *Umay ene ashy*, a commemoration ritual practiced by women, and the role women play in food exchange within feasts, show the place of food in Islamic ritual practices.

Wolfgang Holzwarth focuses on small scale and everyday invitations to share food with still ceremonial and sacrificial meanings among Uzbeks in southern Tajikistan. He compares such a small repast with a festive food sharing at an inter-village level. He points to the strong belief in a ritual blessing received as a reward for sharing food, and suggests that this belief forms a main source of the common cultural identity of Uzbeks and Tajik neighbours.

Amantour Japarov focuses on the importance and symbolic meaning of a particular sheep bone, called *kar zhilik* in Kyrgyz, in the hierarchical order of meat distribution. He considers the practice of meat consumption and distribution as part of Kyrgyz traditional knowledge shared with Kazakhs and Tuvans, who also have a nomadic pastoral cultural heritage. Japarov also shows a retraditionalisation of popular perceptions of this particular bone in times of economic transition.

Economic transition following political changes deeply influences the sphere of food as well. Peter Finke outlines changing food preferences among Mongolian Kazakh pastoralists since 1991, and traces how economic changes influenced ways of food consumption along with shifts in the perceptions of health. He covers the interference between collectively shared values of food and the changes in food consumption and preferences in Mongolia.

Changing approaches to health in connection to food and ideas of national pride are the subject of Penkala-Gawęcka's contribution. She focuses on the invention of a drink in Kyrgyzstan and the way in which notions of tradition and national heritage have been exploited in the drink's advertisement and sale. She points out that consumers pay more attention to the claimed healing qualities of the drink than to the national appeal of its commercial promotion.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to express my hope that this volume may become a colourful and delicious dish from which readers may acquire a taste for Central Asia, its society and culture in everyday and festive days.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND GENERAL NOTES

This is the second CASCA volume in a series of field notes being published by the Department 'Integration and Conflict' of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. The idea of the series is to suggest an opportunity to publish material that did not fit into the main research theme but is worth to be shared. It particularly provides a platform for publishing photographic material.

The idea of the volume's theme came at the retreat meeting of CASCA members in the beautiful Swiss Alps in June 2015. This volume includes papers of CASCA members as well as of guests of the second ESCAS conference that was held in Zurich in October 2015.

Each paper in the volume has passed through an internal process of review, so the authors contributed also as reviewers of this volume. I acknowledge each of them for their critical reading. I would also like to thank my colleagues Soledad Jiménez-Tovar and Wolfgang Holzwarth for their support while working on this introduction.

Given the diversity of the languages spoken in the field sites of all the authors included in this volume, it was decided not to unify the transliteration: each author uses the transliteration system he or she considers the most relevant for the respective languages of their fields.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramzon, Saul M. 1971. *Kirgizi i ikh etnogeneticheskie i istoriko-kul'turnye svyazi*. Leningrad: Nauka: pp. 140–154.
- Arutiunov, Sergey A. and Tatiana A. Voronina (eds) 2001. *Traditsionnaia pishcha kak vyrazhenie etnicheskogo samosoznania. Traditional Food as an Expression of Ethnic Identity*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Arutiunov, Sergey A. and Tatiana A. Voronina (eds) 2004. *Khleb v narodnoi kul'ture. Etnograficheskie ocherki*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Bamana, Gaby. 2011. *On the Tea Road. A Journey into Mongolian Life and Culture*. North Charleston: CreateSpace.

- Caldwell, L. Melissa (ed.). 2009. *Food and Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Cesàro, M. Christina. 2007. 'Polo, Lāghmān, So Säy: Situating Uyghur Food between Central Asia and China', in Ildiko Beller-Hann (ed.), *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*. Aldeshot: Ashgate, pp. 185–202.
- Dorje, Rinjing. 1987. *Food in Tibetan Life*. London: Prospect Books.
- Fischler, Claude. 1988. 'Food, Self and Identity', *Anthropology of Food. Social Science Information* 27(2): 275–292.
- Keating, Elizabeth. 2000. 'Moments of Hierarchy: Constructing Social Stratification by Means of Language, Food, Space, and the Body, in Pohnpei, Micronesia', *American Anthropologist* 102(2): 303–320.
- Kochkunov, Aidarbek. 2010. 'The Ritual of Hospitality in Traditional and Modern Kyrgyz Culture', *Anthropology of the Middle East* 5(2): 36–58.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 2008 [1966]. 'The Culinary Triangle', in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds), *Food and Culture. A Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 36–43.
- Mack, Glenn Randall and Asele Surina. 2005. *Food Culture in Russia and Central Asia (Food Culture around the World)*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Michaels, Paula A. 2007. 'An Ethnohistorical Journey through Kazakh Hospitality', in Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (eds), *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 145–159.
- Murcott, Anne. 1996. 'Food as an Expression of Identity', in Verker Gustavsson and Leif Lewin (eds), *The Future of the Nation State: Essays on Cultural Pluralism and Political Integration*. London: Routledge, pp. 49–77.
- Nader, Laura. 2011. 'Ethnography as Theory', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1(1): 211–219.
- Nalivkin, Vladimir and Maria Nalivkina. 1886. *Ocherk byta zhenshchiny o sedlogo tuzemnogo naselenia Fergany*. Kazan: Tipografia Imperatorskogo Universiteta.
- Nalivkin, Vladimir and Maria Nalivkina. 2016. *Muslim Women of Fergana Valley. A 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ethnography from Central Asia*. Marianne Kamp (ed.). Bloomington, IN: Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Shaniyazov, K. Sh. 1972. 'O traditsionnoi pishche uzbekov', in *Etnograficheskie ocherki material'noi-kul'tury uzbekov kontsa XIX – nachala XX v.* Tashkent: pp. 96–118.
- Zanca, Russell. 2003. "'Take! Take! Take!'" Host-Guest Relations and All that Food: Uzbek Hospitality Past and Present', *The Anthropology of East Europe Review: Central Europe, Eastern Europe and Eurasia* 21(1): 8–16.

- Zanca, Russell. 2007. 'Fat and All That: Good Eating the Uzbek Way', in Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (eds), *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 178–197.
- Zhukovskaia, Natalia L. 1979. 'Pishcha kochevnikov Tsentral'noi Azii (K voprosu ob ekologicheskikh osnovakh formirovaniia modeli pitania)', *Sovetskaia etnografia* 5: 64–75.
- Zununova, G. Sh. and R. R. Nazarov. 2011. 'Transformatsia pishchi v sovremennyi period', in Z. Kh. Arifkhanova, S. N. Abashin and D. A. Alimova (eds), *Uzbeki*. Moscow: Nauka, pp. 337–341.



# INTERNATIONALISM ON THE TABLE: DINING ETHNICITY IN ONE'S HOMELAND KAZAKHSTAN

(RITA SANDERS)

*Rita Sanders is currently a research project member at the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Cologne and a senior researcher at the Global South Studies Center Cologne. Previously, she was a lecturer at the University of Zurich and a researcher with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale. She received her PhD from the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.*

Oftentimes, doing fieldwork means in large part to eat. Every day, several times, I was sitting together with others around a table with food and drinks while trying to understand what and how people eat, and with whom they share their meals, and to link eating and food to the broader context of social relations, shared meanings and identities. My fieldwork<sup>1</sup> centered on questions of ethnicity and migration decisions specifically among Kazakhstani Germans. Though food was not the primary focus of my research, shared meals and the meanings food conveys delivered fundamental insights into people's opinions and feelings on ethnicity and home.

Obviously, I – though I was admittedly not fully aware of it – profited from the capacity of food to act as “a lens/a window by which to see the depth and breadth of human interaction at many levels” (Theophano 2014: 333). Moreover, it seems that exactly the fact that I, as many other people, consider eating in the first instance rather as a mundane necessity than as a powerful activity constitutes its power, or as Long (2014: 303) puts it: “Partly because of that invisibility, it [food] is also one of the most powerful aspects of everyday life through which people live out their cultural identity.” Thus, the power of food arises to a large extent from its unnoticed and repetitive nature in daily routines which is, furthermore, decisive for building memories of the past (cf. Sutton 2001: 17f).

Additionally, food seems to be particularly suited as a memory item because it addresses several senses, as Sutton (2001: 17) refers to as ‘synesthesia’, which means the “synthesis or crossing of experiences from different sensory registers (i. e. taste, smell, hearing)” (ibid.). Moreover, the fact that

---

<sup>1</sup> I conducted twelve months of fieldwork in the City of Taldykorgan in 2006 and 2007. Taldykorgan is a medium-sized city of approximately 135,000 thousand inhabitants situated about 300 kilometers northeast of Almaty.

several senses interact, and “taste and smell have relatively few verbalized categories associated with them” (ibid.), makes it difficult to apply a simplified categorical system which is characteristic of many features we can (only) see, like named colors. Sutton (ibid.) therefore concludes: “Because of this, I will argue, taking off from Dan Sperber’s work, that they [taste and smell] instead become evocative of social situations with which they are associated.” Sutton’s findings generally resonate with the work of Bloch (1998) who points out that the power of cognition derives not so much from knowingly learned categories but from the repetitive character of everyday experiences we can often hardly label. Last but not least, food literally affects our bodies and well-being or as Coleman (2011: 1) puts it for the case of the ethnographer: “There are few areas of social life where the ethnographer’s experience is more immediate and embodied, and where cultural learning requires more commitment, than eating.”

In the following, I aim at making food as a source for my insights more explicit. I could improve my understanding of ethnicity and homeland in Kazakhstan by reading through my field notes of over one hundred meals, which I had together with those who were so generous to invite me for a cup of tea, for dinner or a wedding feast. Moreover, I recognized the twofold significance of food as cuisine and social gathering which has been extensively explored in the huge body of literature on food (cf. Mintz and Du Bois 2002). In the subsequent parts, I will provide the reader with a condensed version of one ‘typical’ dinner with the ethnographer. Subsequently, I will analyze two particular aspects: food as a marker of ethnic identity and the significance of the food’s origin for people’s sense of belonging and home.



Photo 1: Hosts and guests around a table full of ‘international’ dishes like ‘Kazakh bread’, ‘Korean salads’ and ‘German beshbarmak’. (R. SANDERS, 2007)



## HAVING DINNER WITH A GUEST FROM GERMANY

Eating together was a common setting for most of my interviews.<sup>2</sup> Since people new that I was a researcher from Germany concerned with issues of migration, home and ethnicity they might have connected food more often to those topics than they would have done otherwise. Nonetheless, I believe that only the focus on the link of food with home and ethnicity might have been overacted during our conversations, the connection itself is not devised. In the following, I describe one dinner table and one dinner conversation which derives from my reading through many such descriptions of tables and conversations I saw and listened to during my fieldwork.<sup>3</sup>

Anna was a friend of a friend of mine in Taldykorgan, who was eager to invite me to dinner in order to tell me about her way of life. Finally, we agreed upon a date. Next to Anna, her husband and their adult daughter were present at the dinner table. Anna – together with her daughter – had obviously spent a lot of time on preparing the food for our meal: entering the living room, I saw a table stuffed with many small and bigger bowls and plats filled with different sorts of food. After we had exchanged some flowery phrases about the cold winter and the sometimes difficult transport, I was asked to take a seat, and Igor, Anna's husband, poured vodka in our glasses. While we were now all sitting around the table, Igor gave the evening's first toast by expressing his sense of delight about the fact that we were together having dinner today.

Anna, then, started to explain me all the necessary details about the individual dishes by putting a small portion of each of it on my plate. This way, I received a mixture of 'Russian' and 'Korean salads', 'Russian sausages', and 'Kazakh bread'. I was unmistakably requested to try all of those dishes and, surprisingly for me, my hosts were not so much interested in what I liked most, but instead appreciated it when I complimented all dishes in equal measure. For me, it was particularly striking – and also displeasing – that each time when I intended to take more of one sort of salad, they straightaway prompted me to also take something from the other salads. Furthermore, it was difficult to only take a small portion because Anna usually invited me to take more since I should not be shy and feel comfortable at her home.

After we had finished the salads and the other starters, Anna and her daughter served a huge plate which was put in the middle of our table. Anna ex-

---

<sup>2</sup> However, this only concerns informal interviewing. Taped life stories and other more formal types of interviews were usually conducted after or before the meal.

<sup>3</sup> Most often, I was invited by Kazakhstani Germans whose meals and conversations build the basis for the here presented condensed description. However, I furthermore experienced many meals with Kazakhs, Russians and others during my fieldwork. From those experiences, I can state that most aspects concerning the ethnic labelling of food and the internationalism of meals do not differ substantially among Kazakhstani citizens.

plained that she had decided to prepare ‘German beshbarmak’<sup>4</sup> for our dinner, according to a recipe from her mother, which was made with pork instead of lamb in the ‘original Kazakh version’. She herself liked the noodle dish particularly with pork by underlining that this sort of mixture was typical for Kazakhstan itself which consisted of and profited from the many different nationalities living on its territory.

Our conversation touched upon the issues of migration decision, home and, more generally, life conditions for ‘Russians’<sup>5</sup> in Kazakhstan. Igor explained to me that he could not imagine himself living in a country like Germany where he could not just go out for fishing and hunting. Furthermore, both Anna and Igor recounted several cases where people had died after they had migrated to Germany. This they also saw in connection to huge differences in food supply between Germany and Kazakhstan. Anna remarked that it would have not been possible to cook any of the dishes on the table with food out of Germany because those were not natural but instead contaminated with different sorts of fertilizers. She added that she had been to Germany once in order to visit her sister and that she still remembers the tomatoes which would taste like old cucumber – so that it was obvious that something had gone wrong with the food in Germany. In this spirit, a further toast was given by Igor who expressed his love for Kazakhstan’s vast landscape by embracing the country to be his homeland. Afterwards, we ate chocolates from Germany, which I had brought along, and Anna and her daughter were apparently delighted about the chocolates and were praising the good sweets from Germany.

#### ETHNIC DISHES AND INTERNATIONAL REPASTS

In anthropology and beyond it has become commonplace that people tend to associate certain food with whatever kind of group, be it a religiously, ethnically or territorially defined group (cf. Wilk 2014: 325). Thus, food seems to be particularly useful to define others and to draw boundaries, as Sutton (2001: 5) notices: “Food, in the view of both Mary Douglas and those working on ethnicity, is a particularly good ‘boundary marker’, perhaps because it provides a potent symbol of the ability to transform the outside into the inside.” Accordingly, it should not come as a surprise that in 2010 the ‘French feast’ has been nominated as a world cultural heritage by the UNESCO, whereupon German bakers tried to achieve the same status for their bakery produce though one might sympathize with the critique of Bendix and Fenske (2014: 5) who characterize the national food nominations as a backslide into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Beshbarmak is a noodle dish with cooked lamb. It is widely regarded as the ‘most typical Kazakh dish’.

<sup>5</sup> In regard to migration decisions and the general political and economic situation for minority nationalities in Kazakhstan, most Kazakhstani Germans refer to themselves as ‘Russians’ (Sanders 2016).

Likewise, for the context of the previous USSR, Caldwell (2009a: 3) remarks – by referring to Glants and Toomre (1997a) – that “throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the twenty-first, food has been central to both socialist and postsocialist reformist projects as social engineers have used food to promote new societies based on modernity, progress, and culturedness.” In this connection, the success of international communism was also interpreted to stem from the development of each region and each nationality (Hirsch 2005) which could be easily demonstrated by the individual national cuisines and by regional food, or as Caldwell (2009a: 7) puts it: “In many respects, the wealth of the Soviet bloc could be measured in the quantities of foods produced and the culinary diversity of these regions.”

An excellent example of this culinary celebration of diversity provided the exhibition of food at the All-Union Exhibition Center in Moscow (VDNKh) where each republic’s traditions were amongst others illustrated by the presentation of their specific culinary delicacies (Caldwell 2009a: 7f; cf. Glants and Toomre 1997b: xxiii). In current-day Kazakhstan, such national food exhibitions are still fairly common. During the year I spent in Taldykorgan, I attended almost a dozen festivities and virtually each was accompanied by the presentation of national cuisines featured by the nationality-cultural-center-booths (cf. Sanders 2009). Though the nationality booths exhibited next to food also handcraft and informed about their individual history at presentation boards, it was obvious that flat bread, sausages, and cakes were most attractive, assumingly because people could really try out, smell and taste the ‘other culture’ (see photo 2).

Accordingly, the ‘international table’ arranged by Anna displays at home what is publicly presented on major state festivities. This way, public rituals and everyday-day activities mutually reinforce. Sutton (2001), investigating the interplay of food and memory, argues against connecting rituals with the symbolic realm and the everyday with the practical because “anthropological studies of food, on the other hand, have long recognized both poles, in showing how the functions and meanings of eating extend from the quotidian, yet meaningful, practices of daily provisioning to the extraordinary contexts of celebration and commemoration. And, as Mary Douglas has long argued, mundane and extraordinary eating are connected: mutually entailed in systems of meaning, metaphors of each other” (ibid.: 20). Thus, the international table presented to the invited ethnographer, as well as the public exhibition of national cuisines, stem from and, at the same time, support the same system of meaning which, therefore, appears to be self-evident.

Some aspects of the ‘international table’ shall be highlighted in the following: to begin with, most dishes are ethnically categorized but can, and sometimes should, be eaten together. At any rate, the foreign ethnographer was usually encouraged to taste all dishes, and to a certain extent, to like all of them, and it was very difficult to reject those types of food which I actu-



Photo 2: Visitors of the German booths tasting 'typical German dishes and drinks' like sausages, fried potatoes, salads, and beer. (R. SANDERS, 2007)

ally did not like. Long (2014: 287f) – writing about soda bread in Ireland – notes in this context that “food [...] is frequently so tight to our identities that the offering of food by one person to another – and the acceptance or rejection of it – can be a highly charged and emotional act, symbolically representing acceptance or rejection of that individual.” Thus, Long points to the phenomenon that someone rejects all those who belong to an ethnic group by rejecting an ethnically defined type of food associated with that particular group.

For the case of Kazakhstan, and the experiences I made, the situation seems to be different because at least Kazakhstani Germans do not appear more offended when I reject ‘their ethnic dish’, for instance a piece of a ‘German apple pie’, as when I reject the ‘Russian’ or ‘Korean salad’. Instead, as has been also reported by other ethnographers (e. g. Meneley 2011: 19 for the case of her fieldwork in Yemen), rejecting the offered food is on principle offending and connotes disclaiming someone’s hospitality.<sup>6</sup> But the fact that most dishes are ethnically framed and that guests are requested to taste a mixture of them imparts onto the meal an international complexion.

<sup>6</sup> On Kazakh hospitality, see also Michaels (2007).

Thus, the connection of national cuisines and nationality groups is clearly stated but, at the same time, this connection is to a certain extent detached from someone's personal ethnic belonging. Everyone may generally eat and cook whatever nationally framed dish. Moreover, those dishes may be altered in order to fit better to someone's taste, as has been indicated by the beshbarmak which was prepared with pork instead of lamb. Interestingly, however, many of such alteration are still framed in nationality categories, as exemplified by the 'German beshbarmak'. Therefore, Kazakhstani repasts illustrate and confirm the ubiquity of nationality categories which appear oftentimes less deeply felt but rather cooked in order to demonstrate the state's and one's personal stance towards the country's international outlook.

#### FOOD FROM KAZAKHSTAN

The power of food derives not only from commensality and from meanings associated with particular dishes and cuisines but also from the production process itself and, more generally, from the social life of food as a thing (cf. Appadurai 1986, cf. Bendix and Fenske 2014: 8). During the 1990s, citizens of the former Soviet Union were all of a sudden confronted with a range of new products and new modes of consumption 'from the West'. Caldwell (2009b: 103), referring to Barker (1999) and Patino (2008), notes in this context that the "curiosity over the novelty and exotic nature of these new trends, particularly those associated with 'the West', has been replaced by concerns with new socioeconomic hierarchies, taste preferences, the preservation of cultural traditions, and even the nature of choice as a performance of agency." Additionally, it has often been stated (e. g. Caldwell 2009a: 16f; Mincyte 2009) that many consumers express their concerns about imported food from 'the West' because it is assumed to be artificially produced and therefore might harm their health. Instead, they prefer to consume the produce from their own garden plots.

Likewise, Anna and her family prefer to cook with products from Kazakhstan though they prepare Russian, Korean, and German dishes. Moreover, I rarely came across someone deploring the difficulty to purchase 'original' ingredients from Korea or Germany in order to improve the particular Korean or German dishes. In this regard, one might conclude that those ethnic dishes are indeed Kazakhstani Korean and Kazakhstani German dishes because the recipes are assumed to come from the foreign country though the ingredients should be from Kazakhstan<sup>7</sup>.

However, at least as far as Kazakhstani Germans are concerned, the situation seems to be more ambivalent. As indicated by the chocolates, made in

---

<sup>7</sup> However, this is not to deny that many ingredients may actually come from abroad, for instance from China. But at least as far as fruits and vegetables are concerned Kazakhstani Germans prefer local products.

Germany, I brought along for Anna's dinner, it is certainly wrong to assume that products from Germany are principally not appreciated. On the contrary, certain products like sweets and, for instance, baking powder, which is rarely available in Kazakhstan, are very welcome. But as far as not particular manufactures are concerned but agricultural commodities like fruits and vegetables, and also livestock, it is obvious that those from Kazakhstan are assumed to be more natural, tastier and healthier.

To this end, people's explanations address the issue of differing production processes and, for instance, the varying use of fertilizer, but those explanations do, in my view, not exhaust the subject. It rather seems that Kazakhstan's soil and generally nature are better suited to ensure people's good food. People would, however, concede that the food may not be better for everyone (so, for instance, not for me, as was sometimes uttered), but it is certainly better for all those born and raised on the territory of Kazakhstan. Thus, food in Kazakhstan, however international its outlook might be, connotes an oftentimes deeply felt bond to one's homeland which is fundamentally constituted by the land's produce.

#### EVERYDAY FOOD, ETHNICITY AND HOMELAND

The power of food derives from the daily routines of producing, purchasing, preparing and eating it while oftentimes being in a community of others. Through the combination of several senses and through the fact that eating concerns our bodies, food, furthermore, includes basic experiences which appear to be fundamental for more elaborated and named categorical systems. In this article, I have focused on named ethnic categories associated with particular dishes though the underlying power of food might rather stem from its unnamed and often unnoticed aspects. On this account, I have included table conventions and feelings towards food which transgress, and sometimes run contrary, to the ethnic categories. I have argued that many, if not most, dishes are ethnically labelled. However, everyone is asked to taste all of them and to 'exhibit an international mixture' on one's plate. This is fortified through the convention that every time one takes a piece of one dish one is asked to take additionally a piece of another dish. Moreover, those international tables prepared for guests at home resemble exhibitions of national cuisines displayed at major state events. Interestingly, however, Kazakhstani German hosts are not offended when in particular 'German dishes' are not tasted. Rather, the host feels affronted when guests generally reject food which has been put on their plats. Accordingly, feelings arise when the host's hospitality is rejected. Thus, in regard to the international table here described, one might conclude that the named ethnic categories of the individual dishes, though they are talked about in detail, is not what people are really concerned about.

Feelings of belonging and homeland seem, however, present when the food's origin is addressed. On this note, food from Kazakhstan is generally

held to be healthier and tastier than food from Germany which is said to be artificially fabricated. Moreover, people seem to connect Kazakhstani food to fundamental feelings of survival when recounting cases where people had died after migration to Germany because of unfamiliar alimentary and climatic circumstances. On the contrary, feelings of security seem to be present when the smell and taste of one's childhood is remembered by telling that also one's mother prepared 'German beshbarmak' in the same way oneself does. Therefore, the 'international food' in Kazakhstan seems to be meaningful for people because the country's particular climate and soil ensures its production and, thus, people's well-being.

#### NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In this article, I use a simplified version of the BGN (United States Board on Geographic Names) system for transliterating Kazakh and Russian words. For sake of readability, I have omitted apostrophes for the Russian soft and hard signs and converted 'ë' to 'yo'. Secondly, with regard to Kazakh words, I have removed diacritical marks.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many people in Kazakhstan who invited me and who were so generous to share their meals and thoughts with me. Furthermore, warm thanks go to the editor of this volume and two anonymous reviewers who have helped me to improve this article. Finally, I want to thank the Max Planck Society for funding my research project on migration, social networks and home in Kazakhstan.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Appadurai, A. 1986. 'Introduction. Commodities and the Politics of Value', in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–63.
- Barker, A. M. (ed.). 1999. *Consuming Russia. Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bendix, R and M. Fenske. 2014. 'Essen in der Politik', in R. Bendix and M. Fenske (eds), *Politische Mahlzeiten*. Berlin and Münster: Lit, pp. 5–16.
- Bloch, M. 1998. *How We Think They Think. Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Caldwell, M. 2009a. 'Introduction. Food and Everyday Life after State Socialism', in M. Caldwell (ed.), *Food and Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–28.
- Caldwell, M. 2009b. 'Tempest in a Coffee Pot. Brewing Incivility in Russia's Public Sphere', in M. Caldwell (ed.), *Food and Everyday Life*

- in the Postsocialist World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 101–129.
- Coleman, L. 2011. 'Introduction', in L. Coleman (ed.), *Food. Ethnographic Encounters*. Oxford/New York: Berg, pp. 1–16.
- Glants, M and J. Toomre (eds). 1997a. *Food in Russian History and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Glants, M and J. Toomre. 1997b. 'Introduction', in M. Glants and J. Toomre (eds), *Food in Russian History and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. xi–xxvii.
- Hirsch, F. 2005. *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Long, L. M. 2014. 'Breaking Bread in Northern Ireland. Soda Farls, Implicit Meanings, and Gastropolitics', in R. Bendix and M. Fenske (eds), *Politische Mahlzeiten*. Berlin and Münster: Lit, pp. 287–306.
- Meneley, A. 2011. 'Food and Morality in Yemen', in L. Coleman (ed.), *Food. Ethnographic Encounters*. Oxford and New York: Berg, pp. 17–29.
- Michaels, P. A. 2007. 'An Ethnohistorical Journey through Kazakh Hospitality', in J. Sahadeo und R. Zanca (eds), *Everyday Life in Central Asia. Past and Present*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 145–159.
- Mincyte, D. 2009. 'Self-Made Woman. Informal Dairy Markets in Europeanizing Lithuania', in M. Caldwell (ed.), *Food and Everyday Life in the Postsocialist World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 78–100.
- Mintz, S. W. and C. M. Du Bois. 2002. 'The Anthropology of Food and Eating', *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 31: 99–119.
- Patico, J. 2008. *Consumption and Social Change in a Post-Soviet Middle Class*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Sanders, R. 2009. 'In the Twilight of Two States: The German House in Tekmok, Kazakhstan', *Anthropological Notebooks* 15(1): 37–47.
- Sanders, R. 2016. *Staying at Home. Identities, Memories and Social Networks of Kazakhstani Germans*. Berghahn Series 'Integration and Conflict Studies'. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.
- Sutton, D. E. 2001. *Remembrance of Repasts. An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Oxford and New York: Berg
- Theophano, J. 2014. 'Politics and Food in Biography, Research and Everyday Life: A Conversation with the Researcher of Foodways Janet Theophano', in R. Bendix and M. Fenske (eds), *Politische Mahlzeiten*. Berlin and Münster: Lit, pp. 331–341.
- Wilk, R. 2014. 'The Politics of Taste and Assimilation', in R. Bendix and M. Fenske (eds), *Politische Mahlzeiten*. Berlin and Münster: Lit, pp. 319–327.



# “WE DO NOT EAT THEIR STUFF!” WHITE FOOD AND IDENTITY IN INNER MONGOLIA

(MERLE SCHATZ)

*Merle Schatz, M.A. in Chinese Studies, Mongolian Studies and Japanese Studies at Göttingen University. PhD candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, thesis on “Language and Identity of the Mongols in China today”, since 2012 Assistant Professor at East Asian Institute, Chinese Studies, at Leipzig University, and since 2014 also lecturer at University of Cologne, Chinese Studies/Chinese Culture Studies. Current research project on “Contact Zone China”. Research interests: Contact zone, cultural neighbourhood, cultural translation.*

Inner Mongolia is one of the five Autonomous Regions in the People’s Republic of China. According to the 2010 census, Inner Mongolia has a population of approximately 24.7 million people. Its population comprises 79,54% Han Chinese, 17,11% Mongols and 3,36% other nationalities such as Manchu, Hui, Daur, Evenks and Koreans.<sup>1</sup> The Mongols are one of the 56 officially recognized nationalities in China and they are subject to the influence of the national minority policy and therefore to the language policy as well. The nationality *Han* is distinguished from the other 55 nationalities that are called *shaoshu minzu* (少数民族, national minority) because they are outnumbered by the *Han*. The official languages of Inner Mongolia are Mandarin-Chinese and Mongolian, the latter written in Uiguro-Mongolian script (whereas Cyrillic was introduced in the 1940s in the Republic of Mongolia). In order to learn more about Mongolian identity within Chinese society I have visited Inner Mongolia regularly since 2007. There has always been contact between Mongols and Chinese in this region. Mass resettlement campaigns initiated by the Chinese Government, relocated Han Chinese from the central regions of China to frontier regions to secure these areas. To China, adjacent ethnic groups like the Mongols should be infiltrated to prevent them from joining forces with other groups against the ruling centre. Especially under the *Qing*-Dynasty (1644–1912) there was a strong mass resettlement of Han Chinese to areas of today’s Inner Mongolia and neighbour regions which lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Almaz Khan notes that between 1912 and 1949 the Chinese pop-

<sup>1</sup> ‘2010 Census China, Inner Mongolia Data: (内蒙古自治区2010年第六次全国人口普查主要数据公报)’. Retrieved 15 June 2017 from [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/dfirkpcgb/201202/t20120228\\_30397.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/dfirkpcgb/201202/t20120228_30397.html).

ulation in Inner Mongolia rose from 1.5 Million to 5.2 Million due to territorial allocation and mass settlement (Khan 1996: 130). There had also been population movements that were not controlled by the government, for example those that resulted from foreign invasions, natural disasters, or simply the search for better livelihoods. The government-controlled migrations and the ‘natural migrations’ were the two main factors that led to cross-group mingling. The living situation of Mongols and Chinese in Inner Mongolia can be described by the concept of cultural neighbourhood, which has been developed by Gabbert and Thubauville (2010). Gabbert suggests, that “cultural neighbourhood denotes a community of place that is as much a spatial fact as a mode of interaction. Essential features of cultural neighbourhood are patterns of social and spatial organization like common habitats, customs and modes of communication as well as knowledge about the “Other”: Cultural neighbours are aware of and interested in each other, they face each other, get used to each other and develop intimate contact with each other’s differences and similarities” (Gabbert 2014: 15). There are numerous expressions of cultural neighbourhood in China where cultural and ethnic diversity are part of interethnic communication. Marriage between members of different ethnic groups – e. g. in Inner Mongolia – is not uncommon because they are respected as equivalent marriage partners. In addition to intermarriage between Chinese and Mongols, there are Chinese-Mongolian trade relations, members of both groups share residences, religious and cultural rituals and celebrations as well as educational institutions like kindergartens, schools and universities, they share restaurants, go to the same stores, they share music, books, languages and so on. It might be this disappearance of obvious distinction that create an urgent need to express or invent differences and boundaries to what Gabbert calls “balance the dynamics of cultural neighbourhood” (Gabbert 2010: 164). A neighbour, according to Gabbert’s definition, “can be a helper or a friend, but also harmful and adversary. In any case, whether he might be friend or foe, the neighbour in a cultural context can be seen as the familiar other who is near and remote at the same time” (Gabbert 2014: 14f). Cultural neighbourhood in Inner Mongolia is observable not only in shared life habits or commodities, but especially in modes of differentiation observable in, for instance, perception of food. Part of my research interest is to understand how the contact between Mongols and Chinese is shaped by persistent negotiations on both sides. Regarding rules, opinions, lifestyles and economic systems, wishes, rituals or eating habits, members of both groups position themselves differently, contradictorily and inconsistently. The aim is to demarcate themselves clearly from each other despite their shared habits and similarities. This article is based on my fieldwork observations in the capital of Inner Mongolia, Huhhot, and wants to describe this situation using “white food” (Mongolian: *caghan idege*) as an example. White food refers to products made of milk (cow, mare, camel, sheep).



a safe journey among others. Walking towards a visitor with a bowl of milk is a sign of reverence and it is also used as a gesture of reconciliation.

White food plays an important role in the life of Mongols. Those Mongols that live in Chinese cities adapt their white food habits to their life situation. There are several Mongolian food stores specialized on white food products and it is possible to acquire all kinds of milk products throughout the year. Therefore, some Mongolian rituals that include white food are performed in a slightly different version in the cities due to the environment: visitors and guests are greeted and served with white food in the living room, drops of fermented mare's milk are snapped into the room with the fingers to honor the eternal blue sky, and white food is given as a farewell gift.

Eating white food is a typical feature of the Mongols as my Mongolian informants explained. Chinese informants expressed a similar opinion and they stressed that they do not eat that Mongolian "stuff". With "stuff" they referred to white food products, but also to potato dishes, meat and soups that are served in Mongolian restaurants as so-called typical Mongolian dishes. A Mongolian saleswoman in a shop in Huhhot told me that typical dietary habits are a definite distinguishing feature between Mongols and Chinese: "We eat our Mongolian food, the Chinese cannot eat it, they don't like it ... milk tea ... yellow butter ... Mongolian cheese." At another location an interview partner explained that visiting restaurants already showed the differences between both groups: Mongols would eat at Mongolian restaurants, Chinese would not eat there because the food served was typically Mongolian, basically meat and white food, as I was told.

But milk and milk products were never unfamiliar to Chinese living in the north where they also practiced pastoral farming. Milk and milk products always played a role in their eating habits. Nevertheless, the Chinese thought that milk products are the food of 'the other', of the barbarians. According to



Photo 2: Dish in a Mongolian restaurant in Huhhot.

(M. SCHATZ, 2016)

Patricia Ebrey (1996: 67) the skilled horse-riding nomads Xiongnu best embodied ‘the other’, because apparently everything about them was the opposite of what the Chinese considered themselves to be. The historian Sima Qian (司馬遷, ca. 145 or 135 BC – 86 BC) wrote about the Xiongnu in the “Records of the Grand Historian” (Shiji, 史記) that they had no written language, no family names, no feeling of respect for old people, they had no cities or permanent housing, they did not engage in agriculture. Only their art of war was excellent. Regarding the eating habits he noted, that they eat livestock meat, drink livestock juice and wear livestock leather (Xu and An 2004: 1319). It is possible that “juice” here did not refer to milk but to the blood of the animals, which Mongolian warriors also drank. This portrayal of a rather simple Mongolian diet image remains stable. In his bestseller *Wolf Totem* Ji-ang Rong describes that the Mongolian stock farmers basically eat milk products in the summer such as milk, sour milk, tofu, butter and milk skin, and that producing these products takes a lot of time and effort (2004: 441).

In my interviews with Chinese informants I noticed that the consumption of milk products was associated with Mongols who are in turn considered to be backward and simple due to their nomadic lifestyle and low ‘cultural development.’ Milk products are related to Mongolian eating habits and therefore have a bad image for Chinese. In this context it is interesting to see, that there has been a milk boom in China in the last fifteen years. In 1999 I was only able to buy totally overpriced western imported cheese and yoghurt in the Shangrila Hotel in Changchun, northern China. A few years later the supermarkets started selling more and more imported milk products and Chinese milk product brands were also introduced into the market. Additionally, government subsidized advertisement campaigns were launched, Chinese milk products were made available in the whole country and the consumption of milk products has shown a strong increase in the last ten years.



Photo 3: Milk products in a small supermarket in Beijing

(M. SCHATZ, 2017)



Photo 4:  
Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi  
in milk commercial 2002.  
(M. SCHATZ, 2016)



Photo 5–7: Dry cheese, dry cheese, Milk skin.

(M. SCHATZ, 2016)



Photo 8: Yellow Butter.

(M. SCHATZ, 2016)

The assumption that all Han-Chinese suffer from lactose intolerance cannot be generalized. There are no numbers that indicate how many of them are affected, also children suffer less than adults. Domestic milk producers have been aware of this fact and since reduced the lactose content of the milk as well as the packaged sizes that often do not contain more than 250 ml. I have a Chinese friend that does not suffer at all, no matter what kind of milk product and how much of it she consumes. Her sister instead has problems after drinking milk. Another of her friends cannot drink milk but has no problem with eating yogurt. The intolerance does not affect everyone and the symptoms arise to a different degree depending on the person, the age of the person, the product and the amount being consumed.

In fact, today there are no difficulties buying any kind of milk products of different qualities in any supermarket in China. Therefore, Chinese and foreign milk products are now available everywhere in Huhhot. Mongolian food stores sell white food products, such as a variety of local Mongolian cheese of various degrees of consistencies and an assortment of tastes ranging from salty to sweet or even flavoured.

When asking a Chinese lady in a supermarket why more and more customers bought milk products for their children she told me: “Milk is good for the brain. You people in the west drink milk and eat cheese, therefore your countries are developed: you are intelligent, strong and healthy. This is why Chinese now also drink milk and eat milk products.” Currently milk is at the top of the Chinese nutrition agenda: it is spread that milk products are beneficial for the health, that they strengthen the body and promote wellbeing. Anyone in China, who wants to be modern in terms of following Western eating habits drinks milk and eats milk products.

Although in practice Mongols and Chinese consume milk products, this consumption as well as the symbolic meaning ascribed to the products and eating habits are perceived differently by both groups.



Photo 9: A variety of Mongolian cheese. (M. SCHATZ, 2016)

The Inner Mongolians consider the consumption of white food as typical for their group because they assume that Chinese do not eat these products. At the same time they would stress their relation to the Republic of Mongolia and their close ties with Mongolian culture in which eating white food has high cultural value. Chinese also consider milk products typical Mongolian food that they cannot eat and from which they want to distance themselves. At the same time, when they follow Western images of cultivated, developed and modern life, eating of milk products is considered as desirable because it is related to high Western living standard. Pointing to Mongolian white food and declaring “We don’t eat their stuff”, as different Chinese informants did, implies an imagination or knowledge about eating habits of the cultural neighbour and a feeling of difference regarding these. This knowledge may be ignored or denied on the one hand and on the other hand appears overstated, depending on its use for the construction of an argument.

In a Mongolian tourist camp that I once visited north of Huhhot white food was served as typical Mongolian dish to the Chinese and foreign visitors. Mongolian women dressed in typical Mongolian clothes called *debel* while welcoming us. They served fermented mare’s milk while singing a Mongo-





Photo 10: A Mongolian restaurant in Huhhot.

(M. SCHATZ, 2007)

lian folk song. Later we were drinking milk tee with yellow butter and eating Mongolian cheese on a short horse trip.

After a demonstration of Mongolian wrestling and horse racing we had dinner in a Mongolian yurt: potatoes, vegetables and Mongolian pastries. The Chinese visitors considered this food “the food of the poor grassland people who are not developed and who possess nothing”, while eating it joyless. They told me that they came to see the typical Mongolian lifestyle and the grassland. Their image of the Mongolian lifestyle as underdeveloped was confirmed for them by the poor food offered that day. Narrowed distinctions served to stress the differences between the groups. This allows a very clear and distinct construction of a particular identity and also the clear differentiation between both groups.

However, since members of both groups often pursue the same habits in everyday life, these so called obvious features are often not obviously recognizable. I have observed Mongols eating at Chinese restaurants as well as Chinese eating at Mongolian restaurants. The food ‘of the other’ was often similar to that available at the ‘own restaurants’. It remains to be asked whether eating in the restaurants of ‘the other’ can serve as a sign for perceived differences, Mongols as well as Chinese bought white food and dry meat in the Mongolian food stores. Most of the Mongols live in the cities of Inner Mongolia and do not only eat typical Mongolian food, they also like Chinese food. The social anthropologist Uradyn Bulag even notes that “... most Inner Mongols can no longer appreciate the traditional Mongolian food customs, their palate being more adjusted to the new culture they have developed in their interaction with the Chinese” (Bulag 1998: 172).

The statements regarding social and cultural practices which were expressed by members of both groups often did not match. Their explanation was that the differences between Mongolians and Chinese are “sensed”, “felt” differences, “an identity in the heart”. I then had to learn to distinguish

between what was said about food and identity, what in connection to identity was felt or expected and what in response to the environment was performed – towards members of the own group, towards the cultural neighbour and even towards me as an outsider who wanted to get information. More and more I became aware that the negotiation of identity alongside categories such as food rather provides information on the actor's perceptions and the actor's interactions than it gives actual evidence on the categories' uniqueness detected by the actors.

The access to common milk products, the negotiation of identity with regard to these products and the demarcation of different habits regarding the consumption as well as the emphasis on specific characteristics form a system of relations in which the different actors classify white food. It is not the category (such as food) that serves as signifier of an identity, but rather its use within a system of relations. The (non-)shared use of one and the same product and the product's characteristics itself can be ignored, reinterpreted or stressed differently. Minor differences or imagined differences can become extremely important because these differences (imagined or real) are the basis for the feeling of the own otherness (generally perceived as positive) as well as the basis for the feeling of the strangeness of the others (generally perceived as negative). That is how an exaggerated perception regarding the consumption or non-consumption of milk products occurs. This process allows the construction and emphasis of Mongolian and Chinese identity in Inner Mongolia in the process of demarcation despite all proximity and cultural neighborhood.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bulag, Uradyn. 1998. *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ebrey, Patricia. 1996. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gabbert, Echi, and Thubauville, Sophia. 2010. *To Live with Others: Essays on Cultural Neighborhood in Southern Ethiopia*. Köln: Köppe.
- Gabbert, Echi. 2014. 'The Global Neighbourhood Concept. A Chance for Cooperative Development Or Festina Lente', in Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe (ed.), *A Delicate Balance. Land Use, Minority Rights and Social Stability in the Horn of Africa*. Addis Ababa: Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University, pp. 14–37.
- Lessing, Ferdinand D. 1960. *Mongolian-English Dictionary*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Rong, Jiang. 2004. *Der Zorn der Wölfe*. Goldmann Verlag.
- Xu, Jialu and An, Pingqiu. 2004. *Complete translation of 24 Histories: Shiji Volume 2* (二十四史全譯, 史記, 下冊). Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe (上海: 韓語大詞出出版社).

# WHEN FOOD TALKS: INSIGHTS FROM SOUTHERN KAZAKHSTAN

(INDIRA ALIBAYEVA)

*Indira Alibayeva obtained her B.A. in Education (2010) and M.A in Cultural Studies (2013) from Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty. She is currently a PhD Candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and the University of Zurich. Her research interests include identity and conflict theories, minority and diaspora studies, and post-socialist transformations in Kazakhstan.*

## INTRODUCTION

Before moving towards the specific focus of this paper, I would like to place it into the overall context of my project. Since food is the one aspect of identification process which I aim to analyse in my project, it would be reasonable to outline research objectives and connect them with the general questions of this paper. My research is part of a comparative project which examines processes of ethnic differentiation and identification focusing on Uzbek diasporas<sup>1</sup> in Afghanistan and in post-Soviet Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan<sup>2</sup>. Beginning from July 2014 to July 2015, I conducted one year ethnographic research in the South Kazakhstan Province where the Uzbek population of the country is mostly concentrated.

One of the aims of my project is to look at the manifestation and role of ethnic identities in everyday life and in interaction with other ethnic groups. Thus I focused on the criteria of ethnic identification employed by the local population in southern Kazakhstan. As Finke (2014) states in his recent book on Uzbeks, conceptualization of Uzbekness varies depending on the regional setting, and there are different factors which have an impact on formation of ethnic identity. Following his work, I attempt to find out how 'Uzbekness' is conceptualized in the context of Kazakstani society. As Barth (1969) emphasizes, a question of ethnic boundaries becomes relevant not in the homogeneous but heterogeneous societies where diverse ethnic groups are present. Uzbeks living in Kazakhstan often say that they became more like Kazakhs compared to their co-ethnics in Uzbekistan. At the same time, Kazakhs living far from Uzbek villages of Kazakhstan consider those Kazakhs living in a

<sup>1</sup> A meaning of the term diaspora in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia is rather complex and needs detailed analysis. See Diener (2008) on diaspority in Central Asia.

<sup>2</sup> The project is described more in detail in the 1<sup>st</sup> volume of CASCA published by Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2013.

close neighborhood with Uzbeks to be more like the Uzbeks. What criteria stand for kazakhified Uzbek and uzbekified Kazakh? When I asked people, they explained it referring to the cases of deviance from the norms which they believe typical to a certain ethnic group. An adoption of some habits of each other is considered as an example of crossing ethnic boundaries. One may ask what criteria define the boundaries of Uzbekness or Kazakhness? In different occasions of everyday life Uzbeks and Kazakhs distinguish from each other according to language, style of clothing, or a physical appearance which they find typical of each other. Both, Uzbek and Kazakh languages belong to the Turkic language family. While the Uzbek language is part of the Qarluq dialect, the Kazakh is of the Qipchaq dialect. This closeness makes it easier for the members of these ethnic groups living in the close neighborhood to understand each other even if they keep speaking their own language. However, it is easy to recognize an accent when Uzbeks speak Kazakh, or the other way around when Kazakhs speak Uzbek. As for clothing, it is a marker of identity, but cannot be practical always and everywhere. It is considered that Uzbek women dress in very shiny, bright clothes, and wear more dresses than jeans or trousers.

Another visual difference I have observed between Kazakh *dastarkhan* and Uzbek *dasturkhon*<sup>3</sup> is the set of tableware with specific ornaments. During my visits to Uzbek families I have noticed that almost every family has and uses dishes with a cotton flower (in Uzbek *pakhta güllik*) decoration (see the photo 1), which I haven't seen in Kazakh families. Instead dishes with an ornament called *qoshqarmüviz*, resembling the horn of a ram, have been present in the *dastarkhan* of Kazakhs (see the photo 2). Furthermore, traditional elements in a modernized form are becoming prestigious among Kazakhs in the course of the last decade. However, I haven't focused on the intentions of the people in using (or presenting) dishes with traditional patterns, although they play a role in constructing the host's identity.

Besides the mentioned markers of identity, one of the main criterion of differentiation is a genealogical belonging. Kazakhs constitute different tribal units which are part of their ethnic genealogical tree. People who do not belong to any Kazakh clans thus are excluded from being a Kazakh (except Khoja and Töre<sup>4</sup>), while Uzbeks can include individuals speaking Uzbek and living in the same region (Finke 2014).

In this paper I would like to emphasize the role of food in identification and differentiation processes. In particular, I focus on the people's understanding

---

<sup>3</sup> *Dastarkhan* in Kazakh, or *dasturkhon* in Uzbek means tablecloth where prolific assortment of prepared dishes are laid out (Mack and Surina 2005). It is a space where food is served and eaten.

<sup>4</sup> These are the royal (direct descendants of Genghis Khan) and religious groups among Kazakhs which do not belong to any clan. See Malikov (2013) on Khoja identity.



Photo 1: Uzbek table in *Hayit*, or Eid-al-Fitr, set of tableware with an ornament called *Pakhta guli* is specific attribute of Uzbek *dasturkhon*, and is used broadly among Uzbeks. (I. ALIBAYEVA, 2014)

and interpretation of food offered to them in different life cycle events and feasts. Such public events constitute as Handelman states “dense concentrations of symbols and their associations, that are of relevance to particular people” (1998: 9). Considering the symbolic and representative character of feasts, I would like to draw attention to the message of food concerning the host’s identity. How do guests see the food offered to them and, based on that, what opinion do they create about the host family? Particularly, I pay attention to some sorts of food and elements on the table which are considered to bear an ethnic (defining) attribute.

Furthermore, I discuss the cases I witnessed during my stay in southern settlements of Kazakhstan. Using the definition of Robin Fox, a role of gustatory ‘foreigners’, i. e. guests who come from different regions or from the region with distinct food-habits, is crucial for making food a marker of identity. The case I discuss below shows the process of constructing one’s identity based on the food one serves in public events locally called *toy*. Before the case description I give a general overview of Kazakh and Uzbek feasts, focusing particularly on the feast table and food. The recent changes and new trends in serving a feast table will also be given attention.

#### GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE FEASTS CELEBRATED IN THE COMMUNITY

During the one year stay in villages of the South Kazakhstan Province for my field research, I have attended fifteen different kinds of feasts, by Kazakhs



Photo 2: Kazakhs are drinking tea. Bowls in the photo with an ornament called *qoshqarmüyiz* (literally means horn of a ram, male sheep) are becoming widespread among Kazakhs as part of dishes with traditional ornaments. (I. ALIBAYEVA, 2015)

and Uzbeks, called *toy*<sup>5</sup> (in Kazakh) or *tüy* (in Uzbek). In Kazakh national encyclopaedia this concept is explained as an event of festive character where many people gather together (p. 806). I prefer to use the Kazakh version of an emic term *toy* throughout the text, since it is pronounced in the same way by Uzbeks living in Kazakhstan, though in standard Uzbek language the term is written as *tüy*. All types of different scale celebrations such as weddings, celebration of tying a baby into the cradle (Kazakh *besik toy*, Uzbek *besik tüy*), a feast on the occasion of a circumcision of baby boys (Kazakh *sundet toy*, Uzbek *sunnat tüy*), jubilee are referred to as *toy* by Kazakhs and Uzbeks in my field site. Among these feasts, weddings are celebrated most greatly starting from late spring until late autumn. This time is called also ‘a season of *toy*’ (*toyding sezoni* in Kazakh, or *toyni sezoni* in Uzbek). These are the warmest and hottest months in a year: it is also harvest time. Thus, there are economic reasons for doing *toy* in this time because of relatively cheap costs for fruits and vegetables which constitute an essential part of the festive table. Since vegetables are part of the snacks as well as salads and other food, considering the number of guests one needs to buy more of them. Also variety of fruits and vegetables is broader in these months of a year. However in the season of *toy*, it makes some difficulties to reserve desired *toykhana*<sup>6</sup>, a wedding palace, because they are fully booked in ad-

<sup>5</sup> For transliteration of emic terms I used BGN/PCGN romanization system.

<sup>6</sup> *Toykhana* (*toy* is a feast, *khana* is a word adopted from Persian language meaning a house) is a term, used by the locals to refer to the places where people make various feasts.

vance. In his interview to me an owner of one *toykhana* has reported: "... in summer and autumn we work almost without breaks, every day!... the most preferred days, for example weekends and the dates like 06.06., 07.07., 08.08., 09.09., and so on are taken first". A number of guests in weddings depends on the family network and its economic state. Guests of wedding parties are usually relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbours and other acquaintances of an inviting side. An average number of guests is 200–300 people. It can be a minimum 100–120 and the maximum 500–600 guests. Though in few cases the maximum number of guests can go higher than 600. Besides just attending various *toy*, I also participated in planning of feasts. The content of the food to be offered and the tasks during the wedding ceremony are usually discussed among relatives beforehand. Although every ethnic group has its own way of celebration, the content of food on the feast table does not much differ according to an ethnic belonging of a host family. But a minor difference can be found in food and details on the table which I describe below.

#### FEAST FOOD

An abundance of food on the feast table and the types of food vary depending on economic status and regional belonging of a host family. Common food one can find at both Uzbek and Kazakh weddings is fruit in the centre of the table, bread and sweets, drinks, two or four types of salad depending on the economic condition of a family. Dried fruits can be found on wedding tables of relatively prosperous families, since costs for them are high. Plate containing slices of *halal* sausage, boiled meat pieces, *qazy* (horse meat being



Photo 3. An abundantly served table with elements of 'European' food in the Uzbek wedding in Shymkent. A plate containing cherry tomatoes and sliced pepper on the salad leaves is relatively new and becoming trendy, especially in urban settlements.

(I. ALIBAYEVA, 2014)

packed in natural horse intestine), boiled chicken legs and cheese are most common for both Kazakh and Uzbek weddings. I was told that the main difference between Uzbek and Kazakh wedding tables is in the amount of meat offered to guests. There is a consideration that Kazaks serve more meat at *toy*, which is actually the matter of the family's wealth.

As Cynthia Werner (1999) states in her article about feasting in rural Kazakhstan, the quality and quantity of the food in various *toy* are the main topics of village gossip. I have also observed guests discussing the feast table and food. A content of a feast table gave the people an opportunity to estimate families' economic and religious state, or to observe change in their food preferences, thus, change in ethnic identities. Dishes of the Kazakh cuisine such as *qymyz* (horse milk), *qazy* (horse meat sausage), and *besbarmaq* (a dish consisting of boiled meat and dough underneath) are becoming more present in Uzbek *toy* in Kazakhstan (see photo 4). This is considered by their relatives in Uzbekistan as their 'kazakhification' and difference from themselves. Considering feasts as an arena where one can represent his desired identity, there is a need for a careful analysis of each case in order to prevent generalizations. However in this paper I don't aim to analyze the host's activity, but rather focus on the guests interpretation of food which contributes to the construction of a host's identity.

#### REPRESENTATIVE IMAGE OF THE *NOHAT SHÜRVA*

Kazakhs who have ever attended Uzbek *toy* or are good acquainted with the Uzbek cuisine see the *nohat shürva*, chickpea soup, as Uzbek food. From my knowledge and observations of different Uzbek *toy* in the town of Sayram and city Shymkent, I shall say that the *nohat shürva* is usually served for the first course mostly in Uzbek *toy*. Besides, it is cooked on daily basis in some families who grow chickpea and other types of grain. Some Uzbeks say that it is an 'old' way to serve *nohat shürva* at feasts. In one of my conversations, a 49 years old Uzbek woman said: "Before, I don't know why, we would mostly serve *nohat shürva* in our *toy*, but now *besbarmak* (dish of Kazakh cuisine) is served in many *toy* (of Uzbeks)". I am not trying to demonstrate *nohat shürva* as an essential part of Uzbek wedding *dasturkhon*, but I do try to show a message *nohat shürva* gives to guests of an event.

*Nohat shürva* or chickpea soup played an identifying role in the case I would like to describe in this section. Serving a dish which is believed to be typical for another ethnic group may be considered as a fact of identity change. A discussion of a dish that had been offered at one wedding ceremony (*uylenu toy*) in Köktal<sup>7</sup> shows how people conceptualize the food given at

---

<sup>7</sup> I have changed a name of the village. Note that villages with the same name can be found in several regions across Kazakhstan, but they do not refer to my field site.





Photo 4: Festive table in the Uzbek wedding containing *qymyz* and *boursaqs*, fried dough. Presence of these food in Uzbek festive table is a recent phenomenon.

(I. ALIBAYEVA, 2014)

the party. I was invited to a Kazakh wedding there. The wedding ceremony took place in a settlement located close to the Uzbek border, thus it has a significant number of Uzbek population. Chickpea soup (kaz. *nohat sorpa*) was given for the first meal, *manty*<sup>8</sup> for the second. When the wedding came to its end, I drove back together with three guests (two women, and a man) to Shymkent. They were relatives of the bride's elder sister's husband, or in a local term *qudalar*. Suddenly, one of the women expressed her opinion about the *nohat sorpa* (Kazakh way of pronunciation the soup). In her opinion chickpea soup is given in Uzbek *toy* and she had never seen Kazakhs serving chickpea soup at the wedding. She found it very strange and not relevant to Kazakh *dastarkhan*. At the end, she interpreted it as an influence of Uzbek culture and started to count other differences in serving the feast table such as less amount of meat, and absence of *toybastar*<sup>9</sup>, small gifts given to the guests of *toy* (see the photo 5).

She was just othering the host from 'true' (in a local term *nagyzy*) Kazakhs, because their way of serving a feast table and making *toy* differ from the ones she used to visit. It seemed she was just disappointed with a table she was sitting at. The quality and amount of food on her table did not meet her ex-

<sup>8</sup> Filled with minced meat (lamb or beef) dumplings popular in Central Asian cuisine.

<sup>9</sup> Giving gifts called *toybastar* is a relatively new trend in Kazakh *toy*, at least in my field region, although the concept of *toybastar* itself has existed for a long period of time. Meaning 'the beginning of *toy*', *toybastar* is originally a traditional song sung with the aim to express wishes to a host and young couple in Kazakh *toy*. As a way of modernization, gifts given for a guests called *toybastar* became more prevalent in Kazakh *toy* within the last one decade.



Photo 5: Kazakh wedding table. Transparent little bags with chocolates inside placed on the plates are called *toybastar*. (I. ALIBAYEVA, 2015)

peceptions, so she began to think that they served the table in ‘an Uzbek way’ meaning frugally served *dastarkhan*.

Later on, during the conversation with a Kazakh woman in Shymkent, I told her about the food served at the wedding in Köktal. She took it for granted and explained that in many villages of that district Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Tajiks live together. Uzbeks are even the majority in some villages. Thereby, they have an impact on the way of eating and food sharing of Kazakhs. According to her, *nohat sorpa* can be found on the table of many Kazakh families, because they have adopted many habits of Uzbeks, and in general they are a little bit ‘Uzbekized’.

In above-mentioned cases a woman refers to Kazakhs of Köktal as an ‘other’ relying on the difference in their foodways. Similar context is described in the paper of Bellér-Hann (2002) about Uighur attitudes towards the Han in Xinjiang. She states that adoption of Uighur’s food habits by the Han can be considered as an example of crossing ethnic boundaries, and thus contribute to reinforce Uighur’s self-esteem. In the case I described above, it was Kazakhs who are crossing ethnic boundaries and thus were excluded from being ‘true’<sup>10</sup> Kazakhs.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to show the role of food in identification and differentiation acts. I have focused on the representative role of food at feasts and its message guests have taken as meaningful or telling. The discussed

<sup>10</sup> Here ‘true’ is supposed to mean the Kazakh term ‘naghyz’ or Russian ‘nastoyashchiy’.

case was one example for constructing one's identity through foodways. Types of food served at feasts provide guests with a visible ready-to-use data about a host, and guests accordingly construct their opinion about the host without going deeply into different factors left behind of this visual representation. Thus despite sharing of common genealogy, language, and religion, Kazakhs of K ktal were regarded as closer to Uzbeks with whom they share common food habits.

Although I don't claim that the case I have described and discussed in this paper is representative for a whole region, or even for a village, it may however collaborate with same cases in other 'small places' (Eriksen 1995) around the world in establishing an understanding about the processes of ethnic identification.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Avieli, Nir. 2012. *Rice Talks. Food and Community in a Vietnamese Town*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1969. 'Introduction', in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference*. Bergen, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 9–38.
- Bell r-Hann, Ildiko. 2002. 'Temperamental Neighbours: Uighur-Han relations in Xinjiang, Northwest China', in G. Schlee (ed.), *Imagined Differences: Hatred and the Construction of Identity*. Hamburg: Lit, pp. 57–81.
- Diener, A. 2008. 'Diasporic and Transnational Social Practices in Central Asia', *Geography Compass* 2(3): 956–978.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 1995. *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.
- Finke, Peter. 2013. 'Patterns of Identification and Ethnic Differentiation in Central Asia: The Case of The Uzbeks', in P. Finke and G. Schlee, (eds), *CASCA: Centre for Anthropological Studies in Central Asia: Framing the Research, Initial Projects*. Halle (Saale): Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, pp. 1–24.
- Finke, Peter. 2014. *Variations on Uzbek Identity. Strategic Choices, Cognitive Schemas, and Political Constraints in Identification Processes*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Fox, Robin. 'Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective', *Social Issues Research Centre*. Retrieved 15 June 2017 from [http://www.sirc.org/publik/food\\_and\\_eating\\_2.html](http://www.sirc.org/publik/food_and_eating_2.html).
- Handelman, Don. 1998. *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*. New York: Berghahn.
- Kazakh National Encyclopaedia*. 2006. Almaty: Kazakh encyclopaedia press

- Mack, Glenn Randall, and Surina Asele. 2005. *Food Culture in Russia and Central Asia*. Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press
- Malikov, Azim. 2013. 'Khoja in Kazakhstan: Identity Transformations', in P. Finke and G. Schlee (eds), *CASCA: Centre for Anthropological Studies in Central Asia: Framing the Research, Initial Projects*. Halle (Saale): Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, pp. 101–107.
- Werner, Cynthia. 1999. 'The Dynamics of feasting and gift exchange in Rural Kazakstan', in Ingvar Svanberg (ed.), *Contemporary Kazaks. Cultural and Social Perspectives*. Richmond: Curzon, pp. 47–72.

# FOOD AS A MARKER OF IDENTITY IN CHELPEK, KYRGYZSTAN<sup>1</sup>

(AIDA AALY ALYMBAEVA)

*Aida A. Alymbaeva is a doctoral student at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg and associated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany, as well as member of CASCA. Her PhD project focuses on identity politics in Kyrgyzstan. Her previous research experience includes the study of identity issues of Kyrgyz inner migrants and of Kyrgyz traditional knowledge as well as phenomena of sacred sites in Kyrgyzstan.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I focus on food as a marker of identity and a vehicle of its expression in Chelpek<sup>2</sup> village. Chelpek is situated near Karakol town, at the eastern shore of the Yssyk-Kul Lake, in northern Kyrgyzstan. This village is considered to be ethnically distinct, as it is identified with the so called Sart-Kalmaks<sup>3</sup>. This is despite the many similarities of Chelpek with those of other settlements around it that are known as Kyrgyz. The similarities have been observed in the way of life, language, festive and mundane rituals, kinship, marriage, and foodways. People still tend to highlight some differences and in this paper I show what is common and what is different in the food of Chelpek compared to their neighbouring villages that are identified as Kyrgyz. Food can be a good lens for observing and analysing identification processes.<sup>4</sup> The concept of food here includes a particular cuisine with particular courses or dishes and the modes of their preparation along with the ways of serving them at feasts including the rules of sharing and distribution.

The Sart-Kalmaks of Chelpek village are commonly referred to as a group of Western Mongol or Oirat origin that immigrated from the territory of what is now called Xinjiang, particularly from the Tekes area more than one

<sup>1</sup> I thank Soledad Tovar Jimenez, Wolfgang Holzwarth, Louise Bechtold, Indira Alibayeva, and Aksana Ismailbekova for their helpful comments on the earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> For transliteration I use ALA-LC standard and *ö* for *o*; *ü* for *y*; *ng* for *h*.

<sup>3</sup> Identification processes in this village are more complex as based on the contestation of a few concepts – Kalmakness, Sartness and Kyrgyzsness; in the local context the notions of ‘Kalmak’ and ‘Kalmyk’ can have some differences as well. The contestation is based on the memories of the past and of the cultural differences. The vague status of the villagers as being neither minority nor majority complicates the situation shaped by the current national political framework in Kyrgyzstan (read more on this in: Alymbaeva 2014).

<sup>4</sup> It was suggested to look at food as a language with its grammar and syntax (Levi-Strauss 1966; Fischler 1988), and a code and system of messages (Douglas 1972).



Map 1: Location of Chelpe

hundred years ago (Burdukov 1935; Zhukovskaya 1980). Today’s Chelpeki way of life, its traditions, language – almost everything is similar to what is understood to be Kyrgyz. Intermarriages with inhabitants of other villages and regions, mainly with Kyrgyz, are highly frequent. People in Chelpe say, “We became almost Kyrgyz, we marry Kyrgyz, we speak the Kyrgyz language”. For the registration procedure in Kyrgyzstan, they register more and more as Kyrgyz as on the identification card there is still an entry called ‘nationality’. People explain it with bigger chances in their education and working careers.

At the same time, Sart-Kalmaks listed ‘their’ differences in comparison to the surrounding Kyrgyz such as the Kalmak language and their special accent. In fact, just a few of the elderly speak the Kalmak language, but memory about it is taken as a determinant marker. They also named three meal types as very special one. These are *Kalmak-chai* (tea), *Kalmak-nan* (bread) and *kyima-kesme* (noodle soup).

In the paper I first give an outline of foodways in Chelpeki compared with the Kyrgyz cuisine focusing on an example of a feast of meeting in-laws (*kudalar*). Then I give the three ethnographic cases for the three dishes that are considered to be special in Chelpeki. I describe the practices of how food is prepared and consumed in Chelpeki and argue that the actual, though small differences in the foodways of Chelpeki villagers are used to construct their identity.

## AN OUTLINE OF FOODWAYS IN CHELPEK COMPARED WITH KYRGYZ VILLAGES

Now I turn to a brief comparative outline of foodways within the two ‘worlds’ that have been discursively differentiated in the context of Chelpek between Sart-Kalmaks and Kyrgyz.

Burdukov (1935) first described Sart-Kalmaks referring them to nomadic Oirats. This let the following scholars to premise that Sart-Kalmaks and Kyrgyz shared a common nomadic way of life, including shared food preferences with meat in the centre; milk products and flour products also were part of their main food<sup>5</sup>. Living for more than hundred years side by side they now share also etiquette and structure of food, including ideas of hospitality, guests hierarchy based on gender, age and status.<sup>6</sup> Serving pieces of meat (distributing them according to the particular rules) and a mixture of boiled chopped meat with noodle and sauce of chopped onion called *bish-barmak* (lit. in Kyrgyz: five fingers) or *tuuralgan-et* (lit. in Kyrgyz: minced meat) were the main course at the festive events in Chelpek, like in the Kyrgyz villages<sup>7</sup>. *Bish-barmak* can be replaced with *plov* or *pilaf*, which is a kind of fried and stewed meat with carrots and rice. Pilaf has been represented as an Uzbek or Uighur dish. During the last decade, boiled noodles have been replaced by pilaf (at least in the Chui and Yssyk-Kul provinces in the north) due to its convenience with cooking and keeping, as it can be warmed up; and as prices for rice are higher it is also a matter of prestige today. *Boorsok*, deep-fried small pieces of flattened dough is also represented in the festive menu in Chelpek, like in the Kyrgyz villages. As Muslims, Sart-Kalmaks and Kyrgyz share common food taboos, common religious festivities such as *Kurman-ait* or Eid al-Adha, *Orozo-ait* or Eid al-Fitr, rituals of circumcision and marriage – *Nikah*. They practice a common system of life cycle rituals, including *tülöö* that is food sharing with religious meanings based on sacrifice of an animal in order to ask for blessings to achieve some goals, mainly connected to health.<sup>8</sup>

The everyday menu in Chelpek was also identical with those from the Kyrgyz villages: the basis was composed of potato, bread and flour products, butter and fat, tea and sugar. Meat is becoming more festivity foodstuff because of its high prices.

<sup>5</sup> See the article by Natalia Zhukovskaya on food of the nomads in Central Asia (1979).

<sup>6</sup> M. Aitbaev (1963), Saul Abramzon (1971), Aidarbek Kochkunov (2010), Ismailbekova (forthcoming) have broadly described the food culture that is considered to be traditional Kyrgyz. Here, writing about Kyrgyz food I refer to these works and to my own experience as one who grew up in the family considered to be Kyrgyz.

<sup>7</sup> A similar dish with a similar name is a part of the Kazakh cuisine as well.

<sup>8</sup> I thank Indira Alibayeva and Louise Bechtold for indicating the Kazakh term *qudayi*, the Uzbek term *khudoyi* for the similar event in the corresponding cultures; the same word *kudayi* is used in the southern parts of Kyrgyzstan too.



Photo 1: Meat is distributed and being chopped to be put on *pilaf*, at a *tülöö* dinner during Ramadan, Chelpek. (A. A. ALYMBAEVA, 2011)

An invitation of a guest to taste bread – *nan ooz tiiüü* – and to have a cup of tea was also a sign of hospitality in Chelpek just like in the Kyrgyz villages. Still this practice is in less use in the urban areas as it had been in the part of Chelpek that is closer to the town. However, in cases when a guest entered a house, tea was certainly offered and served.

The basic number of ingredients for a table setting was also similar to any of those I saw in the Kyrgyz villages; these are bread, sugar and butter or margarine. This number could be more diverse depending on an income of a family; for instance honey, sweets, cookies, and jam could then be included. Milk for tea was a must-be in Chelpek, as it was in the Kyrgyz villages. Although milk slowly disappears from the everyday menu, it is also becoming a sign of a household's sufficiency.

The main course is served in the evening. As for the morning and the mid-day, the majority of Chelpek villagers, as well as the inhabitants of the other Kyrgyz villages, have a lighter meal such as bread and tea and remnants from the previous evening. A dinner as a main meal of a day consists of one hot meal, again mostly prepared with oil, potato and/or pastry, fried or boiled. This is accompanied again with tea and bread, sugar and butter on the table.

A festive meal is also identical in Chelpek and other villages that are called Kyrgyz. In Chelpek during my fieldwork year in 2011–2012, I observed the feast of meeting new in-laws (*kudalar*), a wedding, and a funeral. What I observed in Chelpek was similar to the events that I have witnessed in the Kyrgyz villages. The ceremonial of these events, the set of courses and their serving order, the rules for seating the guests and for the distribution of pieces of meat, the way of serving dishes and setting the table with the number of must-be components – everything was practically identical or the same. In



the following section I describe a feast that I took part in Chelpek in November 2011 in order to show the similarity and difference of Chelpeki and ‘Kyrgyz’ food.

#### A FEAST IN CHELPEK COMPARED WITH A ‘KYRGYZ’ FEAST

As a comparative example and to show the similarity with the Kyrgyz culture,<sup>9</sup> I now briefly describe the feast on the occasion of welcoming new in-laws in a bride’s house. It is when relatives and close circle from a side of a groom come to a house of a bride to take her with them, after the main negotiations were settled on neutral territory. The bride’s side calls this feast *kız berüü* (lit. giving a daughter). The groom’s side calls this event *kelin koldon aluu* (lit. taking a bride from hands [of her parents]). All the terms were the same in Chelpek. The groom’s side came from Bishkek and they were considered to be ethnically Kyrgyz.

Here I focus only on what relates to food excluding the ritual (and gift exchange), economic and social aspects for the sake of brevity. The whole number and sequence of dishes represented the long and active process of exchange between various cultures living in this part of the country. The table setting was prepared to be as rich as possible. It included a few types of bread: baked flat round bread of different size called *tockoch*<sup>10</sup> that is associated with the Uighur and Uzbek cultures, and *boorsok* which is considered to be Kyrgyz bread. The tablecloth was also covered with all possible types of pastry and confectionery: homemade and manufacture cookies; deep fried twisted pastry – *khvorost*; fried sweet noodle mixed with honey and raisins – *chack-chack*, both are remembered to be adopted from the Uighur and Tatar cuisine; and baked small pieces of sweet yeast dough called *bulochki* as an adoption from the Russian cousin. Various types of salads and snacks included fresh salad as a variation of a Greek one; spicy salads as a representation of the Dungan and Korean cuisine; plates of sliced sausage out of horse-flesh and horse fat – *chuchuck*, and boiled horse rectum – *karta* that are considered to be traditional Kyrgyz (nomadic) delicacies; baked and decorated pieces of chicken as an adoption from Russian cuisine. Butter, honey, fried fruits, *rafinad* or lump sugar, and sweets of different kinds fulfilled the table setting. Drinks were also represented at a part of a table setting: some juice, mineral water, and alcohol. The tea and alcohol were the main drinks at the feast.

Two tables were prepared. The first one, larger but lower and richer, was for the main part of the guests including the parents of the groom. The second

<sup>9</sup> See for example a short description of a Kyrgyz feast for in-laws in Kochkunov 2010: 52–53.

<sup>10</sup> In the Chui and Yssyk-Kul provinces, where Chelpek belongs to, the Russian-speaking populations were more represented, and a Russian word *lepishka* was widely adopted to call the flat round bread along with *tockoch*.



Photo 2: A table set to meet the new in-laws, Chelpek (A. A. ALYMBAEVA, 2011)

one was a normal high or ‘European’ table in a smaller room with similar but lesser numbers of components on it, but fancier: a fancy cake embellished the centre of the table. A few bottles of champagne and coloured serviette forming flowers concluded the picture. This table was prepared for the youth – the bride and the groom with their friends.

The feast itself took about seven hours and included five rounds of food sharing separated by entertaining breaks. During these intervals the hosts cleaned the tablecloths in order to prepare the next rounds.

The first round included the meeting of a groom’s side at the gate of a yard by the hosts. Three girls held bid plates filled with pastry and sweets to meet every guest who in their turn was taking a piece from the plates. After the guests had taken their places around the bigger table (the men sat down at the right side from the entrance and the women at its left side) the main part started. The *Kalmak-tea* was served first: black tea with milk was brought in smaller bowls to each of the guests; then in front of each guest the hosts put a tea spoon of butter into each bowl and crumbled the bread – of the *Kalmak-nan*– into this buttered tea. This was shortly announced during the serving. After the first bowl, the black tea with milk was served without butter and bread during the whole event; some of the guests asked for black tea without milk. This opening tea-round is for tasting all the snacks and salads prepared.

For the second round *shorpo* with *samsa* were served. *Shorpo* is the mutton bouillon with boiled potato and some carrot. *Samsa* is a small pie filled with minced meat and onion baked in a *tandyr* (a local version of pronouncing of tandoor which is a round clay oven; can be baked in an oven as well) and it



Photo 3: A feast table set for the youth – a bride and groom and their friends, Chelpek (A. A. ALYMBAEVA, 2011)

is an adoption from the Uighur and Uzbek cuisine. *Shorpo* with *samsa*<sup>11</sup> can be called typical meals for the second round at Kyrgyz feasts.

The course of the third round is normally not liquid. It could be fried or baked meat with a trimming (can be rice) at the Kyrgyz feasts. Or it can be meat dumplings – *manty* – as it was this time. *Manty* were adopted from the Dungan cuisine. At this feast *manty* were served. This round was accompanied with tea; the ‘normal’ or plain tea without butter and crumbled bread.

The main meal was served at the fourth round. It was *besh-barmak* with the number of bones of a horse, which were carefully taking into account each guest, put into the big bowls. *Besh-barmak* is considered to be the main meal of the Kyrgyz that consists of pieces of meat with bones – *ustukan*, It is to be distributed among the participants together with a mix of minced boiled horseflesh with boiled noodle and an onion sauce.

The guests were left alone for *besh-barmak*. They were left alone because their number was counted and each of them was provided with a bone relevant to the status of a guest in the big bowls. The number of big bowls was equal to the number of small ‘circles’ (from four to five people sitting next to each other) the guests were divided into. The meat was accompanied with the strong mutton brew that was brought to each of the guest in smaller bowls.

The mixture of minced meat and noodles was prepared in a smaller low house at the yard; the house where the whole food preparation was carried out. This prepared dish was brought to the guests in a big bowl and then dis-

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in the southern parts of Kazakhstan *samsa* is referred only to the Uzbek culture and was not widely accepted to be a part of festive menu as in central parts of Kyrgyzstan. I thank Indira Alibayeva for paying my attention to this.

tributed to each plate. It is becoming a norm that the meat is chopped and mixed with noodle and onion sauce by the hosts and served on plates mixed already. The above mentioned tradition required cutting meat in circles by participants of the food sharing and thus every guest could take part in the preparation. Each of the women was provided with a plastic bag at this stage of the feast to put her and her husband's *ustukans*, if he was there, to take meat with them.

After *besb-barmak* was eaten and a short pause for washing hands, the fifth round was started. The tea, this time green tea, was also suggested as it is considered to be helpful for digestion.

After the final blessing, the guests could leave the room but not yet the yard. In the yard the hosts suggested to have a last glass of vodka together with a last toast. This is part of paying respect and not only entertainment. The hosts escorted guests to their cars with salads and drinks and taking last minute toasts. The hosts gave the guests their part of the food and foodstuff in return similar as it was listed above. A huge number of foods is usually prepared and eaten at such feasts. The rest could be consumed on the next day when neighbours and relatives are invited.

The described event was almost identical to the similar kinds of events I saw in villages that are referred to as Kyrgyz. The range of courses, dishes and rituals were also identical to the Kyrgyz ones. The language was Kyrgyz, the songs were in Kyrgyz. The difference was tea that was served at the opening of the dinner. This was the tea that Chelpeki villagers call *Kalmak-chai*.

### THE THREE 'CHELPEKI' DISHES

The assortment of dishes described in the previous section and an order of their sequence form the 'language' of communication shared by the Sart-Kalmaks and the Kyrgyz. However, Chelpeki villagers and some of the people from the surrounding area listed a few differentiating elements. What was different in Chelpek in the opinion of my interlocutors were *Kalmak-chai* (tea), *kyima-kesme* (noodles) and *Kalmak-nan* (bread). Chelpeki villagers bring these courses into media and films, by telling and performing their cooking and serving skills<sup>12</sup>. In the following I show how these food types have special meanings in marking Sart-Kalmakness.

<sup>12</sup> *Kalmak chai üstündögü baian* [A story over a cup of tea]. 2012. Radio interview with Toktobek Zholdoshev, publ. 27.09.2012. Retrieved 3 October 2014 from <http://www.azattyk.org>; '*Köldü jeektei, Chelpek aiylı* [Along the lake, the village Chelpek]. Karakol local telecast. Retrieved 20 November 2014 from [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

### *KALMAK-CHAI*

The described serving of the Kalmak-tea at the feast is one of the main forms of its practice in Chelpek nowadays. It is a part of a ceremonial menu and a sign of greetings of the guests.

One day I visited Ayganysh-*apa*<sup>13</sup> in Chelpek in order to tell her that I had visited her daughter and her granddaughter in Russia. Ayganysh-*apa* was in her seventies. She lives with her younger son and his family. At that moment she was with her two grandchildren. It was the time when breakfast was long over and lunch time has not yet come. She invited me to have a cup of tea. We entered a smaller construction in front of a bigger house in their yard. Normally, people build such smaller constructions out of two rooms as a temporary housing before a bigger house could be finished. Then they become summer houses.

Ayganysh-*apa* quickly prepared a table. The main components such as bread, sugar and jam had already been kept in small bowls on it. Boiled hot water was also ready in a thermos. She brought milk and butter from a fridge which was in the same room. In silence she poured black tea in a bowl, added milk and a tea spoon of butter. Then she crumbed some bread into this bowl and gave it with her right hand to me. I already knew what kind of tea that was. It was *Kalmak-chai*. I was told in many of the houses of Chelpek that such a tea was their special type of tea, served mainly for special or honoured guests, such as in-laws, for example. In many cases that I witnessed, the serving of *Kalmak-chai* was performed and commented on as something unique to this village.

However, the ordinary routine black tea with milk was mainly served without adding butter and crumbling bread into it. Some of Chelpeki villagers explained this with the accommodation to the Kyrgyz way of life and by the misunderstanding of many visitors who did not want to have butter and bread in their bowls. I think it was because many Kyrgyz also have such a meal but as a part of mundane food, and not for a guest. In this particular situation, that I described, Ayganysh-*apa* served the Kalmak-tea as it was part of her everyday routine. I saw that it was not a ceremonial performance, but part of her everyday practice. It could be also because she belongs to an older generation to whom such a tea was part of everyday life.

I was told in Chelpek that ideally Kalmak-tea should be boiled in a cauldron over an open fire. The tea brew and milk should be boiled together in the cauldron and butter or fat and salt should be added. As I described, the recipe was modernised with adding milk into tea in a bowl but the idea is still there: a mixture of tea, milk, butter and bread, so that it becomes a more caloric type of food but not a simple drink anymore. One of the older men in Chelpek told me that such a tea was particularly good to satisfy the guests' hunger

---

<sup>13</sup> *Apa* means mother in Kyrgyz and normally is used towards an older women.



Photo 4: Serving *Kalmak-chai*, Chelpek

(A. A. ALYMBAEVA, 2011)

at the first moments of their visit after a long journey. Chelpeki tea is a transformed remnant of a nomadic cuisine, when tea was cooked out of the main components of nomadic cuisine such as milk and sheep fat.<sup>14</sup>

The described Kalmak-tea in its variations is still represented in different parts of Kyrgyzstan as part of the ordinary meal. But its linkage to the ‘Kalmak’ is forgotten, it remains to be called this way only in Chelpek and it is only in Chelpek that this tea is represented and served as something special. This specialty is linked to ‘Kalmakness’ by villagers. In most of the cases, it is a normal black tea with milk, poured in a bowl, with added butter and sugar or/and salt, and finally, bread’s crumbs are dropped into a bowl with tea. This type of tea was represented in Karakol about generations ago, and could be served for breakfast in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, such as Alay area. It is still the fastest and easiest type of meal in the rural area.

As for Chelpek, stories and legends that could keep such linkages with the Kalmyk past are not remembered. Thus, memory on depicting themselves as a part of the bigger Mongol-Kalmyk world is gradually weakening, but not disappearing. Chelpeki villagers tend to formulate and perform their tea and its serving as a marker making them Sart-Kalmaks. It was an ordinary food that became today a marker of identity.

<sup>14</sup> Natalia Zhukovskaya (1979), Sergey Abashin (2001), and Mair and Hoh (2009) write about the tight interrelation of the nomadic way of life and the Kalmak-tea that was an easy and fast hot dish made of the pastoralist main products: milk and fat. These studies of the Kalmak-tea bring us to the wider concept of the Mongol-tea. Mongol-tea or Kalmyk-tea was and is represented as a special marker of the Mongol-speaking cultures.



Photo 5: Heating *tandyr* up for putting bread in, Chelpek (A. A. ALYMBAEVA, 2011)

#### *KALMAK-NAN AND TANDYR*

The use of a clay oven *tandyr* and production of *Kalmak-nan* are the peculiarity of Chelpek. Once we had a long talk with Erlan-ava<sup>15</sup>, a man in his fifties, a neighbour of my host family in Chelpek. He told me about his family, his youth and life in Chelpek and how he remembered it. One of his memories was about *tandyr*. He told that there were four to five *tandyr* at each street in his childhood, and they were not hidden behind walls. He told:

“As a rule, when the newly-fledged bread had been taken from *tandyr*, every passer-by was suggested to taste the bread, and that persons could not refuse trying the bread. Even Russians would have come to taste the bread. And now, all the *tandyr*s are in the yards. And when I later told my wife, when she takes the bread out of *tandyr*, that could be good to invite people to try the bread (*ooz tiigiziüü*), she brushed away my words saying, ‘These are your Kalmak habits!’”

My husband, who helped me a lot during my fieldwork, started to describe the *tandyr* with an aperture at the top which he had seen in the south of Kyrgyzstan, in Dzhahalal-Abad area. Erlan-ava said the Uighur village have such *tandyr* in the neighbourhood, they had them movable for sale too. I never saw *tandyr* in Kyrgyz villages; the Kyrgyz have ovens that they learnt to build and use from the Russians (or better to say Slavic-speaking populations). These ovens are of square form and bread is put in it on a baking tray.

<sup>15</sup> *Ava* (Kyrg.) is an addressing to an older man in this area.



Photo 6: Kalmak-nan in *tandyr*, Chelpek

(A. A. ALYMBAEVA, 2011)

In Chelpek, *tandyr* has an aperture at the top. After the oven is heated and the fire is not strong anymore, a baker pastes the round pieces of dough close to one another on the inside walls of the *tandyr*. Then the aperture is carefully closed with pieces of fabric, or simply with old clothes. After a necessary time period the ready bread can be taken out.

Chelpek is associated with a nomadic Oirat past and its inhabitants use such a type of oven that was practiced mainly by the settled Muslim populations. *Tandyr* is mentioned in one of the variations of the story of the Sart-Kalmaks origin. In this story the two Muslim men who became progenitors of the Sart-Kalmaks had to stay in the Tekes area of present Xinjiang among the Kalmaks (Oirats). They built a *tandyr* and started to bake bread and to sell it. By doing so they grew rich.

Nowadays, some of the Chelpeki villagers organized baking workshops in their yards by building three to twelve *tandyr* and by hiring people to bake the bread every day, followed by distributing bread among shops and bazaars in Karakol in order to be sold. Villagers told they have a special dough recipe to make bread as tasty as aromatic and beautifully ruddy but also long storable. They told that to knead dough they use milk and butter but not their artificial substitutes. These round bread flats have been called *Kalmak-nan* and are normally the size of a palm of the hand, much smaller than those widely spread flat bread ascribed to Uyghurs. In shops and bazaars *Kalmak-nan* is sold in packages of ten pieces. I used to buy such packages as a food souvenir from Chelpek<sup>16</sup>. For the big festivity events, such as weddings

<sup>16</sup> One of the meanings of the word *chelpek* in Kyrgyz is bread, particularly, deep fried flat bread. It is mentioned in one of the stories I heard from a couple of





Photo 7: *Kalmak-nan* is ready to be taken out, Chelpek (A. A. ALYMBAEVA, 2012)

or receiving of in-laws, Chelpeki villagers baked even smaller bread flats so that two–three of them could be placed on an open hand. Preparing the dough, forming it into pieces and baking of them is a social event of meeting and communication for women, as it requires many hands and thus gathers many relatives and close neighbours to help.

So, bread baked in the *tandyr*, an oven that is known to be typical of settled cultures in Central Asia, is part of an image making foodstuff of this village. This is the village that was and is associated with a nomadic group of Western Mongol origin. Thinking of *tandyr* and *Kalmak-nan* let suppose that the fathers of Sart-Kalmaks could have adopted the *tandyr* from the settled cultures with which they had come to live side by side. Most likely, the core of the village’s population was formed by different ethnic components in the past, partly by nomads who had to settle for different reasons, and partly by representatives of settled Muslim groups.<sup>17</sup> What is important for the considering topic, *Kalmak-nan* has been represented by the villagers as their specialty which in combination with the *Kalmak-chai* makes them Sart-Kalmaks.

◀ Chelpeki inhabitants on the origin of the village’s name. In some other parts of Kyrgyzstan, such as the Chui province, people could use it for a dish that is cooked of some meat, potato, carrots and bigger pieces of flat unleavened dough.

<sup>17</sup> Bübüaysha Alymbaeva (1966) asserts the composite character of the group. Anvar Mokeev (2013) gives his hypothesis on the component of Muslim settled populations from East Turkestan (particularly, Kashgar) as part of the group formation.

### KYIMA-KESME

The third dish that was listed by Chelpeki villagers as their special course was *kyima-kesme*. *Kyima* means chopped or minced meat, and *kesme* means noodle in Kyrgyz. This is a type of soup with boiled minced meat, onion and noodle. It is a soup more for mundane food. I spent my first day in Chelpek in the house of Bektur Mansurov and his wife Totu-*ezhe*<sup>18</sup> in summer 2011. We were sitting in their older part of the house that they used for hot summer days. It was a small room. We sat at the *topchan*, a raised wooden platform in the right corner of the room near to the *ochok*, a furnace with a built-in cauldron. We sat around a low table that was set with bread, sugar, butter, and jam on it. While we had been talking with Bektur-*ava*, Totu-*ezhe* brought a mutton bone and started to cut meat off it. Then she chopped meat finely up together with onion. She also prepared dough out of flour and salted water. Meanwhile, she boiled water in the cauldron and put the minced meat into boiling water while stirring it slowly. While the soup was slowly boiling, Totu-*ezhe* thinly rolled out dough, then poured flour on it and rolled it in so it became a long roll. She cut it into thin pieces and then shook it up. Thus, she made hand-made noodle. Totu-*ezhe* put the noodles into the boiling soup and in a couple of minutes the soup was ready. She poured the soup into big bowls for each of us. Then they commented that this was *kyima-kesme*, the special Chelpeki soup, an inexpensive and fast way of cooking a hot meal.

The way of this soup cooking became even easier with ready minced meat and half-prepared wheat-flour noodle available in the market. I ate such soup cooked out of ready foodstuff in one of the houses where I went together with a group of teenagers to commemorate their classmate who passed away a couple of days ago. Funeral and commemoration take many days while each relative, friend, neighbour and colleague of a late person should pay a visit to his/her house to pray. The family of the late person should meet everyone and provide them with tea and food. In this case the modernised version of *kyima-kesme* out of half-prepared foodstuff is one of the affordable options to feed a big number of visitors.

I have ‘borrowed’ this recipe from Chelpek. I am cooking this soup now not so often using ready minced meat and half-prepared market noodle. Once I cooked it for a Kyrgyz guest, a father of my colleague who visited her in Germany. After I served the soup commenting on a recipe from Chelpek, he said it tasted very much like a Kyrgyz *besbarmak* [to remind: it is a thick dish of chopped boiled meat mixed with boiled noodle and boiled chopped onion dressing] it was just a liquid kind of version. I asked him if he had ever met this kind of soup before and he replied that he had not.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ezhe* means a sister in Kyrgyz and a typical way of addressing to an older woman, in Chelpek as well.

One young woman, who was born and grew up in Chelpek, lives in a neighbouring village considered to be a Kyrgyz village. She told me how her neighbours had been surprised how she managed to cook such a tasty soup in a short period of time that was equal to a time of boiling one tea pot. Since then, she laughed telling that they usually ask her to cook *kyima-kesme* for them as they find it tasty. The villagers perceived this soup to be a dietary and still saturating meal. This combination of characteristics of food as dietary and still filling shows a common (for Chelpeki villagers, as well as for the Kyrgyz) perception of dietary food. It is normally considered not to be filling but the fat was understood to be filling. The soup that is not fat but still filling, told the villagers, could be useful for healing purposes. The ability to cook a hot meal fast is one of the modern needs and this soup satisfies it. Thus, it can be seen how modern ideas of health and busy life are being brought into the food representation in Chelpek.

## CONCLUSION

Described assortment and classification of foodstuffs, taking Levi-Strauss's (1966) metaphor, is a language of communication that is understandable for both, the Sart-Kalmaks and the Kyrgyz. What my descriptions above showed is that Chelpeki food is structured in practically the same way as that of the surrounding ethnically Kyrgyz settlements. The language of food consists of a certain range of dishes and ways of cooking and serving them. It also includes the hierarchy of the guests' and the hosts' location around the table. A Kyrgyz family from some other parts of Kyrgyzstan, by visiting Chelpek, would easily understand the meal system there. The same applies for any Chelpeki villager visiting any other house of a Kyrgyz in other parts of the country. This is because they both share the food system within the similar codes it reflects (taking Douglas's idea of a meal as a code). For both the meal means invitation to be included, even temporarily, into a closer circle.

At the same time, there are the three dishes that have been represented to be different in Chelpek. The villagers bring them into public via video and television broadcast showing how to cook them. It is hard to assert whether these narratives on Sart-Kalmak special food are the result of the post-Soviet wave of 'national revivalism' because I did not find any documentation of their food culture from the past. Most likely, there were already similarities in the foodways of new migrants who came to the current Chelpek in the second half of the nineteenth century, because of the shared nomadic way of life. They could already adopt the *tandyr* practice from local groups at former territories. It could also be, and I tend to take this seriously, that this group was a mixture of representatives of different cultures such as nomadic and settled ones that were united by Islam and had lived some time together in the Tekes area before moving to the shore of Yssyk-Kul.

What my field observations also show is the possibility to track the cultural exchanges through food and foodways and their use and interpretations nowadays. It is shown how some drinks, as the Kalmak-tea, are still practiced, brought into the ceremonial sphere, and turned into a marker of Sart-Kalmakness in Chelpek. At the same time, a similar type of tea is still prepared as part of ordinary food by some of the Kyrgyz, but the linkage to the Mongol/Kalmyk tea has been forgotten. The use of *tandyr* in Chelpek can be understood as a material linkage to the settled cultures in Central Asia that was named by the nomads with the word ‘Sart’. The case of the Chelpeki soup shows how people use modern ideas of health and fast life in the representations of food.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abashin, Sergey. 2001. ‘Chai v Sredney Azii: istoria napitka v 18–19 vekakh’, in S. Arutiunov and T. Voronina (eds), *Traditsionnaia pishcha kak vyrazhenie etnicheskogo samosoznania. Traditional Food as an Expression of Ethnic Identity*. Moscow: Nauka, pp. 204–230.
- Abramzon, Saul. 1971. *Kirgizy i ikh etnogeneticheskie i istoriko-kul'turnye svyazi*. Leningrad: Nauka, pp. 140–153.
- Aitbaev, M. 1963. ‘Pishcha kirgizov 19 i nachala 20 vekov’, *Izvestia Akademii Nauk Kirgizskoy SSR: Seriya obschestvennykh nauk* V(1): 13–23.
- Alymbaeva, Aida. 2014. ‘Mezhdu ‘sartom’ i ‘kalmakom’: Politika identichnosti v Kyrgyzstane’, *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4: 45–55.
- Alymbaeva, Büdüaisha. 1966. ‘K voprosu o sblizhenii narodov Kirgizii’, in *Trudiaschiesya Kirgizii v bor'be za stroitel'stvo sotsializma i kommunizma*. Frunze: Ilim, pp. 200–212.
- Burdukov, Aleksey. 1935. ‘Kara-Kol'skiye kalmyki (sart-kalmyki)’, *Sovetskaia etnografiya* 6: 47–78.
- Douglas, Mary. 1972. ‘Deciphering a Meal’. *Daedalus: Myth, Symbol, and Culture* 101/1 (Winter): 61–81.
- Fischler, Claude. 1988. ‘Food, Self and Identity’, *Anthropology of Food. Social Science Information* 27 (London: SAGE): 275–292.
- Ismailbekova A. Forthcoming. *Blood Ties and the Native Son: The Poetics of Patronage in Kyrgyzstan*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kochkunov, Aidarbek. 2010. ‘The Ritual of Hospitality in Traditional and Modern Kyrgyz Culture’, *Anthropology of the Middle East* 5(2): 36–58.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. ‘The Culinary Triangle’, *Partisan Review* 33: 586–595.

- Mair, Viktor H. & Hoh, Erling. 2009. *The True History of Tea*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Mokeyev, Anvar. 2013. *Novyi vzgliad na vopros o proiskhozhdenii sart-kalmakov*, Web-site of the Kyrgyz agency 'AkiPress'. Retrieved 31 May 2013 from <http://akipress.org/kghistory/>.
- Zhukovskaya, Natalia L. 1979. 'Pishcha kochevnikov Tsentral'noi Azii (K voprosu ob ekologicheskikh osnovakh formirovaniya modeli pitania)', *Sovetskaya etnografiya*, 5 (September-October): 64–75.
- Zhukovskaya, Natalia L. 1980. 'Issyk-kul'skiye kalmaki (sart-kalmaki)', *Etnicheskiye protsessy u natsionalnykh grupp Sredney Azii i Kazakhstana*. Moscow.



# “THE ONLY ORGAN WHICH HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH POLITICS IS THE STOMACH”: KYRGYZ AND UZBEKS NEGOTIATE THEIR FOOD AS MARKERS OF IDENTIFICATIONS

(BAKTYGUL KARIMOVA)

*Baktygul Karimova studied Kyrgyz Philology at the State University Osh, Kyrgyzstan from 1993 to 1997. She has a Master Degree in Islamic Studies, New Oriental Philology and Social Anthropology from the University of Bern (2008–2012). Currently, she is enrolled as a PhD student at the Anthropology Department of Zurich University. Her PhD project is part of the SNF-project ‘Ethnic Differentiation, Interethnic Relations and Conflict in Central Asia: The Case of the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan’. This project studies the process of ethnic differentiation and interethnic relations in four Central Asian countries, in which the Uzbeks form a significant minority. In this study the ethnical aspects of conflicts and political mobilization are being investigated. In her thesis Karimova examines the case of Kyrgyzstan as part of the aforementioned wider research project.*

## INTRODUCTION

The material of this article is based on my ethnographic research since 2013 in southern Kyrgyzstan. I conducted my research mostly in Osh city and the neighboring towns around Osh city such as Nookat, Kyzyl-Kiya, Ozgen, and Batken. Current research findings have been complemented with the secondary sources such as mass media and locally published materials. The genre of this article is descriptive. Later material will be integrated into my PhD dissertation.

Everyone has been affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the conflict in Osh in 2010. According to the opinions of my informants, there were some mistrust and tensions even amongst those who were not directly involved in the conflict. Despite all these tensions, kitchens were not closed and food was served everyday. In this short paper I focus on how two ethnic groups like Uzbeks and Kyrgyz negotiate their food, eating habits, and food culture since the Osh conflict in 2010. The question of the significance of food culture for interethnic relations of two ethnic groups and their integration strategies is explored. I argue that the specificity of the Uzbeks minority’s economic niche in southern Kyrgyzstan contribute to the integration of Uzbeks into the

main stream of Kyrgyzstan society in the aftermath of the Osh conflict. To put it differently, food is used as an intentional identity marker in order to negotiate their position within the unstable socio-political environment of southern Kyrgyzstan.

In southern Kyrgyzstan, guests of any café and restaurant pay very close attention to the ethnicity of the cook. Any service in the south is culturally specific and thus is the best way to differentiate one group from another. In other words, every ethnic group keeps its own economic niche (producing food, business, service) thereby generating its unique qualities. The case of Uzbek cooks manifests this difference because Uzbeks are widely accepted as having good cuisine through the utilization of vegetable and fruits. Uzbek cooks are also competent at preparing other Central Asian and Russian food like beefsteaks, lagman (noodle with meat and vegetable sauce), and manty (meat stuffed dumplings). In contrast, the Kyrgyz are competent mostly in meat distribution and consumption. There is even a stereotype which states that Uzbeks are competent in the kitchen whilst Kyrgyz are lazy meat eaters. Thus the differences are cemented on the basis of stereotypes. I would like to explore these stereotypes using the example of *tandyr samsa* as the main food of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan.

#### DIFFERENT DISCOURSES AROUND UZBEK CUISINE AFTER 2010

Shortly after the ethnic riots between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in June 2010, the Uzbek pop-star Yulduz Usmanova released her song “To the Kyrgyz” (*Qyrgyzlarga*). In her song she blames the Kyrgyz for the recent events. Usmanova demands that the Kyrgyz apologize to the Uzbeks. She claims that the Kyrgyz would starve without the Uzbek farmers and bakers. In the song she asks the following question to the Kyrgyz: *Qymyzynga kym ham toyady?*<sup>1</sup>; meaning literary, only *kymys* is left and it cannot be enough to feed people. The content of this song provoked a severe response<sup>2</sup>. The songs by Yulduz Usmanova were banned from radio and shops<sup>3</sup>. Nowadays the name of the pop-star is a taboo in the Kyrgyz Republic. But the discussions about the song still continue online amongst the Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth<sup>4</sup>. The debate has now moved from the topic of the song itself to a general cultural conflict between the two ethnic groups.

<sup>1</sup> Kymyz, fermented mare’s milk is the National beverage of the Kyrgyz

<sup>2</sup> ‘*Yrdan chykkkan chyr*’. 2010. Retrieved 24. October 2015 from [http://www.azattyk.org/content/Kyrgyzstan\\_Uzbekistan\\_Usmanova\\_Song/2085867.html](http://www.azattyk.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Uzbekistan_Usmanova_Song/2085867.html). Taken from Megoran, Nick. 2012. *Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan: “Understanding and Responding to Nationalism”*. London: Chatham House, pp. 7.

<sup>3</sup> ‘*Kyrgyz Fifth channel vs Uzbek singer Yulduz Usmanova*’. 2010. Retrieved 12. November 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9nCVo3e2dk>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘*Pesnia Yulduz Usmanovoi*’. 2010. Retrieved 12. November 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oqMxIJ9C7M>.



The ethnic disturbances, exacerbated by Usmanova's insulting song, have created new attitudes among Kyrgyz with regard to food. On the one hand some Kyrgyz nationalists are of the opinion that the Kyrgyz people have adequately nourished themselves for centuries without Uzbeks and that they will continue to do so. They avoid many things designated as 'Uzbek'. They do not recognize the Uzbek minority as an indigenous ethnicity of Kyrgyzstan and see them as immigrants (*kelgyn*). They regret that Uzbeks did not leave the country after 2010. The nationalist Kyrgyz see Uzbeks as immigrants and they try to make it clear that Kyrgyz have priority say in Kyrgyzstan, because it is, after all, 'their home'. One of the most frequently occurring wishes of this group is that Uzbeks should not be arrogant towards Kyrgyz.

However, many Kyrgyz living in southern Kyrgyzstan used to enjoy Uzbek food cuisine. The conflict raised contradictory ideas about identity and food. On the one hand some Kyrgyz people go to a restaurant with a Kyrgyz owner, or a restaurant with a Kyrgyz name out of solidarity, even though every one of them is aware that the cooks in the restaurant are mainly Uzbek. They justify this habit with the solidarity to the Kyrgyz and are very content and proud that Kyrgyz receive their money. This is because, in the opinion of this group, the provider is the Kyrgyz and not the Uzbek. So in their mind, the Uzbek would not be able to earn his money if the Kyrgyz did not eat at those places. For these people it is hard to enjoy their favourite food without an internal conflict related to matters of ethnicity. Kyrgyz feel obliged to support people of their own ethnic identity.



Photo 1: Cafe-Kyrgyzstan. The owner of the café is an Uzbek person. Nookat (B. KARIMOVA/U. ABDRAHITOV, 2015)

However, many Kyrgyz of southern Kyrgyzstan prefer to eat Uzbek food. In such situations Kyrgyz say that the most important thing is that the food is tasty. The problem of identity enters here because people, despite of how they identify their ethnicity, believe that Uzbeks are the best cooks with their recipes. The Kyrgyz cannot live without Uzbek food but, at the same time, Kyrgyz have to take the side of their ethnic groups. If Kyrgyz accept Uzbek food in public it means they are betraying their own Kyrgyz identity. Food matters in identification of people in times of post-conflict situations and brings contradictory views and experiences around identity and food. In the subsequent sections, I will illustrate how people find ways of negotiating their own identities in relations to food.

### TANDYR SAMSA

Despite some ethnic segregation the southern Kyrgyz have not stopped enjoying the Uzbek cuisine, particularly *tandyr samsa* which is especially cherished. *Tandyr samsa* is viewed as local food instead of dividing along ethnic lines. The uniqueness of *tandyr samsa* is that mainly it is made by Uzbeks and consumed mostly by Kyrgyz. *Tandyr samsa* is in between the two ethnic groups. This makes their ethnic identities blur and push people to go beyond ethnic boundaries. A few words about its composition are important to give the reader an idea about *tandyr samsa*.

*Tandyr samsa* is made from dough, meat, onions and spices and is baked in an earthen oven (*tandyr*). In the opinion of local people, the best *tandyr samsa* must have a crispy dough, a juicy broth, big pieces of meat and should be big enough to be a meal in itself. Eating *tandyr samsa* has its own technique; you cut out the harder lower part and eat the inner part with *naavay nan* (flat-bread). When it comes to the harder part, older people put it in a cup of green tea to soften it up and therefore make it easier to eat.

The taverns where people eat are some of the best places for ethnologist to socialize, have spontaneous conversations or simply observe and listen. I frequently went to a *samsakana*<sup>5</sup>, because being ‘a southern Kyrgyz’ myself I also like them a lot.

Next to the *tandyr*, in front of the entrance to the *samsakana*, the young Uzbek *samsachi* (a baker of *samsa*) calls the guests to enter. Inside, the place is full of guests; many of whom are Kyrgyz who came to the city for different personal reasons. I found a free spot next to two Kyrgyz women and listened to the conversation of three other guests, a Kyrgyz over forty and two Uzbeks over sixty years old. They share a knife. The Kyrgyz offers tea to the Uzbeks as they have run out. The Uzbeks gladly accept and thank him for it. The three men talk about the cattle – and hay market, about the visitors, the prices and cattle farming, and each of them shared his experience.

---

<sup>5</sup> The place where *samsa* is being baked; a kind of tearoom



Photo 2: How to eat *tandyr samsa*

(B. KARIMOVA/U. ABDRAHITOV, 2015)

Inside the *samsakana* it is usually very loud: friendly conversations and content faces dominate the atmosphere; and loud, bragging phone calls to Russia, screaming children, ripped up plastic table cloths, tea pots with little faults, not entirely clean tea mugs and small numbers of knives. This however hardly bothers anyone. The guests share a seat, they talk to each other, and enjoy their favourite *tandyr samsa* together. Apparently, neither *samsakanas* in Russia nor café-restaurants in northern Kyrgyzstan which offer *tandyr samsa* can replace the ambiance of its 'true' origin, people from south of Kyrgyzstan believe.

#### FOOD HABITS AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONSHIP

Aygul is a 47-year-old school biology teacher. She is a Kyrgyz. In the year 2010, her two daughters studied at the University of Osh. During the four-day riots, her daughters took shelter in the basement of a government building in Osh together with their fellow students and were protected by the military. Aygul and her husband had no contact with their daughters and they could not enter the city to look for them. These were the most terrible days her family had to endure.

When the song by Yulduz Usmanova was released, Aygul, just like the rest of the Kyrgyz, reacted harshly. Since then she no longer listens to her favourite Uzbek band *Bojalar*. Furthermore she no longer watches Uzbek films like she had previously done. Now she considers Usmanova as nothing more than an agitator who brought more troubles to the interethnic relations. She thinks Usmanova should apologize to the Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks, because she is responsible for the withdrawal of Uzbek music from society. She has an ambiguous attitude towards the Uzbek minority. On the one hand, she does not

trust Uzbeks and avoids them. On the other she also enjoys the common life with Uzbeks:

“If I take a taxi in the city, I pick a Kyrgyz taxi driver. And when I go shopping on the market place, I buy my groceries from Kyrgyz vendors. But when I go eating in the city I seek Uzbeks, without thinking twice, to eat *tandyr samsa*. I thank the Uzbek joyfully and am happy to be living in the same neighbourhood with them. I feel sorry for the poor Tschüy-Kyrgyz [the northern Kyrgyz]. It is a pity that they cannot enjoy *tandyr samsa* like we [the southern Kyrgyz] do.”

Aygul jokingly remarks: “*The only organ which has nothing to do with politics is the stomach.*” Despite certain restrictions Aygul respects Uzbeks. As a Kyrgyz she is ashamed when another Kyrgyz discriminates an Uzbek publicly. In such cases she always tries to distract the other Kyrgyz or to stand up for the Uzbek.

Aygul lives in a village which is exclusively inhabited by Kyrgyz people. She goes to the towns of Osh, Nookat, Kara-Suu or Kyzyl-Kiya whenever she wants to buy something specific or in large amounts. It occurs that she arranges her meetings in the city so she can dine with her acquaintances. Aygul cannot imagine city visits without Uzbek *tandir samsa*. In her village there is no *samsakana*. When it comes to *tandyr samsa*, she likes to remind herself of her childhood and how she went to *samsakanas* with her parents and later with her schoolmates. Nowadays, she dines out in the city at least



Photo 4: Kyrgyz and Uzbek customers. Just before lunch break in *samsakana*  
(B. KARIMOVA/U. ABDRAHITOV, 2015)

once a week for different reasons and with different people. There is a big choice of food, but AYGUL often chooses *tandyr samsa*. She claims that her desire for *tandyr samsa*, like a lot of the other inhabitants of the south of Kyrgyzstan, have to do with her life-long eating habits. Each time AYGUL goes to the city she takes at least one *tandyr samsa* home to her daughter. AYGUL is already a regular visitor at many *samsakanas*. If, on occasion, she happens to have no money with her, then she can still take some *tandyr samsas* and pay next time she is there.

The Kyrgyz who work in the city but live outside of it eat in restaurants, *samsakanas* or cafes. So, the Kyrgyz make up the majority of visitors. In all the cities there are a lot of taverns where one can eat *samsa*. To have a good relation to the vendor is a great advantage for the client. Most clients are regulars of a certain tavern and they cherish good friendships with owners or *samsachy*. Regulars like these can also defer payment until they are able to provide the money.

Amongst most of the southern Kyrgyz eating *tandyr samsa* has been a long tradition. Furthermore, this eating habit shows and enables a certain degree of social interaction, recognition and respect for the Uzbek minority by the Kyrgyz society.

#### ‘OUR’ UZBEKS

For those who enjoy *tandyr samsa*, the dish is more than just food. Meeting relatives and friends, eating together and sharing a good conversation, good moods and nice memories are as much a part of it. Together *tandyr samsa* just tastes better and people love to remind themselves of times like these.



Photo 3: Uzbek *samsachy* and Kyrgyz customers (B. KARIMOVA/U. ABDRAHITOV, 2015)

Between all of this, the appreciation of the Uzbek *tandyr samsa*-masters is not being forgotten. Frequently the Kyrgyz want to claim that “their Uzbeks” make the best *tandyr samsa*. Discussions like these are amongst the most popular topics in their communities. Aygul too talks about the location-related competition with her sister:

“My sister Rabiya is funny. I invited her to eat the most expensive *samsa*<sup>6</sup> in Kyzyl-Kiya. It costs 100 *som*<sup>7</sup>, and it is the best *samsa* in town. Instead of thanking the *samsachi* and me for it, she said that the *samsa* of her Nookat-Uzbeks tastes better than ours. In Nookat it only costs 70 *som*.”

Discussions like these are rather common, both among Kyrgyz and between Kyrgyz and members of other ethnic groups. They enjoy conversing with each other in *samsakanas* and look forward to their local *tandyr samsa* savoured together. In general, all fans of *tandyr samsa* regularly compliment the *samsachy who are Uzbeks* and thank them sincerely. The *samsachy* are happy and enjoy the gratefulness of their guests. At the same time, they thank their guests too. The mutual gratefulness arising from the consumption of local food brings the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks closer to each other. In these situations ethnic differences seem to disappear and pride prevails.

On social media platforms like Facebook, odnoklassniki.ru, Whatsapp and Instagram adolescents actively talk about ‘their’ *tandyr samsa*. They put photos of themselves and their *samsakana* of choice online. They report about new places or where they enjoyed a good *tandyr samsa*. Posts like this are often promoted by migrants. With joy and longing they describe their experiences connected to eating *tandyr samsa*. Some fans of *tandyr samsa* ask the one who is in Kyrgyzstan to eat for them as well. Many plead to send *tandyr samsa* to Russia. Frequently, parents of someone who is going to travel to Russia give them *tandyr samsas* to take with them.

In northern Kyrgyzstan a lot of *samsakanas* have opened during the last two decades. The owners often are migrants from the south and they invite Uzbek *samsachy*, who are also from the south, and sometimes Kyrgyz *samsachy*, who have learnt this profession, to work there. The cafés and restaurants, which offer *tandyr samsa* in northern Kyrgyzstan are often visited by regulars from southern Kyrgyzstan. But migrants always miss ‘their own’ *tandyr samsa* from their home village. Regarding culinary culture and eating habits on Kyrgyzstan, an individual’s regional background affiliation is more important than his ethnic affiliation.

---

<sup>6</sup> It means *tandyr samsa* here.

<sup>7</sup> 1 USA dollar 75 *som*



Photo 5: *Tandyr samsa*, Nookat

(B. KARIMOVA/U. ABDRASHITOV, 2015)

#### MONEY, *TANDYR SAMSAS* AND SOCIAL RELATIONS: GIVING HAPPINESS IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN

The following expressions in Kyrgyz that are being often used – *köngülün kotorup koyuu*, *raazy kylyp koyuu*, or *süyüntüp koyuu* – can be given in English with ‘giving happiness’. Other expressions such as *köngülü kötörtülüp kaluu*, *raazy bolup kaluu*, or *süyünüp kaluu*<sup>8</sup> can be translated with an accumulative ‘receiving happiness’. These are about actions between people, especially relatives and friends towards each other, that could be evaluated as blessings from the elders and is a part of a social norm among the Kyrgyz.

In order to please, one should give a gift. This can be anything starting from gifts, goods, and clothes. Sometimes gifts can be given in a monetary form, by saying that one can buy whatever one wants. The sum of the money depends on the relationships between a giver and a receiver, but it can range from 20 *som* to 500 *som*. For example, if a nephew gives money to his aunt to buy a *tandyr samsa*, next time his own mother will be invited by a cousin for a *tandyr samsa* in the city. The aunt herself will boast of her generous nephew out of gratitude. This elevates the nephew’s status in the family circle. Sometimes relatives invite each other to have lunch together by expressing this offer in terms of ‘having a cup of tee’, ‘eat samsa’, and ‘enjoy your shashlyk’ (grilled meat).

Even though there is a big choice of food in the city, people mostly prefer to invite for having *tandyr samsa* instead of giving money for ‘giving happiness’. The reason why inhabitants of southern Kyrgyzstan use this dish for giving happiness is because *tandyr samsa* is considered to be fatty, nourish-

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



Photo 6: Enjoyin *tandyr samsa*

(B. KARIMOVA/U. ABDRAHITOV, 2015)

ing, tasty and it is not expensive to compare with other foods. Usually *tandyr samsa* can be consumed together with bread. The cost of *tandyr samsa* is 50–70 *som*, and bread is 10 *som*, and one pot of tea is 5–10 *som*. If food costs around 165 *som*, then 200 *som* is usually given. People usually get 100 *som* for *samsa*. The money equivalent to this set of food is a tidy sum to be given as a gift and, thus, cannot be that appreciated, but inviting to *tandyr samsa*, on the other hand, would be always satisfactory enough for ‘giving happiness’.

Many of the young people in Russia are so called labour migrants. Their parents sometimes go to eat *tandyr samsa* with their own pension money, but they tell everybody that their children transferred the money from Russia. Those who did receive the money from their children let themselves be seen in the city more often and enjoy the compliments of others: “*Did some money come from Russia? You spent a lot of your days in samsakanas*”. The elderly people together with grandchildren or friends prefer to spend their time at the public café and restaurants. There are very grateful that they were able to improve their financial situation through migration. They view the time span between 1990 and about 2000 as hard times: “*We could not afford to buy samsa, we did not even have money for our daily bread*”. *Tandyr samsa* is one the best ways for parents to show off their children and their success.

These types of social norms and interactions, involving favours and competition, strengthen the habit of consuming *tandyr samsa* among the children. They contribute to the passing down of shared culinary tastes and eating habits to the next generation. Ultimately this also contributes to a more peaceful coexistence between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks.





Photo 8: With great joy the Kyrgyz school children receive their favourite *tandyr samsa*.  
(B. KARIMOVA/U. ABDRAHITOV, 2015)

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Megoran, Nick. 2012. *‘Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan: “Understanding and Responding to Nationalism”*’. London: Chatham House.
- ‘*Yrdan chykkan chyr*’. 2010. Retrieved 24. October 2015 from [http://www.azattyk.org/content/Kyrgyzstan\\_Uzbekistan\\_Usmanova\\_Song/2085867.html](http://www.azattyk.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Uzbekistan_Usmanova_Song/2085867.html).
- ‘*Kyrgyz Fifth Channel vs Uzbek Singer Yulduz Usmanova*’. 2010. Retrieved 12. November 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9nCVo3e2dk>.
- ‘*Песня Юлдуз Усмановой*’. 2010. Retrieved 12. November 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oqMxIJ9C7M>.



# EATING AND BODY PRACTISES AMONG CONTEMPORARY DUNGANS IN KAZAKHSTAN<sup>1</sup>

(SOLEDAD JIMÉNEZ-TOVAR)

*Soledad Jiménez-Tovar is Assistant Professor at the History Division of the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), in Mexico City. She has a BA in Latin American Studies (2006, UNAM, Mexico), a MA in Chinese Studies (2009, ColMex, Mexico) and a PhD in Social Anthropology (2014, MPI for Social Anthropology, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany). Over the last decade, she has been doing research on the cultural relations between China and Central Asia. Her PhD project was on Dungan people, Sinophone Muslims who are an ethnic minority in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.*

*Interviewee: You want to learn about the Dungans, right?*

*I: Yes, I do.*

*Interviewee: And you want to behave properly, right?*

*I: Yes I do, of course!*

*Interviewee: Then you have to learn that it's extremely rude, when somebody is offering you tea, that you receive it with your left hand instead of with the right hand. It's not that I feel offended. But I'd feel better if you don't do it again!*

The former quotation corresponds to an interaction I had when I just started my field work among Shaanxi Dungans in Kazakhstan, in 2011<sup>2</sup>. The woman who told me this precision on drinking tea had to learn it on her own, because she is not Dungan but Russian. She married a Dungan during the World War II and came to Kazakhstan in the 1950s. This woman and I were the only non-Dungans in the room. After the precision she did, all the others sharing the tea agreed. Even though this woman was Russian, she would be taken as part of 'Dungan collective'. At least, she was quite aware of Dungan rules of etiquette and body language. In that sense, the ethnic belonging of this woman was somehow more 'Dungan' than 'Russian'.

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Aida Aaly Alymbaeva for her insightful comments to this text.

<sup>2</sup> The main outcome of such a fieldwork is my PhD thesis (Jiménez-Tovar 2014). For more information on my field work see Jiménez-Tovar (2016b). A deeper discussion on Dungans in Central Asia has been offered in Jiménez-Tovar (2016a). For another article on food and culture among Central Asian Dungans see Jiménez-Tovar (2015).

This was the first time that I was 'educated' by Dungans. Such an education would take two paths from that moment on. The first path was related to Dungan food and eating manners. The second path is the one of body language. The relation between food and body among Shaanxi Dungans is the topic of this ethnographic essay. Ideas of religious purity, freedom, appropriateness, and spaces of intimacy are only some of the aspects that the relationship between food and body can reveal. I follow Bell and Valentine (1997), for whom the body is the smallest unit in which one can explore the ways of place making through food.

The examples I present in this text are mostly of women. The reason of this being that, as a female, eating alone with men would be seen as inappropriate. In addition, even though the situation has been changing, men are mostly consumers rather than the ones who cook the food to be served. In turn, women build up spaces of intimacy and privacy around food while cooking it. I entered in an easier way into Dungan houses through the kitchen, either as a guest or even as a scullion.

I divided this essay in three sections: intimacy, liminality, and home. Each of them combines several ethnographic examples that provide particular nuances to every one of the concepts developed in the section.

## INTIMACY

Food is a device for creating intimacy. Feeding is a way of taking care of each other. When anyone comes to a Dungan house, the first thing that happens after the greetings is to offer the guest something to eat and to drink. However, this is part of Dungan hospitality, it does not necessarily mean that guests and hosts are close to each other. There are subtler ways of showing relatedness. For example, when one is only a guest, more elaborated food should be prepared. In turn, when the person is considered to be close, he or she would be offered with the same food that is prepared for everybody in the household. Once eating, the guest would be constantly offered with more food until he/she is not able to eat anything else. In general, the guest can refuse to eat but with one exception.

The exception is when somebody takes food from his or her own plate and puts it onto another person's plate. This is a way of sharing food that is also common in China, from where Dungans migrated 150 years ago. This style of sharing food normally happens in a vertical way and according to a gender division. I have seen very often that elders feed the younger members in a household in such a way. I never saw it the other way around, nor among people of the same age. Unless the food sharing is with children, usually males give their food to other males and females do the same only with females. This food sharing is a very emotional moment and it is the most intimate amongst Dungans.

Besides the intimacy at the table, there is still another food-related place of intimacy: the kitchen. While the table is a place where both males and fe-



Photo 1. Preparing *momo* (dumplings) for a party. Sortobe, Kazakhstan (S. JIMÉNEZ-TOVAR, 2011)

males could sit together<sup>3</sup>, the kitchen is rather a feminine place. The only moments when I heard conversations on very private topics, such as sexuality, that happened in the kitchen. Getting into the kitchen, however, is not an easy task. One can always enter into the kitchen, but that does not necessarily mean that one is entitled to stay, either just for chatting or even for helping in cooking and cleaning.

Cooking and cleaning the kitchen, washing the dishes, or even peeling onions are activities that are restricted to the closer ones in the household. This is an expression of a hospitality that it is a long-termed way of passing from status of a guest to a household member. It took me about half a year to be included in these activities. Such activities are considered to be exclusive for females. Nevertheless, I have also seen males who cook and clean. Such males are conflictive both for female and for male. Apparently, kitchen related ac-

---

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to the everyday life. During festivities or parties, men and women would sit separately. In the everyday the family sits together, unless a guest comes. Then the guest is asked to sit together with the older family members while the younger ones would enter into the room only in order to serve food or tea. Children do not usually join and they are allowed to come only when the guest has left the house.



Photo 2. A groom invited by his bride's family to a *shi*, a banquet prepared especially for him after the wedding. Sortobe, Kazakhstan (S. JIMÉNEZ-TOVAR, 2011)

tivities seem to be contrary to ideas of Dungan masculinity. There is, however, some flexibility. Such a flexibility depends on the age and activities developed by the male. A teenage male student helping in the general activities of the household would have more freedom to join the kitchen than the patriarch of the household would. If the later comes into the kitchen, the ones who are inside would assume that it is only to ask for something in particular, such as tea. At the end, the patriarch himself would not enter because it is not 'a man's thing'. However, there would be one exception: if a guest comes and there is no one else from the household. Such an incursion into the kitchen would be only for preparing tea though. In turn, if the teenage male comes into the kitchen, it is very plausible that he would be given the task of buying ingredients that are lacking, or bringing firewood, or loading something too heavy.

#### LIMINALITY

'Liminality' is a concept proposed by Arnold Van Gennep (2001 [1909]), taken up later by Victor Turner (1995 [1969]), for referring to the moment of transition, especially during a ritual, when the individual is going from one stage to another. In this section I will revise some ways of liminality that have to do with food and the body.



Photo 3. The bride's family sharing the food offered to the groom in the *shi* after the groom left. Sortobe, Kazakhstan (S. JIMÉNEZ-TOVAR, 2011)

The first moment is when young women at a marriageable age should be in good shape, so they can get the best match to marry. In summer 2012, I was invited to a dinner. Since I had a good relationship with the family, I went directly to the kitchen. The dinner was almost ready. One of the daughters in the household, a 19-year old, who had been helping with the cooking activities, asked whether she could taste the main dish. The grandmother allowed her to do so. While the attendees expected that the young woman would take just a bit of the food, she fully filled the plate. The grandmother started laughing. The mother scolded the young woman:

Mother: How many times I've told you that you shouldn't eat that much!

Grandmother: Let her eat!

Mother: If she eats so much, she will gain weight and nobody is going to want to marry her!

Grandmother: Okay, that's a good point.

(To the granddaughter) Don't eat that much now. After you marry, you can eat as much as you want and get fat!

Eating as few as possible has its climax on the day of the wedding, when Dungan brides have to sit the whole day in a place where everybody can see them. The brides are not allowed to talk to anyone. Because their mobility and communication is limited, the brides are fed with broth since two days before the wedding. That way, they also do not need to go to the toilet. After the wedding, the brides are starving and dehydrated. The day after the wedding, they can start to eat normally<sup>4</sup>.

This is a contrast with what I have heard among older women. In 2015, I went to Xi'an, China, with some Dungans. The women invited me to go to a sauna. Once there, they started a comparison of our bellies. In the middle of the jokes, one of them told me:

“I don't know why we are ashamed of our bellies. If you have one it's good, that means you are wealthy enough and that you can eat a lot. But that was before, now that is changing.”

How the body is modified depending on the amount of food eaten seems to be related to particular body values. However, such body values change across lifetime. Such values have to do with being attractive enough in order to find a good partner during youth, or to show a given level of wealth during maturity. In the discussion of getting fat or not, I never came across healthy issues: having health problems does not seem to be related with obesity in the Dungan rural society. Further investigation among urban Dungans needs to be done.

## HOME

“I'm very scared. What is going to happen with me in that household? In my family we eat more traditional, Dungan, food. We rarely eat anything sweet, but *konfeti* [bonbons] with tea. In turn, my future husband's family loves to eat Russian food: they love *bliny* [crepes] and *sgushenka* [condensed milk]. It's not only that I don't know how to cook that, but the fact that I don't like that food. What if I never get used to the new food? What if I fall ill?”

This is an extract of a conversation I sustained in 2011 with a young woman the day before her wedding. In the fear that she explained to me, we

---

<sup>4</sup> This way of feeding the bride has a very practical reason. During the whole ritual, the bride cannot talk to anyone. She is not yet part of the new household and she needs to be exhibited to the whole family of her husband. She can only sit and wait until anyone comes to see her, then she makes reverences. For a full description of a Dungan wedding, day by day, see Jiménez-Tovar (2016b).



can see that a sense of home is intimately related to food. The ingredients preferred by the household she was about to join were characterised as non-Dungan. The woman explained her lack of knowledge while cooking with such ingredients. The unknown, the new family, the new life that this woman was about to face, altogether was represented by the ‘Russian’ food that the new household was supposed to prefer. To be used to Dungan food represents a particular and specific way of nurturing. The biggest fear in this quotation happens to be the understanding that there are other, unknown ways to nurture that this woman does not know. Nor is she sure whether she would be able to embrace a new nurture. The fear is to fall ill because of the inability to get adapted to the new ingredients. In other words, nurture is embodied. The body can suffer damages if the food it is used to is changed.

The fear which this woman is describing is also related to the place that women occupy inside the family. Dungans practice patrilocality. That means that this woman is going to leave the family she was raised by in order to join a new family, namely, her husband’s. Once in the new household, everything she learned beforehand would not be as useful as before. She would need to learn what and how to cook according to the taste preferred by the new family. Only while being alone with her husband she would be able to cook with the ingredients and in the way she prefers. However, before that, the bride will be trained by her mother-in-law and other women in the household. This practice is kind of a norm in Central Asia: that family-in-law itself aims to teach a new bride regardless her abilities/knowledge she brings from her own family; every family has its own ‘way/order of life’.

The Russian woman who taught me how to drink tea passed through the same process. The same happened to other non-Dungan women who married Dungan men. Svetlana Dyer (1979, 1991) wanted to see in this practise the Dungan version of ‘Sinicisation’. In her ethnographies from the 1970’s and 1980’s, Dyer was sure of Dungan Chinese-ness. Indeed, she invented a new word in Chinese for this phenomenon: ‘Dunganisation’ (*dongganhua*, 东干化). Nevertheless, when I did my fieldwork between 2011 and 2013, what Dungan people told me was rather different.

First, they accepted that non-Dungan women have to learn how to cook Dungan food. However, both male and female Dungans explained to me that this practice was not exclusive of the Dungan. In general, in cases of inter-ethnic marriage, women have to learn how to cook the food ‘traditional’ to the ethnicity of their husbands. For example, a Dungan woman married to a Kazakh or to a Kyrgyz would have to pass through the same cooking training under her mother-in-law’s supervision. Second, despite of the idea that there is food specific for every ethnicity in Central Asia, there is a mixture at every day’s tables. Similar to what Rita Sanders describes in her contribution to this volume, there is a consciousness of the ‘ethnic origin’ of a given dish, for

example, the noodles known as *laghman* were brought from China by Uyghurs and Dungans, *besbarmak* is a ‘Kazakh’ or ‘Kyrgyz’ dish, *bliny* are ‘Russian’, etc. The acknowledgement of the ‘ethnic origin’ of food is one thing. Another thing is the refusal of eating all these dishes only based on ethnicity. There would be religious reasons for not eating something, for example, while refusing to eat pork. However, one can be a Dungan who eats ‘Russian’ *kasha* [porridge] or ‘Kazakh/Kyrgyz’ *kurt* [dried balls of sour milk]. Third, I developed elsewhere (Jiménez-Tovar 2014) the concept of ‘centripetal mirroring’ as the phenomenon of rating other people’s ethnic performance according to a ‘list of features’ that are not common to everyone in that group. Such a list is, if not personal, at least limited to the household. The bride worried about the food in the new household is a good example of this. She said that in her household they ate more traditional Dungan food. But they liked *konfeti*. She did not see *konfeti* as ‘Russian’. That evening, she also offered me *tort* (cake), another kind of food that would not be considered traditionally as ‘Dungan’.

Interpretations that concentrate on how ‘Chinese’ Dungans are, such as the one by Dyer (1979, 1981), miss a much richer inter-connexion between the peoples living in Central Asia, among them Dungans. Through the food one can realise how integrated to the ‘host-society’ Dungan people are. At the end, one is capable of always learning something new. In 2013 I went again to the Dungans. I was invited into a house where there was a party for females only. It happened to be the new home of the woman I interviewed in 2011. She had a baby in her arms. She looked happy. We had this interaction:

She: I’m very happy to see you! Do you remember how scared I was?! Now look at me! I have my husband, I have my child, I’m good.

I: How about the food? Did you get used?

She: Well, I miss my mom’s food, but I’ve never got ill here! And I live in Almaty, with my husband. In Almaty we eat other things. You know, it’s a city. Now Almaty is my home.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this essay I gave some instances through which food and body are inter-related. Food ingredients and eating manners are topics through which integration, assimilation, or the lack of them can be studied without falling into the trap of political correctness. This is particularly relevant in a place such as the Central Asian region, where ethnic diversity and nation-state building have led to a certain degree of animosity. An approach on food can also help in the discussion of body politics without attributing all of it to religious interpretations. Finally, understanding the body as a place and the ways that



Photo 4. Dungan women eating and interacting during a wedding. Bular Batir, Kazakhstan (S. JIMÉNEZ-TOVAR, 2011)

food has an influence on conceptions of body and body language is an idea that helps us to see how place making is performed since its smallest unit. Body is the first of the scales in which place is made. Food is a material device through which such a place making is developed.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bell, David and Gill Valentine. 1997. *Consuming Geographies. We Are Where We Eat*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Dyer, Svetlana. 1979. *Soviet Dungan Kolkhozes in the Kirghiz SSR and the Kazakh SSR*. Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University Press. Oriental Monograph Series No. 25.
- Dyer, Svetlana. 1991. *Soviet Dungans in 1985: Birthdays, Weddings, Funerals and Kolkhoz Life*. Taipei: Center for Chinese Studies.
- Gennep, Arnold van. 2001 [1909]. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jiménez-Tovar, Soledad. 2014. 'Centripetal Mirrors, Cultural Conservation among Shaanxi Dungans in Kazakhstan', PhD dissertation. Halle (Saale): Martin-Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Philosophische Fakultät and Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.
- Jiménez-Tovar, Soledad. 2015. '¿Y eso, con qué se come?: folclore culinario e identidad en el Kasajistán rural contemporáneo', *Estudios de Asia y África* 50/3(158): 749–758.
- Jiménez-Tovar, Soledad. 2016a. 'Limits of Diaspority in Central Asia: Contextualizing Dungan's Multiple Belongings', *Central Asian Survey* 35(3): 387–404.

- 
- Jiménez-Tovar, S. 2016b. *The Anthropologist as Mushroom. Notes from a PhD Research Project in Central Asia*. Halle, Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Department 'Integration and Conflict'. Field Notes and Research Projects XIV.
- Turner, Victor. 1995 [1969]. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

# THE NEXUS OF CUISINE AND SOCIAL LIFE AMONG RURAL UZBEKS OF THE FERGHANA VALLEY<sup>1</sup>

(RUSSELL ZANCA)

*Russell Zanca lives in Chicago with his family. He earned his doctorate from the University of Illinois. He initiated ethnographic projects in Uzbekistan and throughout Central Asia beginning in 1993. He became a professor in 2010 at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. Lately, Zanca has worked closely with colleagues in Central Eurasian Studies at the University of Chicago, and is also the founder of the Chicago Central Eurasia Group.*

## INTRODUCTION

I collected the field materials and data that help form this article roughly from 1992–2000, mainly in the Ferghana valley provinces of Namangan and Andijan, Uzbekistan.

Anthropologists and historians have written on foodways (the foods processed and prepared as cuisines) in a variety of different places and contexts. Some have approached the topic historically while others have looked at foodstuffs with an emphasis on how processes and products have affected both culture change and the course of world history (Mintz 1985; Turner 2004; Montanari 2006). While there is a long tradition of food writing in ethnographies extending back to Franz Boas, it really is only recently that culinary studies in anthropology have become a popular sub-discipline.

Discussions of food provide scholars and readers the kind of knowledge that most of us would be keen to know, simply because foodstuffs and meals tend to be particular and varied within any society. It makes up part of anthropology's knowledge fund. However, being informed about what people eat and how people eat can take us deeper into the lives and worldviews of people than mere descriptions and discussions. A focus on cuisine tells us the foods people are willing to eat, prefer to eat, and how they prepare their foods. In turn, these foci within the rural Uzbek context inform us about the intimate and particular worlds of commensality as one of culture's most

---

<sup>1</sup> Note on Transliteration: Uzbek has no standardized transliteration in English despite more than a few Uzbek government efforts to convert the language to the Roman orthography since 1992. Therefore, commonly known proper nouns, such as "Namangan" or "Ferghana" are represented by the standardized transliteration from Russian/Cyrillic orthography. Ordinary Uzbek words have been translated via a conscientious mix of standard scholarly practice (for the past quarter century in the west) and attention to accurate transliterated renderings of Uzbek phonemes.

ubiquitous yet largely unexplored realms of social interaction. They tell us how people are human in this place and at this time.

Working with informants on food, enabled me to broach topics that might have made people uncomfortable in other types of interview settings. And this became a revelation to me, for I had not considered treating food seriously when I began fieldwork and considered appropriate topics. In the field I learned (and when I returned home and began studying what other anthropologists had written) that food and its preparation ramified into numerous realms of culture. When people eat they do so in particular, habitual ways. We may or may not use utensils, we may or may not eat with members of the opposite sex, we may not eat things considered uncooked, or, conversely, we may enjoy foods that have received the most minimal processing (little to no cooking), we sit or comport ourselves in a particular manner, and we clearly distinguish the importance of certain meals over others, whether this owes to company, occasion, or time of day.

Since procuring and preparing food involves work, people the world over practice divisions of labor; girls and boys do certain things, while women and men do others. Where people sit during meals might tell us much about notions of respect and hierarchy, and the things that people are willing/unwilling to discuss at table can provide anthropologists with all sorts of insights about attitudes in a given locale that might otherwise be difficult for researchers to understand outside of this intimate context. So, among many other domains of cultural life, food and cuisine inform us about local economy, the division of labor, gender, status and authority, and even a family or group's sense of familial dynamics, local, national, and international politics among myriad issues that might be discussed at dinner time.

Interest in what and how people ate in rural Uzbek villages enabled me to access certain types of confidential knowledge about local affairs and politics that I had trouble learning when I approached people formally for interviews. If no single factor accounts for why this is so, perhaps it is a matter of common sense to reason that mealtimes, especially dinner time, is one of the least tense periods of any given day, and a time when people seek to create the strongest social bonds as they nourish themselves and share thoughts with a visitor. I cannot think of any other social context in which I gained more insight into what we call *culture* than during my time spent around various tables, or, more accurately, tablecloths (*dasturkhan* – Uzbeks often eat while sitting on cushions/quilts atop the floor from a rectangular tablecloth). Admittedly, occasional prodigious bouts of alcohol consumption, mainly vodka and fortified sweet wine, during dinners and feasts also lubricated many a tight tongue.

This chapter then attempts to serve three major purposes as enumerated below. Specifically on the farms, investigation into cuisine seemed important enough to research, especially as it impinged on daily life, celebrations and ceremonies:

- 1. The notion that perceived changes to diet, specifically eating more bread in comparison to the Soviet Golden Age (roughly, 1960–1987), reflect a descent into poverty, even as new Uzbekistan state policies encourage people to plant more food crops, especially rice;
- 2. The kinds of meals that people prepare and the related social world of meal taking among family members or a group of friends. This second point links, I think, the first and third. It is the crux of this chapter and, perhaps at its most ingenuous, informs us about the specificities that we might consider as constitutive of Uzbekness. As anthropologists we cautiously navigate shoals of generalizing and essentializing. However, we are still searching for and trying to apprehend what we think of as culturally phenomenal. Indeed, I am trying to do this below by merging commensality and Uzbekness. Meal taking and social worlds overlap cross-culturally to be sure, but we also find in them markers of identity, difference, ethnicity, and what we see as the variety of being and acting human.
- 3. The importance of celebratory acts in social life as they relate to or are supported by meal preparation and feasting. Hospitality in all facets of domestic life is crucial to Uzbek notions of proper behavior and conduct. Despite external problems and difficulties, I focus on celebration and hospitality in relation to the prominent role food necessarily plays in maintaining a robust sense of what it means to act appropriately in social life.

### *OSH EIMIZ!/LET'S EAT PILAF!*

Meal preparation involves arduous female labor viewed through western standards. Uzbek girls and women form small teams to cook usually without the benefit of indoor plumbing or piped in fuel. So prepping for dinner often takes on the appearance of a small-scale project, especially when an average family consists in six or seven people.

Rice is the staple for many dinners. It arrives most often to the table in the form of pilaf, which today is as much the national dish as it is the national obsession, since Uzbeks never seem to tire of talking about it or eating it. According to my data, rural women served a pilaf (known alternatively as *palov/osh* in Uzbek) more than 60% of the time for dinner because as several women told me, “It’s so easy to make.” Owing to its popularity, children learn from an early age what goes into a tasty *palov*. Children older than seven spend time helping their mothers ready the essential ingredients while sitting with them in the kitchen or by the hearth.

Historically, pilaf was a dish reserved for landowners and rulers. Peasants rarely ate it, having a taste during special occasions, such as weddings, or owed in part to the generosity of the landlords. (Tolstov 1962: 308). Its frequent and widespread consumption took place mainly after World War II,

and today rural people eat *osh* often four to five times per week, although a variety of non-meat palovs constitute most of these frequent servings – a “poor man’s” or “peasant’s” palov. During fieldwork people often pointed out that they ate it less frequently with meat than during the late Soviet period; meat, naturally, being the most savored component in addition to prized varieties of short-grain rice, carrots, onions, garlic, and copious amounts of cottonseed oil.

It takes about two hours to cook pilaf. Depending on the weather, women cook indoors at a hearth (a kitchen area usually comprising an enclosed mud-brick shed-like area), or outdoors in their own courtyard (*hovli*). The indoor hearth often occupies an add-on room of one’s home, and this in turn connects to a small cellar where particular fruits and vegetables, along with canned goods, are stored for colder months.

Dinners require ingredients and essential supplies that ordinarily would be associated with non-industrialized countries. For example, at least two buckets of water have to be fetched. Daughters, mothers, and sometimes sons bring the water from a nearby irrigation channel (*ariq*) that flows just outside a person’s home. Water from these narrow feeder channels gets diverted further to supply garden plot irrigation for the families own vegetables, herbs, nut and fruit trees, and, grains; maize is the most common. Because not every household has an *ariq* running by its home, people may have to walk up to 100 meters to find another source. The best-equipped families have a pipe with a spigot in their own courtyards. Next, cooking fuel has to be gathered.

In FV villages, dried cotton stalks (*ghozapoe*) is the preferred fuel, and one can see huge stacks of these thin pulpy bundles just on the sides of people’s houses. Dried cow or sheep dung serves as the preferred fuel in Uzbekistan’s pastoralist areas, mainly in the central and western areas of the country.

Nearly all the meals are cooked in an enormous cast-iron cauldron, known as a *qozon*. This vessel looks like a thick wok, and the average hearth *qozon* makes enough food to feed from 12–15 people, although with average family sizes being six to eight people, they certainly do not fill their cauldrons to capacity for each cooked meal. Furthermore, most families also have at least one larger *qozon* that can feed at least twice as many people for extended family gatherings and celebrations. And some are so large that they contain enough space to feed upward of 100 people. These containers form the backbone of culinary preparation, and also serve as at least partial testament to the communal nature of rural Uzbek foodways, which may be adduced from their size.

*Qozons* also carry a symbolic quality. The word conveys the idea of a household or family unit, as in the phrase “*bir qozondan*,” which literally means “from one cooking pot,” but which also signifies people who share their resources, and who thus eat from one pot. As long as a child remains in



his parents' home, willingly shares his income or other earnings/resources with the rest of the family, then that person remains *bir qozondan*. If he or she wishes not to share, then the alternative is to leave and live separately from "another pot," *boshka qozondan*.

Copious amounts of cottonseed oil are used in cooking most meals, perhaps a pint's worth per family pilaf. The reason for the ubiquity and generous use of this oil where I worked has all to do with the fact that most of Uzbekistan's Ferghana valley remains primarily a cotton-growing region. People say fondly that the best-tasting pilafs are the oiliest. Still, others have their own ideas about the importance of oil in the diet. One friend instructed me, "If you don't eat enough oil, your brain won't function properly." Because many people eat pilaf with the right hand (making a kind of scooper with the four longest fingers), they half-jokingly refer to a great pilaf as one that causes oil to drip down one's wrist toward the elbow while eating (Zanca 2007).

Beyond all of the supposed healthful qualities imparted by cottonseed oil, I have also seen women apply it externally, especially to the face and hands as a moisturizer once the summer sun turns skin to what sometimes appears as coffee-colored leather. And on a kind of internal/external note, people also speak of how cottonseed oil regulates and eases bowel movements with its lubricating effects.

After the cooking oil has been left on high heat, the rest of pilaf preparation resumes. Cooks cut up onions, peel and cut carrots into match-stick shapes, and clean homegrown rice by rinsing it a few times to remove dirt, small pebbles, and husk from the grains. Next, chunks of cut up beef or mutton (the latter preferred but expensive, thus used on more special occasions), along with pieces of animal fat are added with carrots. Other additions to a tasty pilaf's mountain of steaming rice include pomegranate seeds, quinces, black-eyed peas, raisins, chickpeas, and hard-boiled eggs.

#### *PILAF AND MORE: COOKERY IN MASCULINE TONES – WEDDING PARTIES*

Now consider meal preparation of a different character – to wit, the communality of masculinized feast preparation on the eve of a *kelin toi* (lit. 'the-one-who-arrives party'/bride's wedding). One may witness the epitome of village cooperation and solidarity through the pre-wedding party organized and attended exclusively by males, colloquially known as *sabzi qirish* ('carrot peeling'). The event takes its name from the enormous quantity of carrots that men prepare for essential wedding meals, such as *laghmon* (a noodle soup) and *palov/pilaf* (50-plus kg). On the night before a household's main wedding party, boys and men of all ages gather at the home of the bride and groom, respectively, in order to help out with the food preparation and cooking. The event showcases industriousness and relaxation, in a kind of whis-



Photo 1: Palov chef  
(R. ZANCA, 2011)

tle-while-you-work way. The camaraderie allows for gossip, news, joke telling, and, of great delight to many, the chance to eat and drink in a feel-good atmosphere as the event marks the more joyous and less solemn side of the wedding.

A local butcher and cook already have been dealing with meat and cooking for the better part of a full day in advance. They may work for the particular household for two-three days and will be paid in a potential number of ways, including the return of the revered favor they perform, a sort of typical balanced reciprocity. Naturally, the exercise of friendship or the affirmations of collective identity are not the only rewards for those who show up. The material or, rather, gastronomic incentives of a meat dish and booze ensure that there is something for all under the society-wide banner of “share and share alike.”

*Sabzi qirish* usually begins about dusk and lasts till midnight or thereabouts, once the elders have come, supped, pronounced a benediction over the wedding, and led the attendees in prayer. During these preparation parties, boys and men congregate in age groups – that is, they congregate as classmates and former classmates, for it is through their schooling that people make their lifetime friends and form tightly knit groups.

Once the vegetables have been cleaned and chopped, the rice rinsed properly, sufficient firewood gathered, metal tables and benches furnished with quilts for cushioning, and all of the raw foods have begun cooking away in two-three, 50-gallon cauldrons, the groups relax either inside or outside on raised rectangular platforms, sitting on quilts. Most of the younger men are careful not to drink too brazenly in front of the older men who themselves may imbibe little, if at all. Once the seniors have exited, caution is thrown to the wind. Many men proceed to bolt down teacup after teacup either or *port-vine* or *oq choi* (literally, white tea=vodka). Having attained quick highs all around, the remainder of the evening may be dedicated to joking and laughter. Serious discussions and grievances surrounding personal circumstances or the national economy, etc. are left behind, although they were fit topics at the beginning of the carrot peeling party.

Most of the cooking and food preparation itself takes place within the male arena. Comparing themselves to their wives, men half-jokingly refer to their manliness (*erkaklik*) necessary to stir the capacious cauldrons that may serve 200 people.

Because the family name is on the line, as it were, it should come as no shock that men in this patrilocal/virilocal society work very hard at executing all that goes into wedding entertainment and comfort with maximal efforts. To outsiders, men may seem lethargic and irresponsible from time to time vis-à-vis women, but weddings witness men in action, men with little time for dalliance's ordinary respites either on the roadside or over by the canal or the auto mechanic's shop. Peer scrutiny forces the man of the house to pull out hidden reserves of energy and creativity; he will be at his best – indulgent and gracious – making sure that all who matter get their due.

#### *UZBEKS' PREFERRED 'GRAIN OF CIVILIZATION'*

Rice growing has long been beloved among Ferghana valley Uzbeks. Because the rice grows best in regions closest to abundant water resources, certain regions or villages have been responsible for supplying nearby towns with rice. Today villagers are satisfied that so many varieties can be grown successfully in their “own” backyards. A reflection of the old supply system may be witnessed in marketplaces where sellers identify the sorts and regions whence their rice originates. Since prospective buyers rarely need to be told the sort, they are likely to ask reticent sellers, “*Qaerdan-u?*” or “*Guruch qaerdan?*”/“Where's it from?” or “Where's the rice from?”

Uzbeks now consume so much rice that each pilaf for a household group requires anywhere from two and one-half-four pounds of rice. A family of six-seven people will consume approximately 1 metric ton of rice per year (nearly 300 pounds per person per year) given the average weekly consumption of households (I estimated this based on average rice holding, rice purchases, and what informants told me about their consumption patterns, but it

is a rough estimate) (Zanca 2011). Contrast this figure to the annual average rice consumption for Americans, which approximates 10 pounds, or roughly half the amount of ice cream consumed (Williams 1996: 83)!

The different names for rice sorts reflect different kinds that differ according to size, shape, coloring, flavor, and productivity value. Informants told me of at least six different sorts raised locally, and I counted at least ten in rural marketplaces. The *qizilarpa* (red barley) variety, for example, is a favorite for pilaf with its short, fat flavorful grains. The rice that Uzbeks seem to privilege above all others is *devzira*, and Uzgen district (in Osh province of southern Kyrgyzstan) and Jalalobod province (southern Kyrgyzstan) are most renowned for this sort.

Once the three-four quarts of water have boiled down and evaporated, the pilaf in the cauldron is covered by a bowl that is tightly pressed so that little steam escapes. During the final moments of steaming, bulbs of garlic may be added as a favorite condiment (softened, steamed garlic is eaten by the clove after mashing it into one's helping of pilaf). A woman then typically piles the pilaf on a large platter and brings it to the table. Preceding, accompanying, and following the meal will be pots of green tea.

FV Uzbeks ordinarily do not use chairs, but sit on quilts (*kurpalar*). People sit cross-legged as they take their meals or sit erect on bended knees. Over the course of longer meals or socials, changes of bodily position occur frequently to improve circulation to legs and feet as well as to maximize comfort.

#### MEALTIME ETIQUETTE

FV Uzbeks typically practice sex segregation during their meals: men sit and wait in the main recreation or guest room of the house, while women cook and serve them. Very young children, regardless of sex, are likely to sit with their fathers at dinner. These patterns vary to a slight degree in the more than 50 village households where I ate and socialized.

Age groups, contrary to common wisdom, do not always reflect liberal outlooks according to the way in which people have been socialized. Education level and commitments to socialist equality, or ideas about "proper" Muslim behavior, however, do influence liberalization or lack thereof among individuals in this sense. If one couple (man and wife) were to visit another, it would be likely that the woman guest would sit at the dining table, and that her woman host friend would continue to serve her while socializing with her as if they were taking it easy on their own. In certain conservative homes, women guests will head directly to the kitchen area where they will help host friends prepare and serve. Later these women will eat together and socialize in the kitchen area.

Boys who have reached the age of 16 or so, often do not eat with their fathers and their fathers' friends, but will eat with their mothers and sisters in

the kitchen area. Since parents dote upon young children, however, especially boys under 10 and little girls, they will often stay for some of the time with a father and his friends.

When men entertain other men, it is extremely unlikely that either the host's wife or any other female relative (with the possible exception of the host's mother – owing to her seniority/authority) will ever intrude on the temporarily designated male space in any capacity other than as one waiting on and serving. There is an inviolability attached to the temporary male domain whenever men gather, although there is no such enforcement of practices that all recognize and respect. That is, there are few express prohibitions from entering gendered space, but certain kinds of intrusions would be considered brazen and improper; such intrusions on temporarily engendered space would flout the norms of practice, such as wives or daughters walking in on a men's evening social to socialize or watch television.

During the morning breakfast (known as *nonushta* – literally, the breaking of or passing of bread – in Uzbek) such sex segregation is not generally practiced, especially if all or most of the family will shortly head off to work or school. Women still take care of preparations and any cooking that they may need to do for breakfast, but everyone eats together quickly. Breakfasts, just as their Uzbek name suggests, tend to be Spartan affairs. Bread and tea, perhaps a few walnuts and raisins, are the staple. Sometimes eggs, bunches of grapes (mostly in the summer and fall), or honey and cups of boiled milk or cold cream make up richer fare. Of course, much like families in other agricultural settings, the morning schedules of each individual in the home are not the same. School-age children, members with jobs in nearby towns, and collective farm brigade field workers do not all begin to eat or leave their breakfast table at the same time.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELING FULL

Into the new millennium few villagers express satisfaction about their diets and daily fare when they compare their eating habits and availability of foods to the recent past of the late Soviet era, especially up until the late 1980s. Today people say that their choices are more limited, and they say that their domestic foods are not substantial enough. In a word, they are talking about the lack of meat in their diets, or, if not meat per se, then meat products – some type of animal fat and animal protein in their meals. But general complaints about food exceed complaining about the lack of meat. Uzbeks, as I alluded to earlier, when speaking of greasy pilaf, have what one could call a fundamental belief in the need for rich foods that by our standards would be considered too high in fat, cholesterol, and calories. To underline my point, villagers spoke of foods being most delicious because they are *kop/mnogo kalorniye* (mixed Uzbek and Russian phrase for high in calories or 'rich'). I

point to a reversal in concepts of what is healthful and nutritious half-seriously: there obviously is no mystery as to why it should be the case. High-calorie foods provide the most satisfaction, or feeling of fullness.

The vast majority of villagers from ages 10–65, if able-bodied, spend a great deal of their waking hours moving about and working hard. On average, villagers walk or bicycle from three to eight km/day (less in the winter months), and they engage in arduous physical labor, from cooking preparation to carrying heavy sacks of provisions to constant attention paid to land itself—hoeing, cropping, digging, draining, etc. In short, the high-calorie diet most people recall and wish for is commensurate with the demands of their lifestyles.

As mentioned, in visiting the FV during the summer and autumn months, one would think rightly that people eat well. The winter and spring seasons, however, mark different periods in nutritional intake; and during the mid-late 1990s some families experienced the kinds of food shortages that the village last experienced only a few times after bad harvests in the post-WW II era.

One September afternoon I recall joking around with a friend who had prepared a sautéed mixture of corn, potatoes, carrots, peppers, and eggplants from his own garden. My friend announced that he was going to try an “experiment” before he set to cooking. The “experiment” turned out to be a meatless meal because no meal really is considered manly or hearty enough if it contains no meat. And as one can see from comparative research into Mediterranean and North African societies, hosts may feel mortified when there is no meat to be had for their guests (Herzfeld 1985: 136; Bourdieu 1990: 252). While we were eating, I praised the meal and told him how I appreciated his culinary innovation that I even knew American vegetarians who would really go for his meal. He proceeded to ask me if most Americans were vegetarian, and I said no and that it is difficult for them sometimes because meat always intrudes on their dietary plans whenever they are not in full control over the preparation of their own meals. He nodded as he listened, and then he said, “Well, you go ahead and let them know what an easy time of it they’ll have in Uzbekistan; we’re all vegetarians now.” We laughed for a while but both wished for a piece of meat at that moment. We also recalled the old Jack London short story about the withered and impoverished prizefighter longing for a piece of steak to give him the strength to defeat a youthful challenger.

#### LIVING BY BREAD ALONE

After the early 1990s the place of bread, which already assumed a big place in pan-Soviet diets prior to national independence, assumed even greater significance, according to most adult villagers with whom I discussed the topic. Grain-based foodstuffs of the carbohydrate-laden diet consist mainly in wheat and rice with smaller supplements of maize and sorghum. Uzbeks eat



Photo 2: Selling bakery bread from a *tandir* oven in Ferghana. (R. ZANCA, 2011)

enormous amounts of bread. Since women make bread and other dough foods, I inquired about the total amount based on local calculations, since people do not usually sit around thinking about how much they eat in the manner of a statistician. At any rate, results show that a family of seven to eight people will consume nearly 90 kg of wheat flour in a two-week period, which means that they will consume more than a metric ton of wheat in the course of a year! A day's total alone, based on informant information and direct observation (to say nothing of personal consumption), is approximately a little more than one kilogram of wheat flour per person. In terms of bread alone a neighbor woman told me that she bakes at least 20 loaves of bread every two-three days for her family of six. The *tandir*-oven (a large circular oven made from mud and wool) baked loaves are heavy and dense. These loaves often get shared among neighbors, so not every loaf is eaten by a particular household's members. Village women have a system of "bread-giving" and "bread-taking" that operates on internal concepts of neighborliness and friendship. Not to bake bread and savory pastries (*somsalar*) with others in mind would not be well regarded.

Lest it be thought that the dire necessity, passion, and all-around obsession for and with bread is a distinctly rural phenomenon, I can attest that experiences in urban settings show the contrary. In cities such as Namangan and Osh, few urbanites have or frequently use *tandirs* in comparison to the villages, especially those living in high-rise apartment blocs. Bread baking in the cities is left to professional bakers, or at least to people who bake all the time to meet street or neighborhood (*mahalla*) demands. Most city bread is



Photo 3: Woman lights fire for a home's *tandir* oven in Marghilan.  
(R. ZANCA, 2011)

lighter and fluffier than whole-wheat village bread. Refined flour and other ingredients, including egg and milk, make for a very tasty but less substantial bread. City people even will say: “We don’t eat as well as villagers (meaning fewer vitamins and nutrients from bread). Our bread has no substance, and theirs is so solid and dark the way it should be. Life is harder there, especially for the women, but all the same they’re healthier than we are.”

Be this as it may, rural people, children most of all, enjoy the opportunity to have bakery bread (*nonvoi non*), which kolkhozniks buy in bulk (perhaps 175–225 loaves in a variety of tastes, shapes and styles) for weddings and special occasions whenever tens of people gather at one house. Russians refer to the Uzbek bread from town and city bakeries as *lepishka* (literally, “sticker,” because of the method of placing the dough on the circular sides of the heated *tandir* ovens). Several small children once confided in me that their gastronomic fantasy was *nonvoi non* with *shashlyk* (skewered pieces of marinated mutton or beef and fat that have been grilled). Such specially marinated and prepared meats are rare as is the lighter and fluffier town version of their bread. They responded to our question, “What’s your favorite holiday dish?”

Another anthropologist who noted the centrality of bread in the lives of a mainly agricultural society is Counihan, who conducted fieldwork off the



coast of Italy in Sardinia. She shows that bread affects many spheres of social life besides ordinary consumption (1997: 283–295). Bread's role also is multi-lateral in villages, in physically sustaining people, being a thing of pride to those women who bake well, and also in serving as a means for labor organization and social intercourse for those involved in preparing it.

Moreover, bread has essential symbolic roles to play, too. Anybody leaving home for even an overnight journey must bring at least one loaf from home, and it is important that bread accompanies a person should he be heading off for a distant trip. Uzbeks believe that bread delivers comfort and happiness. Moreover, if one suffers from nightmares, one method to alleviate fright is to place bread under one's pillow because it will guard against demons. Villagers also believe that birds may come and take bread from underneath one's pillow, and then fly away with the demonic spirits it absorbed through the nightmare. Such symbolic associations of bread's protector-like status also are noted by the anthropologist Arnott working in Greece, in the Peloponnesus (1975: 303).

Villagers eat bread all day long and they would never dare throw away stale bread, an act considered obscene and sinful given relatively recent experiences with hunger. Of course, such attitudes are not only a product of history and famines, but are shared by Muslim peoples throughout the Near and Middle East. Stale bread is broken up into soups, dunked in tea, or simply placed in bowls of water for softening (this last method is known as *ordak shurva*/'duck soup', because the pieces float as they absorb water like ducks on a pond). Bread's all-important role as nourishment mirrors patterns found throughout the Mediterranean (Balfet 1975: 310). These methods of eating bread are essential to older people who often have few, if any, teeth. In peasant households, few meals commence without someone (generally the oldest male relative present) announcing , "*Non sindiring!*" ("Let's break bread!"). Pieces are torn from each loaf with the hands (using a knife to cut bread is considered bad form, as if one is doing violence to the bread). Then the host carefully places equal amounts of bread in front of each diner. Later uneaten pieces are collected from the sitting and then carefully stacked together and put away. The cycle repeats itself at the next meal.

## MEAT MATTERS

Considerations of foodstuffs and food preparation constitute one of the most lively and enjoyable aspects of social interaction, but even this topic cannot but become political during anthropological investigations involving an American and post-Soviet citizens. I say this because food as a consumer good became an important tool in the Soviet quest to deliver its people from hunger that had prevailed from the 1920s through the 1950s. The state knew that for socialism to succeed it had to put food on the table, especially foods that people coveted, such as meat, butter, fish eggs, etc. – the richest and

highest in calories (Von Bremzen 2013). In fact, from 1960 till 1990 the gross agricultural output of the U.S.S.R. grew at twice the rate of population (Severin 1993), but all the while this very system, specifically its financial, productive, and distributive parts were heading for disaster (Van Atta 1993). Nevertheless, from an ethnographic perspective, one has to consider both the pertinent facts from the macro-economic side, meaning the bungled planned economy of food production, as well as the micro-economic perspectives and local perceptions of the accomplishments achieved in filling stomachs by the old regime. Excluding World War II, other countries of the formerly Communist world – the Second World – notably, the Czech and Slovak republics as well as Hungary the German Democratic Republic, probably have not experienced the kind of long-term poverty and hunger felt by the peoples of the countryside in Russia and Central Asia.

Lenin once remarked that grain was the “currency of currencies.” In the 1950s, the leadership began to promise untold peace time riches, which would have a lot to do with the greater exploitation of its vast resources, and the ocean of wheat in which they soon would be awash with the kickoff of Premier Khrushchev’s Virgin Lands campaign in 1954 in northern Kazakhstan (the idea was to grow vast quantities of wheat on dry grass lands, mainly used by nomadic herders). For the first time in decades, the mid-1950s marked a period in Soviet life when various leaders spoke openly about past mistakes and crimes, not the least of which were those dealing with the falsifying of agriculture and livestock production figures, developments, etc. For example, from 1928–1953 the Soviet Union lost nearly 9,000,000 head of cattle (Crankshaw 1959). Furthermore, the leadership began declaring the importance of consumer needs, especially quality foodstuffs. More than likely this new notion may have had a mesmerizing effect as people could start to salivate over illusions of steaming bread and skewers of roast mutton as opposed to those of power plants and pesticide factories.

In an effort to understand what genuine wealth differences existed between themselves and Americans, informants and strangers never hesitated to ask about my annual income. However, the amount of money alone did not satisfy people’s understanding; they wanted more concrete understandings of what our money buys. The importance of affordable food, demonstrating a good quality of life, was brought home to me when people would probe further with standard questions, such as the following:

Okay, but how many kilos of meat does \$2,000.00  
buy you each month?  
Or,  
Alright, but how much is a loaf of bread?

Once I told informants or strangers, they would start calculating immediately how much of a given food product it would buy. Questions about rent, cars, stereos, entertainment, etc. all followed those about foods values. Furthermore, when I later hosted a visiting Uzbek scholar in Chicago whom I had brought as a guest to a wedding, he announced toward evening's end, "I think there is more meat at Uzbek weddings." My wife and I exchanged bemused glances. Talk of food as a measure of the relative wealth of economy – political economy, really – appears already to be anchored in the rural social structure, and this may reflect more a Soviet-Uzbek identity than one wholly rooted in historical patterns. Quantification seems essential to any wealth calculus.

### CURTAILING EXCESSIVE WEDDINGS

If procuring preferred food products (*oziq-ovqat*) in daily life engenders a new set of economic hurdles in the post-Soviet world, getting married and planning wedding parties are on an altogether different scale in terms of how Uzbeks look at the gist of who they are as a people because the rural wedding has long been a point of pride. Typically, it features hundreds of guests who feast, dance, and display all sorts of important gifts for the new couple, mainly new garments and new household items as the newlyweds start out on the road to family life.

Excess at weddings, even among families who can ill afford to spend so lavishly, has been noted in the historical literature; it certainly became an issue that even the Bolsheviks wanted to tackle much earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kamp 2006).

Few practices are marked by the kind of cultural extravagance as the *kelin toi* (daughter's wedding preparation ceremonies and party – the main wedding celebration). Uzbeks themselves consciously engage whatever doubts or self-questioning they may have about spending so much money and expending so much effort on these weddings by ensuring that the affair goes off in a way that garners respect, just as it gives the daughter pride in her own family, and as it also helps her parents know that the crucial relations to new in-laws get off to a proper start.

People also talked about being trapped by weddings, saying there is no escape from the burdens (especially the dual-sided contributions of bride-wealth and dowry) they entail. Smart are those parents who plan for the festivities years in advance by collecting the items required to help furnish the new union. Thinking and planning for these weddings is so developed a field of cultural reproduction that every adult can provide outsiders with a quantified list of necessary items. Gift endowments are based on strict plans, too.

Nothing about the nature and structure of the celebration had really changed; it is just that people have had to scale back the lavishness. Proportionality has been introduced, and most villagers seem to be aware of new

standards that have become self-imposed in a fast but also collective way. Both men and women move within their own jurisdictions when wedding planning and supplying come about. Men ordinarily concern themselves with supplying all non-baked foodstuffs and beverages in order to feed anywhere from 85–300 people. Part of this inventory includes a cow and perhaps 1–2 sheep, 50 kg of carrots, 30 kg of onions, 20 melons, 50 kg of rice, 25 kg of potatoes, etc.

There is really no way to tell how many guests will show up. Variables that ensure large crowds usually include marriages between a villager and a townsman, the sheer number of one's relatives, the popularity of the host in the community, the influence of one family over the others, the popularity of the betrothed, the hosts' generosity, the popularity of a singer or the musicians involved, etc.

Paradoxically, the consumption of alcoholic beverages is always, subtly though, discouraged, but should a family in this particular village not supply the alcohol those in attendance (the men, really) would view the hosts as ungracious tightwads. This matter, no laughing one at that, becomes so serious that men obsess about their liquor purchases days before the celebration draws close. They worry about who will find the necessary quantity of liquor, varieties of it (champagne, vodka, brandy, and port wine) and, most importantly, how much it will cost.

Men claim they also have had to cut down on their outlays for alcohol by approximately half the level from the pre-*perestroika* years (1985–1991). This means that they will now purchase 20–25 half-liters (size of bottles in which it is sold) of vodka as opposed to the 40–50 that characterized the last 25 or so years of the Soviet era.

My own findings indicate that because men drink, perhaps more heavily now than in the aforementioned period, they tend to supply or provide wedding celebrations with vodka that they have brought themselves and bring to the celebrations as guests, which is a newer pattern. Weddings, furthermore, are one of the few social occasions where people expect to drink and willingly make excuses for those who have drunk a lot of vodka or port wine – the other main wedding beverage: “We just drink for his daughter's happiness.”

It is unlikely that curtailment of festivities and consumption itself will come to pass any time soon because such a transformation would ramify into several domains of the social structure. One should not see the spendthrift patterns as merely an example of blindly following custom. Of course, people think seriously about the costs, how they will budget the available cash on hand, whether or not they will need to borrow, and what their actual spending ceiling is. Having said this, however, the wedding gifts, dowry, and party form the integral parts of one of Uzbek culture's most important life-cycle celebrations. Not only must an atmosphere of conviviality and generosity be shown to neighbors and new in-laws, but a daughter's parents, espe-

cially her father, show their child how much they value, honor, and love her, even as they send her off to live with a new family – in exogamous surroundings, i. e. often outside her own neighborhood and village.

At one wedding I experienced near-chaos set in once people learned that the host had run out of food. People were not particularly angry; some found it funny in fact. Just the same they wondered aloud why they had come if not to eat a meal with meat (it is essential to sacrifice and cook a sheep for the wedding feast, which will then be cooked into soup and rice pilaf). Still others, in an effort to avoid the even greater embarrassment, mobilized to get the cauldrons filled and bubbling away again. One woman (W) who noticed me snapping photos and taking notes during the party got my attention and asked what I thought about the wedding itself:

W: Our weddings aren't like yours, are they?

RZ: Well, in some ways yes, in some ways, no...

W: Come on! Of course they're not! We're wild, running all about. There's no order to our weddings. Everybody is welcome, but not much forethought goes into the planning. You must think we're backward, right?

RZ: Not really. I just...

W: Well, it's true. We should plan them. They're so expensive now, but we just don't think. That's why we stay so poor.

But what goes into the actual financing of a wedding with so little money on hand? The family, generally the father himself, must sell livestock or other sources of capital that are not subject to the vagaries of a non-convertible currency in the marketplace. Thus a sheep, a cow, a bicycle, or even an old auto and electrical appliances may figure in the 'war chest' to raise the cash necessary to pay for the provisions and supplies.

When questioned, a young, university-bound man (YM below) discussed how it is that older men endure these weddings, what with all of the expenses, impositions on time, the endless stream of guests, etc. Then he turned the tables, asking what it is like for American fathers. Although he had some familiarity with American weddings from movies, we established that most American fathers don't do a lot of cooking for the weddings and they don't worry too much about uninvited guests showing up. Continuing with the local issues, this is how he responded when asked about what happens if a man just gets fed up and wants to scale back the excess. He shook his head and explained:

YM: There's no way, that's just not acceptable to us.

RZ: But why? What if you don't have enough, or you're ill prepared for large crowds of people?

YM: Then you're an idiot! Look, these celebrations don't just sneak up on people. They're a part of one's upbringing, and men know about them and prepare for them years in advance. Besides, even if it pains a man, he will not let it trouble him until it is well past.

RZ: Why?

YM: Because we are supposed to look upon the *kelin toi* (lit. bride's party) as a happy event. One mustn't worry about not having enough.

The young man's remarks demonstrate that, financial burdens aside, the *toi* must go on. Impressing others, earning respect, and gaining pride may be guaranteed through a successful or scandal-free wedding (that could be caused by disputes among new in-laws, insufficient foodstuffs, disciplinary breakdown, poor culinary execution, etc.). Readers should keep in mind, however, that the reputation of a family holding a wedding is not staked/predicated on upping or outdoing neighbors and friends – at least not for most of the families, in some potlatching style, though everyone wants others, especially the in-laws, to know that there was no skimping. Additionally, the high degree of mutual help among friends, neighbors, and relatives during weddings works against individualistic or selfish tendencies that might demarcate groups of villagers by stratification. By and large, society remains sufficiently communalist now so as not to cause any noticeable non-egalitarian antagonism. Today the situation for a majority of villagers may be said to correspond to a remark made by Clifford Geertz about Javanese with whom he worked in the 1960s; he spoke of their “shared poverty.” According to him, the Javanese peasants he knew referred to themselves economically as the “just enoughs” and “not quite enoughs” (1963: 97).

#### KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

Uzbek society, however, is one wherein appearances mean a great deal, and having guests over to one's home provides the atmosphere most conducive to taking care of business and attempting to complete goals where prying eyes and malicious talk are kept to a minimum. The home is the place of refuge and confidentiality relative to the public sphere. Here one probably need not fear reproach or ridicule owing to unwelcome requests or propositions. Conversations in the home among friends or acquaintances usually do not travel beyond the four walls of a particular sitting room or beyond the outdoor *ai-van* (the low, porch-like area that usually faces the courtyard) in warmer weather.

Whereas other men in Muslim societies of the Near and Middle East find or seek little repose in the home (Bourdieu 1977: 90) because it has been designated a feminine domain, Uzbeks have masculinized their own spatial



Photo 4: Hospitable lady in Marghilan (R. ZANCA, 2011)

and temporal areas within the home. They make sure that women wait on them and clean their sitting area; children generally are not allowed to bother the men once they have begun to entertain their guests, or once men have decided that the time has come for men-only discussions or recreation. Wives typically play little to no role in these very private affairs of their husbands save post facto, if matters are serious enough to merit the authority of both household managers.

The service and attention women bring to these guest evenings can make or break her husband's relationship to the guest/s. The importance of women's conduct and efforts factor into the freshness of the foodstuffs prepared. Since no one should leave disgusted, the food – from the fundamental breaking of bread and tea drinking, to the long drawn out pilaf eating should at least be tasty. Here a woman may either be a partner to her husband or act in opposition to him. Her housekeeping and food preparation may either serve as a part of his family pride or his scourge. The role of the woman or women in these sessions constitutes a form of power over the men that outsiders can overlook easily at first glance because the women appear and comport themselves as ones who are effaced and subservient, making of themselves a shadow presence as they busily follow imperious directives at the behest of men.

Indeed hospitality is a family affair. An individual within a family household cannot make the guest/s feel welcome and comfortable – hospitality’s crucible – if his spouse and other relatives do not put their best collective foot forward, too. Even a guest who is not an insider can feel the tension and sense the anger of a family not living in harmony. This is why benevolence and decency must be expressed characteristics of the *hojain* (master of the house). He dooms himself if he is neither respected nor liked in his own home.

## CONCLUSION

The social life of food, broadly, has been the subject of this essay. In it I discussed a ubiquitous meal, nutrition, ideas about good eating and good meal preparation, and then I segued into weddings as major affairs. These affairs tie together households as production units as their members join children to other families, all the while keeping in mind the importance of emotional and psychological satisfaction that the hard-boiled aspects of weddings as major life-cycle events within the domestic sphere must try satisfying. I concluded the chapter with conceptions and instances of hospitality, a vaunted aspect of social life for Uzbeks in addition to being a value that they feel strongly distinguished them from neighboring peoples, thus marking an important aspect of identity.

In providing instances of the basic making of meals, the decline in village fortunes and its popularly perceived negative impact on the diet and nutrition, the foodstuffs people value highly, celebratory meals, communal events, and aspects of hospitality as they relate to the commensal, I am drawing distinctions about Uzbek sensibilities centered on food as well as food’s preparation and sociality, or what I will call the humanity of food. While there is no question that Uzbek meals and customary practices connected to them share much with neighboring ethnic groups and modern countries, I also argue that Uzbek ways remain culturally unique within a broader Central Asian culinary context.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnott, M. L. 1975. ‘The Beads of Mani’, in M. L. Arnott (ed.), *Gastronomy: The Anthropology of Food and Food Habits*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, pp. 297–304.
- Balfet, H. 1975. ‘Bread in Some Regions of the Mediterranean Area: A Contribution to the Studies on Eating Habits’, in M. L. Arnott (ed.), *Gastronomy: The Anthropology of Food and Food Habits*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, pp. 305–314.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Counihan, C. 1997. 'Bread as World: Food Habits and Social Relations in Modernizing Sardinia', in C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik (eds), *Food and Culture: A Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 283–295.
- Crankshaw, E. 1959. *Khrushchev's Russia*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- Geertz, C. 1963. *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.
- Herzfeld, M. 1985. *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Kamp, M. 2006. *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Mintz, S. 1986. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Montanari, M. 1992. *Food Is Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Severin, B. 1992. 'Differences in Food Production and Food Consumption among the Former Republics of the Soviet Union', in R. F. Kaufman and J. P. Hardt (eds), *The Former Soviet Union in Transition*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 514–540.
- Tolstov, S.P. et al (eds). 1962. *Narody Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk.
- Turner, J. 2003. *Spice: the History of a Temptation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Van Atta, D. 1993. *The "Farmer Threat": The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform in Post-Soviet Russia*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Von Bremzen, A. 2014. *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking: A Memoir of Food and Longing*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Williams, W.W. 1996. 'From Asia's Good Earth: Rice, Society, and Science', *Hemispheres* December: 80–88.
- Zanca, R. 2006. 'Fat and All That: Good Eating the Uzbek Way in Everyday Life', in J. Sahadeo and R. Zanca (eds), *Central Asia Past and Present*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 178–197.
- Zanca, R. 2011. *Life in a Muslim Uzbek Village: Cotton Farming after Communism*. Wadsworth, CA: Cengage and Wadsworth Publishing Company.



# THE ROLE OF FOOD IN IDENTIFICATION PROCESS: EXAMPLES FROM CENTRAL ASIA

(RANO TURAEVA)

*Rano Turaeva is an associated researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle in Germany. Her dissertation title was 'Identification, Discrimination and Communication: Khorezmian migrants in Tashkent'. Her book, based on her dissertation and published with Routledge (2016), explores the dynamics of interethnic relations among sub-ethnic Uzbek groups in Tashkent. She published her work in such journals as Inner Asia, Central Asian Survey, Post-Communist studies, Anthropology of Middle East, Anthropolos among others. Her works touched upon such topics as language and identity, entrepreneurship and religion, migration and religion, citizenship, ethnic relations, state and society relations among others. Her current research focuses on the role of mosques in regulating informal economies on the example of Central Asian migrants in Russia.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Central Asian cuisine varies from region to region. Although most of the basic food and principles of baking bread are similar, there are still considerable differences between what one could call an Uzbek (which has already 12 regional differences), Tadjik, Turkmen, Kyrgyz and Kazakh cuisine. In this paper I will focus on Uzbek and partly Turkmen food in order to make the argument about the important role food plays in the identification process. There are two scales of comparison used in this paper, namely national food and regional varieties of food within one country to support the argument of the link between identity and food in general. Although the major material used for this paper derives from the research done in Uzbekistan with shorter trips to other Central Asian countries, the arguments of this paper contribute generally to the existing links to identity and food in general. For more on Uzbek and regional identities challenging Uzbek identities see the works by Finke (2006) and Turaeva (2016).

Before I start exploring the link between food and identity in Central Asia, I briefly distinguish identity from identification process. In studying collective identities, I take the definition by Donahoe et al. (2009) as a starting point. They define collective identity as “a representation containing – or seeming to contain – a normative appeal to potential respondents and providing them with the means of understanding themselves, or being understood, as members of a larger category of persons or as participants in a larger as-

semblage” (ibid.: 2). The authors distinguish identity and identification by suggesting that we consider the former as representation and the latter as process. Following Brubaker and Cooper (2000), I am keen on taking a processual approach and use the term identification when I describe the processes of collective identification. However, I and others (Donahoe et al. 2009) believe that the substantive ‘identity’ is useful to indicate the types of identity that are object of these identification processes. Without its object, these processes cannot take place.

It is not new that the link between food and identity has been qualitatively established so far in the academic literature (Poe 1999; Feffer 2005; Counihan and Van Esterick 2013; Cwiertka 2006; Valentine 1999; Wilk 1999; Shields-Argeles 2004; Wilson 2006; Rosenblum 2010; Liu and Lin 2009; Fischler 1988). All of the academic discussions linking food with identity drew their material from the West, some from Asia but there is not an ethnographic account highlighting the aspects of food and identity in Central Asia.

Fischler stated that “[f]ood is central to our sense of identity” (1988: 275). Food can be defined as a marker of identity or badge of identity to follow Jackson (1974). Jackson defined any marker of identity [such as food for example] as “a badge of identity” (1974: 59), a metaphor adopted from Barth (1969) who referred to badges of identity as “diacritica”.

#### FOOD IN CENTRAL ASIA

Food is an important part of the everyday life of people in Central Asia. It is a common practice in Central Asia to eat warm two times a day during lunch time and in the evening. Considering the complexity of the cuisine of all the Central Asian countries it is not so difficult to calculate how much time is spent on the cooking every day. The food is often cooked by women depending on the context, situation, event or people involved in the participation of the consumption of the cooked food. Consequently, I argue that the amount of time spent everyday for cooking influences identification of women differently than men.

Food defines also the family and person’s social and financial status if the food is offered also depending on whom the food is offered to. The quality of the cooked food is also a measure to assess *kelin/s* if any, daughter/s or the wife is cooking the food.

What follows is an example where the food can be decisive regarding one’s social and financial status. The life-cycle events are very big events for which poorer families even have to work and save for years. There for instance it is obvious from the menu, the amount of meat within the offered food, the variety and amount of food offered as well as the menu of drinks. In smaller gatherings or guest invitations one can also see how much efforts are put into the food offering. The same principles applies such as the amount of meat in the food and the variety of the drinks offered as well as other table food decorations such as fruits, nuts and sweets.

One must differentiate between private and public offerings of food. I would differentiate the food which is offered and the food consumed on a everyday basis. One could write another article on all kinds of aspects of food offering and food consumption in Central Asia but in this paper I would like to focus on the link between food and identity in Central Asia drawing from the material collected from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and also partly from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

I have conducted the main research on the topic of identity and migration in Uzbekistan focusing on regional differences and identification of different regional groups in Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup> These differences were pronounced by such markers as food, cloth, and language among others. Although Uzbek cuisine can be known as unified, there are still regional varieties of Uzbek food in Uzbekistan which can also be seen from different restaurants in Uzbekistan mainly in Tashkent such as Samarqand, Bukhara, Khorezmian food, and Gijduvon Oshi among others. These regional varieties of food also serve as markers of regional identity which I detailed in my book (Turaeva 2016) based on the above research.

#### REGIONAL VARIETIES OF FOOD

The primary item of food to be differentiated is bread and *osh* (main Uzbek dish made out of rice, carrots, onions, meat and oil) which are the basic components of the Uzbek cuisine. Bread is a very important item since it is eaten together with all of the dishes with the exception of filled pasta dishes where pasta replaces the bread.

#### *NON/NAN (BREAD)*

Bread is made differently in the various regions of Uzbekistan. Baking bread is a highly labour intensive and time consuming process: a large amount of dough needs to be prepared, the fire is prepared in the oven (handmade out of mud and straw), and subsequent baking. Preparing the dough is laborious given the weight of the dough, requiring considerable strength to knead it into the required consistency. When the dough is ready it must be divided into portions and rolled flat, and only after 15–20 minutes, it is ready to be baked. The process of bread making is onerous and requires many precautions and much attention, and is highly time consuming. There are varieties of breads baked in the traditional *tandyr* (oven), also cooked without oven on fire depending on the kind of bread and depending on the country and the region. For example *yupka* is a kind of bread which is particular to Khorezm region and might also be found in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

---

<sup>1</sup> The longest field research in the region I conducted was in Uzbekistan 2005–2006 with shorter travels to other Central Asian countries, and between 2010 and 2014 with shorter stays in Uzbekistan.



Photo 1: *Tandir*, an oven for baking bread, Tashkent

(R. TURAEVA, 2005)

(under different names). This kind of bread is made out of dough which is not based on yeast and is cooked in a flat top over the fire or oven. A particular regional variety of this bread (Gurlan district) is known in Khorezm in Uzbekistan and serves also for the definition of the sub-regional group identity in Khorezm

Comparing the differences of bread in Uzbekistan one can observe that those differences play a tremendous role in regional identification of Uzbek groups in Uzbekistan. Famous and popular in Tashkent is one specialty of Samarkand bread which is very thick, round and has the form of most bread made in Tashkent. This type of bread which is favourite of Tashkentis and many other regional Uzbek groups is not favoured by Khorezmians who find it too thick in comparison with their very thin bread.

The decorations are also different for each region in Uzbekistan as well as varying from one country to another. Tashkent and other regions in Uzbekistan stamp their bread with one flower ornament in the centre of their bread. Khorezmians have a very particular type of bread distinguished by its thinness and its more decoratively floral; one flower in the centre and two or three rows surrounding it. In Turkmenistan for example, depending on the region the bread ornament distinguishes regional differences. In Dashhovuz the bread is thinner and decorative as in Aq-tepe or Kunya-Urgench in Turkmenistan. The quality of bread is also different.

Bread is a must part of the guests' present to the house of a host. Variety of bread also serve as a symbolic mark of a certain ritual such as engagement, marriage or child-birth.



Photo 2: Baking bread,  
Khorezm, Uzbekistan  
(R. TURAEVA, 2006)

The differences of bread quality for instance in Tashkent are seen in the consumption patterns and administration of the supply of bread from different regions. Khorezmians who come to live and build a house in Tashkent first construct their own *tandir* (a self-built oven usually outside in the garden) in order to bake their own bread. Otherwise, their families send them Khorezmian bread along with other food items from Khorezm. Khorezmians consider Tashkent bread as being ‘empty’ (not nutritional) and meager. They say, “[i]t is better to buy a Russian *buhanka*<sup>Ru</sup> (loaf of bread) than this Tashkent bread” (Adolat, 35, 12.03.2006). These types of discourses and distinguished patterns of bread supply and consumption play out in the identity politics among Uzbek groups in Uzbekistan.<sup>2</sup>

#### *OSH/PALOV*

*Osh/palov* is a popular dish all over Central Asia and is cooked differently in each Central Asian country. There are also regional differences of *palov*-making within the country itself. The differences of *osh/palov* within Uzbekistan are most distinguished. In Uzbekistan, every region is proud of its

<sup>2</sup> See more on the regional differences in Uzbekistan Turaeva (2016).



Photo 3: *Palov*, rice dish made on fire, Tashkent Uzbekistan (R. TURAEVA, 2006)

way of making *osh* (Khorezmians use the word *palov*). Khorezmian *palov* is distinguished as being white and Khorezmians do not like others' *osh* as, depending on the regional variety, it is too dark and spicy for them. The differences in the recipes for *osh* (the rest of Uzbeks) or *palov* (Khorezmians, Bukharans) are insignificant to a non-specialist of this dish. For example, the *osh* of Tashkentis is distinct as they add beans and onions are burnt, giving the rice its dark color and specific taste. *Osh* from Fergana Valley includes sheep fat instead of normal plant oil, giving a different flavour. Bukhara and Samarqand *palov* is known to be served separately, and the rice is cooked independently and added at the end. These are the most distinct varieties of *osh* or *palov*. Khorezmian *palov* is considered to be very special from the Khorezmian point of view and “strange” for non-Khorezmians. It is distinct from others in that Khorezmians use less oil, do not burn onions in the frying, and use nothing else than rice, carrots, meat, oil, garlic, salt and *zira* (cumin seeds). Khorezmians say that their *palov* is *diyetcheskiy* (dietary) in comparison to others, as the rice is cooked well, with less oil and no burning actions in the process.

Members of ethnic groups can go at great lengths in order to promote their regional specialities. One can of course find cafés with a cuisine specific to the region. One may find Khorezmian, Bukhara, or Samarqand cafés which claim to offer specific food from their region. Khorezmians are very proud of their cuisine since they have dishes that are not found in other regions; *tuhum barak* (dumplings filled with eggs and boiled in the water) is the most cited. I was also asked to cook *tuhum barak* when I was a guest at my informants'



places from Namangan, Andijan, and Tashkent but cooked only once, which took the whole morning. Unfortunately, judging from the amount they ate, and from their faces, they did not seem to like it so much, although they were very curious about it, and sampled it for the first time.

Witnessing the discussions over bread and *osh* and whose food is tastier, better, and more popular, one wonders why these differences are so much discussed, compared, and competed over. As I mentioned above, although sometimes the dishes in question might not be so excitingly tasty for others, they are still promoted with great enthusiasm, and one may be led to believe it is done only for the sake of making a difference. Conversely, it may only be a matter of dietetic habit, and inability to accept alternatives.

Below I will discuss another popular dish *Sumalak* and events around this event which are celebrated usually in March around Navruz. *Sumalak* events serve not only for marking a beginning of spring and a new year but also serve as an institution for maintaining ethnic and kinship networks. *Sumalak* also serves as a marker of a group's identity be it kinship, ethnicity or nationality.

#### *SUMALAK*

*Sumalak* events take place once each year, usually in early spring during Navruz celebrations (celebration of spring). *Sumalak* is brown, sweet, and has a consistency of soup puree considered to be a holy sweet dish made out of wheat, small amounts of oil, a small amount of white flour, and water. *Sumalak* is prepared through 12 hours of boiling and non-stop stirring, plus a



Photo 4: *Sumalak*, Tashkent Uzbekistan

(R. TURAEVA, 2006)

preparation period of about three to four hours of manual labour. At the bottom of the *kazan* (a big pot for cooking), small smooth stones are placed to avoid burning. It is important to constantly stir the *sumalak* while cooking. Preparation for the cooking begins as early as 10 days prior to the celebration. For 4 days, moist wheat is kept in linen bags and frequently watered. After 4 days, the turgid grains are placed on trays and watered every four hours until sprouts appear. The cooking itself begins during the day and ends in early morning of the next day. The sprouts are then cut, crushed or are manually let through the meat grinder several times until the juice has been squeezed out and the mash put through the grinder again. Considering the labour intensity and the length of preparation and cooking *sumalak*, it requires many people to help and work together for more than 24 hours. This makes it a relatively big event for acquaintances who want to socialise, such as kinship networks, friends and co-ethnics (*zemlyak* co-lander). *Sumalak* is one of the events where one can see the core of networks getting together and also observe the statuses and roles each member has in the given network. The *Sumalak* event becomes a lively space of interaction where there is time for important things to be discussed in a more relaxed environment: events are planned, relations established and renegotiated, gossip is collected and spread, decisions are made, and future plans discussed.

*Sumalak* events in Tashkent is a clear marker of ethnic and kinship boundaries which can be recognized from the invited people (included and excluded). Sometimes the *Sumalak* events are also called like *Sumalak* with neighbours, *Sumalak* with relatives, Khorezmian *Sumalak*, *Sumalak* with colleagues etc. *Sumalak* can be cooked together with a small organized group who wants to socialize together and maintain the group. *Sumalak* is a good opportunity to compare different networks socializing intensively. In these events one can see how status and social roles are negotiated, maintained and performed as well as the hierarchies within these networks.

I attended several *Sumalak* events in Tashkent and in two regions in Turkmenistan. Those in Uzbekistan were organized either by neighbourhood communities or ethnic networks.

Events such as *sumalak* are the best locations where one can observe the statuses and roles members of networks possess and perform. The length of the event also creates a more relaxed atmosphere for discussing internal arrangements regarding social relations, solving problems and discussing others. Depending on who is organizing *Sumalak* and for whom the event had different purposes for gathering together as well as the character of the whole event. For example, the neighbourhood *sumalak* was performed in the *mahalla* public yard where most of the neighbours attended and the group of attendees was heterogeneous in terms of cultural and regional background. There the exchange was very formal, and discussion centred round issues concerning the common problems of the households and neighbourhood

such as communal payments and taxes. The music was not specific and depended on who donated the player and CDs or tapes. Dances were not performed as everybody was shy. There was also a feeling that some women had been forced into this event in order to get to know their own neighbours and, if new in the neighbourhood, also to introduce themselves. At other ethnicity based *sumalak* events (with the exception of a few neighbours) where the participants were solely ethnic members, the exchange was more intensive and served as a forum for not only socializing but also planning things together and solving each other's problems.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this short piece I highlighted the link between food and identification. I brought up major food items that served as markers of identity and group belonging. These were bread, *osh/palov* and *Sumalak*. The examples drew both from the differences among Central Asian countries and regional differences within one country.

I argued that food varieties serve to define one's collective identity and group belonging. I also touched upon the important seasonal dish of *Sumalak* in Central Asia and showed how the *Sumalak* events serve as a space for maintaining ethnic, kinship and other networks as well as a reinforcement of status within these networks and communities.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barth, F. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget; London: Allen and Unwin.
- Brubaker R., and F. Cooper. 2000. 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society* 29(1): 1–47.
- Cwierotka, K. J. 2006. *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Counihan, C., and P. Van Esterik (eds). 2013. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Donahoe et al. 2009. *The Formation and Mobilization of Collective Identities in Situations of Conflict and Integration* (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers: No. 116). Halle (Saale): Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.
- Feffer, J. 2005. 'Korean Food, Korean Identity: The Impact of Globalization on Korean Agriculture', *Shorenstein APARC*. Retrieved 4 December 2011 from [http://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/korea/publications/korean\\_food\\_korean\\_identity\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_globalization\\_on\\_korean\\_agriculture](http://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/korea/publications/korean_food_korean_identity_the_impact_of_globalization_on_korean_agriculture).

- Fischler, C. 1988. 'Food, Self and Identity', *Social Science Information* 27(2): 275–292.
- Finke, P. 2006. *Variations on Uzbek Identity: Concepts, Constraints and Local Configurations*. Professoral book, Leipzig University.
- Jackson J. 1974. 'Language Identity of the Colombian Vaupés Indians', in R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (eds), *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. New York: Cambridge University Press: pp. 50–64.  
Translated as 'Identidad lingüística de los indios Colombianos del Vaupés', in *Lenguaje y sociedad*, Centro de Traducciones Univalle, Cali, Colombia, 1983: pp. 379–398.
- Liu, Haiming, and Lianlian Lin. 'Food, Culinary Identity, and Transnational Culture: Chinese Restaurant Business in Southern California', *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12.2 (2009): 135–162.
- Poe, T. N. 1999. 'The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915–1947', *American Studies International* 37(1): 4–33.
- Rosenblum, J. 2010. *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Shields-Argeles, C. 2004. 'Imagining Self and the Other: Food and Identity in France and the United States', *Food, Culture & Society* 7(2): 13–28.
- Turaeva R. 2016. *Migration and Identity in Central Asia: The Uzbek Experience*, London: Routledge.
- Valentine, G. 1999. 'Eating In: Home, Consumption and Identity', *The Sociological Review* 47(3): 491–524.
- Wilson, T. M. (ed.). 2006. *Food, Drink and Identity in Europe* (European Studies. An Interdisciplinary Series in European Culture, History and Politics: Vol. 22). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Wilk, R. R. 1999. "'Real Belizean Food": Building Local Identity in the Transnational Caribbean', *American Anthropologist* 101(2): 244–255.

# THE RITUAL ECONOMY OF BREAD AND WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN<sup>1</sup>

(LOUISE BECHTOLD)

*Louise Bechtold holds an M.A. in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Philosophy from the University of Tübingen, Germany, where she is a PhD-student. She has conducted her PhD field research on the ritual economy of feasts in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2011 and 2012. Since 2015 she is a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. Her current research investigates kinship classification and practice in southern Kyrgyzstan.*

## INTRODUCTION

Bread is important in Kyrgyzstan for many reasons. It is the main staple food and is consumed both in everyday life, but also at feasts. At the same time it is considered as sacred and is used in rituals that aim at increasing fertility, wealth and abundance. At feasts bread is pooled, distributed and exchanged. Its production at home, its ritual meaning and the distribution and exchange of bread are mainly handled by women, for whom the details of these procedures are recognised in local custom. They can create a common identity, but also lead to tensions, when women that follow different local customs meet, e.g. in-laws at feasts. This paper examines the ritual economy<sup>2</sup> of bread, which comprises both the economic aspect of the production, consumption, and exchange of bread, and the ritual meaning and value of bread. Secondly it deals with the question of how the ritual economy of bread is connected to identity of the women involved.

In rural southern Kyrgyzstan bread is either baked in an oven *tandyr*<sup>3</sup> as flat bread, or fried in hot oil. The depiction of bread in this paper is based on a one-year field research in the rural area around the town of Jalal-Abad in southern Kyrgyzstan, where I lived and conducted the ethnographic field research for my PhD in 2011 and 2012. Parts of this paper refer to the mountainous rural area north of Jalal-Abad, where mainly Kyrgyz live, other parts

<sup>1</sup> I thank Aida Alymbaeva, Indira Alibayeva, and Benjamin Bechtold for helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Wells and McAnany's definition of ritual economy as the "process of provisioning and consuming that materializes and substantiates worldview for managing meaning and shaping interpretation" (Wells 2008: 3).

<sup>3</sup> The Romanization of the Cyrillic Kyrgyz script was conducted according to international standard BGN/PCGN.

to a village inhabited both by Kyrgyz and Uzbeks south of Jalal-Abad near the Uzbek border.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will first deal with the value of bread both for everyday consumption and hospitality, then with the everyday practice of baking homemade bread and its meanings, the role of bread in ritual activities, and finally the exchange of bread at feasts and local identity.

#### OVERVIEW: BREAD IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN

In southern Kyrgyzstan, bread is consumed together with tea several times a day. All meals are accompanied by bread. Although meat dishes are considered to be typical of Kyrgyz and Kazakh cuisine, in everyday life only rich families can afford to cook large amounts of meat on a daily basis.

In the rural region around the town of Jalal-Abad in southern Kyrgyzstan where I conducted my research, the daily rhythm of food consumption usually includes at least three meals or more when guests come. Among both, Uzbeks that mainly reside in towns in the Fergana Valley and Kyrgyz that settle both in rural areas, and in towns in southern Kyrgyzstan, bread is eaten together with hot dishes, but also as a separate meal accompanied by tea. This most frequent meal is called “drinking tea”, during which bread is eaten with some additional jam and honey to be either added to the tea or eaten by dipping the bread into it. Additionally *sary may* (clarified butter) or *kaymak* (blotted cream) is eaten along with the bread, when available. Other leftovers like bread, fried pastry, cookies, sweets and meat are regularly brought from feasts and added to the meals.

There exist several different kinds of bread, the main division being between bread baked in a *tandyr* and bread that is fried in a big pot (*kazan*). Homemade *tandyr* bread is usually referred to simply as *nan*, the bread that is baked in a commercial bread bakery by a *naabaychy* (person baking flat bread) is called *naabay nan*. It is slightly thinner and smaller than the homemade *nan*. For feasts especially big breads are made at home called *patyr nan* that are often nicely decorated and sometimes smeared with clarified butter after baking to make them more beautiful.

The same dough that is used for producing *nan* can also be cut into small pieces and fried into fried pastry like *boorsok*, one of the most important foods served at a feast. Fried flat breads, *may tokoch*, represent an important ritual meal. Frying bread is important for commemoration rituals, since it involves heating the oil until it starts to smoke (*jyt chygaruu*) which satisfies the ancestor spirits *arbak*.

In the rural area around the town of Jalal-Abad in southern Kyrgyzstan most of the bread that is consumed is produced at home. Flat bread is usually

---

<sup>4</sup> The respective location and ethnic composition of the village are indicated in the text.



Photo 1: Homemade *nan* and fried pastries

(L. BECHTOLD, 2011)

baked in a clay oven called *tandyr*, which you can find in every yard.<sup>5</sup> Similar to homemade milk products, homemade bread is not sold, rather every household is expected to be self-sufficient in producing them for every-day life. Baking tasty bread is considered as one of the important qualities of a good housewife, a good *kelin* (daughter in law). Homemade bread is said to be tastier and healthier than bread bought at the bazaar, it stills the hunger well. Baking one's own bread is perceived as a sign of self-sufficiency. In case there is a young daughter-in-law at home that could bake the bread herself, borrowing it from neighbours is considered as shameful (*uyat bolot*). In contrast to that, in urban areas across Kyrgyzstan and also in many semi-rural areas, bread is often bought in stores or at the bazaar.

In Kyrgyzstan and all across Central Asia bread is treated with special respect and considered to be sacred (Borbieva 2013: 503). It is always the first food tasted. Flat breads have two different sides and it should not be put face down. It should never be thrown away. Bread that has become too stale for eating is added to other food (e. g. *nan pilav*), or is dried as fodder for domestic animals. Bread should never touch the ground, but rather be placed on the *dastorkon* (tablecloth), which is considered as clean. The holiness of bread in the Kyrgyz and Uzbek culture is considered by some to relate to Islam (Borbieva 2013: 503).

<sup>5</sup> Baking bread in a *tandyr* can be used to contrast southern Kyrgyzstan with northern Kyrgyzstan, where bread is nowadays baked inside the house in an oven. From the perspective of Kyrgyz from northern Kyrgyzstan southern Kyrgyz in this context are perceived as culturally closer to Uzbeks and Tajiks, who also bake their breads in *tandyr*s.

Bread is not only important, because people live on it, but it also has ritual functions. Offering bread and tea is considered to be the basic way of offering hospitality (Light 2015: 55). When spontaneous visitors come to a house, they are often invited for tea or, in case a hot dish is being prepared, they are invited to share the meal. If a guest declines this offer, he will be offered to at least taste from the bread. “*Nandan ooz tiygile*”<sup>6</sup> (“Taste the bread”) is the saying that is used to offer this basic form of hospitality.

At big feasts huge amounts of bread are consumed and, additionally, taken home and consumed there (see below). To give just one example, for a one-year commemoration ceremony (*jyldyk*)<sup>7</sup> that I was invited to in 2011 in a Kyrgyz village north of Jalal-Abad, 500 small *naabay nan* and 300 bigger breads were bought to the bazaar; an additional 100 *patyr nan* were baked by the women organising the feast.

The next part of this paper will give a detailed description of the process of producing bread and deal with the meaning that is ascribed to the everyday practice of baking bread, focussing on the perspective of two young women.

#### WOMEN’S EVERYDAY PRACTICE OF BAKING BREAD: RELIGIOUS MERITS AND HARD WORK

Baking bread in the *tandyr* for the whole family is hard work. Depending on the number of heads in a family, bread is baked between one and three times a week. Below I describe how my Kyrgyz friend and host sister Nazira<sup>8</sup> bakes bread in order to illustrate the everyday practice of baking bread and its meanings.

My host sister and friend Nazira, a married Kyrgyz woman in her thirties, is considered a hard and strong worker. When baking bread she prepares the dough (*kamyr*) slowly and carefully. First she spreads the cloth for baking bread – the *supra* – on the floor<sup>9</sup>. She brings in the flour needed to bake 12

<sup>6</sup> *Ooz tiyüü* literally means “to touch the mouth” and can be translated as “to try from something” or “to taste something”.

<sup>7</sup> In southern Kyrgyzstan the commemoration ceremony that takes place at about a year after a person’s death is called *jyldyk* (lit. “yearly”). In literature on northern Kyrgyzstan this one-year commemoration ceremony is referred to as *ash* (Jacquesson 2008, Hardenberg 2015). In the region under study here the term *ash* is used to refer to commemoration rituals in general, but in specific to denote the last and biggest commemoration feast that can be organised either together with a *jyldyk*, or separately years later. The close connection between commemorating ancestors and ‘nurturing’ them is evident in the second meaning of the word *ash*, which translates as “food”.

<sup>8</sup> The name was changed for the sake of anonymity.

<sup>9</sup> A *supra* consists of two square layers of cloth; the sides are slightly longer than a meter. The lower layer is impermeable; the top layer usually consists of a white cloth made from cotton. The top side of the *supra* is considered as clean, similar to a tablecloth (*dastorkon*).





Photo 2: My Kyrgyz host sister with my son preparing flat breads from dough  
(L. BECHTOLD, 2016)

bread, measuring the amount with a simple plate. While sieving the flour through the sieve (*elek*) she tells me that one should always bake an even number of breads; baking an odd number of breads would bring bad luck. She pours warm water into a big bowl, adding a handful of flour, some yeast and salt. Now she adds the rest of the flour and starts kneading the heavy, sticky mass. She continues until the dough ceases to be sticky, and easily comes off the bowl's sides. Now she puts the dough aside to let it rise. Now during summer it is not necessary to wrap it into thick blankets, like during winter. We drink some tea and wait for the dough to rise.

Now we go back inside to form the bread out of the dough. It has risen and my host sister again starts to knead it. She divides the dough into equal pieces and forms round balls out of the dough, one for each *nan*. This time she makes ten big balls and two small ones. She places them on a tablecloth next to the *supra* in a neat row. She forms them one by one into round flat breads slowly turning them with both hands, keeping the rim of the bread slightly thicker than the rest. An important function is fulfilled by the *chekich*, a wooden handle with many metal pins on one side. It is used like a stamp, punching the middle of the bread. The needles of the *chekich* form nice decorative patterns, and let the air contained inside this part of the bread come out, so that it stays flat. Out of the small pieces of dough Nazira forms small breads for children, called *gülchekey*.

Outside we collect some dried maize plants and heat the oven with them. Apart from the dried maize plants, straw, rice plants, thin twigs, or dried pieces of dung can be used to heat the *tandyr*, since they all burn fast. When the fuel in the *tandyr* has burned down and the ashes are glowing, we bring out the flat breads on a big plate. Nazira now wears a thick glove on her right



Photo 3: Breads baking in a *tandyr*

(L. BECHTOLD, 2011)

hand. She places a *nan* onto the glove with the top side up and spreads a bit of water on it. Then she turns it around and does the same with the back side. Now she reaches into the oven and sticks the back side of the bread onto the side of the *tandyr* (see photo No 2).

One by one all breads are placed into the oven. By carefully stirring the ashes the temperature can be increased during the baking process. When the first breads turn yellow and slightly brown, she uses the same glove to pull them out of the oven, carefully grabbing the bread on the part of the rim that is furthest back. “Baking bread in the *tandyr* is *soop*”, Nazira tells me, while we are still standing in front of the oven. She refers to a belief that several young women had told me about. Feeding the family with homemade food and especially baking bread in the *tandyr* (among other things) is considered to bring religious merits (*soop*) that are collected for the afterlife (Borbieva 2013: 503). By referring to this belief my host sister ascribes a special meaning to her activities that aim at nurturing others.

While this belief is held by many, other perspectives on baking bread exist in parallel. To give just one example, a neighbouring young woman called Aigül<sup>10</sup> once complained to me about having to bake so many breads, and more generally about her difficult life as a daughter in law (*kelin*) in the village. Her parents-in-law drank tea five times a day, which she had to prepare and serve, she told me. Since they always ate bread with it she had to bake bread every second day, even baking breads in loads of 20. She went on to complain about the hard physical work (*kara jumush*) that is expected from

<sup>10</sup> The name was changed for the sake of anonymity.

young daughters in law in the village. In the town, where she came from, men helped with the housework and were hard workers, she told me. Here in the village men were lazy, did not work, but rather sat around playing cards. Men were too proud to help the women with the heavy tasks that village life requires, like fetching water from the river. Here all the hard work was considered to be women's work she ended her complaint.

While Nazira underlined the religious importance of baking bread, Aigül saw the same activity as part of the local distribution of labour, which she considered the plight of young women in the village.

## BREAD IN RITUAL

Bread symbolises fertility and plenty, so that it is used in ritual, e.g. in the transitory moment during the wedding ritual, when the bride steps over the doorstep of her husband's home. In order to make her future and the future of the house that she enters fertile and prosperous a flat-bread each is placed under the bride's armpits before entering. She keeps them under her armpits while bowing to her new in-laws after entering their house.

Like bread itself the utensils that are used to make bread can be used in rituals too. To give an example, the *supra* which is usually used as a clean surface while preparing dough and forming the bread (see above) is used in a ritual that serves to increase the fertility of young women and protect their children. The ritual called *Umay ene ashy* is a small commemoration ritual dedicated to Umay *ene*<sup>11</sup>. Umay *ene* represents the most important female religious figure and ancestor in Kyrgyzstan. She is said to be the mother of all Kyrgyz, sometimes she is also referred to as the wife of Prophet Mohammed. The commemoration ritual proceeded as follows. On a Tuesday in April 2011, seven women from neighbouring houses met in order to dedicate the second ritual meal of three to Umay *ene*, which are prepared before the ritual. This ritual was organised by the host to ask from Umay *ene* for her daughter to bear a son. The host had prepared three different kinds of bread *kurgak tokoch*, *may tokoch*, and *gülchekey*. These breads should only be prepared by a woman who regularly conducts the five daily prayers (*namaz*). In contrast to *tandyr nan* they are produced without touching the dough with a knife or the *chakych*. The seven *kurgak tokoch* (dry breads) are first baked in the pot on the fire, then oil is added and the seven *may tokoch* (fat bread) are fried in it. Then the pot is taken from the fire and the last single *gülchekey* bread is baked in the ashes. Each of the seven women sitting around the tablecloth received a *kurgak tokoch*, a *may tokoch* and a piece of the single *gülchekey* that was baked in the ashes, which were placed in front of each of them in a pile. The porridge had been cooked using milk, flour, and adding some salt.

<sup>11</sup> Similar rituals are practiced also in Uzbekistan, referring not to Umay *ene*, but to Bibi Seshambe ("Lady Tuesday").



Photo 4: The host lights seven sticks, the *supra* and the three kinds of bread at a commemoration feast for *Umay ene* (L. BECHTOLD, 2011)

It was served by the host's daughter in law. Each of the women placed the bowl in front of them. Before eating the porridge and the three different kinds of bread, seven sticks of cotton that had been stuck into a glass with corn seeds, were lit like candles (see photo No 4).

While the host lit them, she addressed *Umay ene* with wishes for fertility and wellbeing for the children of the family. During this ritual the *supra* lay open in the centre of the ritual activities, and was thus loaded with the blessings of *Umay ene*. The lighting of the cotton sticks was followed by a recitation from the Koran, which the oldest of the women present conducted in silence, followed by a prayer pronounced in Kyrgyz. After this the women present started eating from the porridge and bread.

At the end of the ritual meal the *supra* was carried outside with the side of the white clean cloth folded to the inside, bowing three times toward the tablecloth where the *supra* had been. When taking the *supra* outside, she did not turn towards the door as usual, but instead walked backwards in order not to turn her back towards the room. Before crossing the doorstep she lifted the *supra* over her head. This was supposed to preserve the blessings inside the *supra* as one of the elderly women explained to the other women present. When this *supra* was used later on to bake bread, the blessing contained in it would rub off to the bread and is then incorporated by the people consuming it. This commemoration ritual for *Umay ene* was supposed to stay a secret that should not be discovered by men. Therefore we took the bread from the ritual meal home in secret, hiding it under our clothes when walking on the

street. We consumed it at home, sharing it only with women and girls<sup>12</sup>, in order not to disclose the ritual to men.<sup>13</sup>

Similar to the seven breads used in the commemoration ritual for Umay *ene* described above, the consumption of seven breads<sup>14</sup> often accompanies a sacrifice (*kudayy*), but can also substitute domestic animals in sacrifice, like at the *jeti nan kudayy* (lit. “seven bread sacrifice”, Bechtold forthcoming, Privratsky 2001: 132–133), or when producing *sümölök* for the *nooruz* festivities at the New Year on March 21<sup>st</sup>.

The following paragraphs will now deal with the bread exchange that takes place at feasts.

#### LOCAL IDENTITY, FEASTING AND EXCHANGE OF BREAD

In Kyrgyzstan procedures at feasts, gift exchange, and commensality are fixed by what is called *salt* – local custom<sup>15</sup>. Every village has its own slightly different expectations as to the details of the procedures, the expected quantity and quality of food at the *dastorkon*, and the gifts exchanged at bigger ceremonies. In southern Kyrgyzstan bread is exchanged by women at every feast. Together with sweets and cookies the bread is transported in a *sebet*, a weed basket around which a tablecloth is folded. A headscarf holds the *sebet* together and serves as a handle. *Sebets* are brought to feasts both by helpers and guests alike, who thus contribute to the feast. During the feast the *sebets* are emptied, and the bread and other food contained in them is added to the food that the guests eat while sitting around a tablecloth. At a later stage of the feast, the *sebets* are refilled with the stock of bread in the stock room and taken back home by the guests (see photo 6). The food contained in them is then later shared by everybody at home. This expands the network of people who eat from the food of a feast further, thus leading to a sharing of food from the feast by many people (see Hardenberg 2015; Bechtold

<sup>12</sup> Pregnant women are also forbidden to eat it, since they might be pregnant with a son. The women that consumed the ritual breads should not have sexual intercourse for three days after the ritual for the same reason.

<sup>13</sup> A legend explains this secrecy as follows: Once upon a time there was a young woman that was helped by Umay *ene*. After some years she wanted to commemorate Umay *ene*, but her husband became angry and overthrew the cooking pot with the food inside. This resulted in bad fortune, so that after some time the husband could be convinced to perform the commemoration ritual ‘*ash*’. In order not to quarrel with men, this ritual is therefore performed in secrecy. I suspect that this legend is really about female religious practice and male orthodox Islam which considers the veneration of other figures as hereditary. The food at the feast was restricted in such a manner that men did not have to be involved (for slaughtering an animal) and the porridge produced could be taken for a usual form of porridge.

<sup>14</sup> In case that the bread should suffice for many people instead of seven, also the multiples of seven (14, 21, etc.) can be produced. Similarly, the number 41 represents a sacred number that can be used when baking breads for sacrifice.

<sup>15</sup> See Beyer (2009) for a detailed analysis of *salt* or “customary law” in Kyrgyzstan.



Photo 5: Refilling *sebets* at a one year commemoration feast *jyldyk* (L. BECHTOLD, 2011)

forthcoming for implications of this practice).

While bread exchange is widespread in Central Asia, the exact details of the bread exchange vary from region to region, from village to village, and even from *uruu* to *uruu* (descent line<sup>16</sup>). To give an example from a village north of Jalal-Abad, the women belonging to two different *uruu* had agreed on a different practice. While the members of the one *uruu* had replaced the contributions of bread brought in *sebets* with a fixed sum of money, the other group kept the practice of bringing *sebets*.

Although it is important to underline the integrative function of commensality, of inviting each other to feasts in Kyrgyzstan, feasting and gift exchange at feast can also create tension or serve as a ‘battleground’ for existing conflicts. During my field research in the region around Jalal-Abad, I was able to witness several such conflicts. In two of these cases the conflicting parties were *kudagyylar*, the mothers-in-law of a couple, who seem to be especially sensitive to alleged “maltreatment” from the other side. In such cases the person who has not received her appropriate share can be offended, spread gossip telling other people “how she was treated”.

In the paragraphs below I will describe the implication of bread exchange focussing on one feast, during which the different expectations of the parties involved became evident.

---

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the terms “patrilineage” and “descent line” in the context of Kyrgyzstan see (Hardenberg 2009).

## EXCHANGING *SEBETS* AT A *BESHIK TOY*

The feast under examination took place in a village south of Jalal-Abad near the border to Uzbekistan that is inhabited mostly by Kyrgyz, where the exchange of breads in *sebets* is especially elaborate. The chosen feast was a *beshik toy*, literally a “cradle feast”, which is celebrated when the first child of a couple is tied into the cradle. The feast takes place at the house of the child’s parents or paternal grandparents. The most important guest is the baby’s maternal grandmother, who is accompanied by a group of about eight women and some affiliated men. This group of guests, which I will call ‘in-laws’, had travelled from a town in the Batken region, which is also located in southern Kyrgyzstan, from where it took the guests about four hours to drive to the feast.

The *sebet* exchange started already on the day before the *beshik-toy* when the women living in the local village quarter (*maala*<sup>17</sup>) visited the woman hosting the feast, bringing with them *sebets* filled with bread and sweets. The women of this local neighbourhood, *maala*, closely assist each other with organising big happy feasts like weddings and *beshik toys*. Part of this assistance consists in contributing food to each other’s feasts by bringing *sebets* to the hosts before the feast. With the food each of the women also brought a piece of cloth<sup>18</sup> (*materiyal*, Rus., lit. “material”) and a headscarf, which were placed inside the *sebet*.<sup>19</sup> These loafs of bread and pieces of cloth were now stored in a separate room for usage on the following day.

On the morning of the day of the feast the tablecloths around which the guests would sit around were prepared by the hosts and their helpers in several rooms of the house, who arranged breads, fried pastry, cups containing honey, marmalade, or clarified butter, several kinds of salad, dried fruits, sweets, and plates with cheese and sausage on these tablecloths. They used part of the bread, fried pastry, and sweets brought by the women on the preceding day to lay a particularly rich *dastorkon* in the biggest room for the in-laws. When these important guests – the maternal grandmother of the baby and her company – arrived they were greeted and the *sebets* that they brought with them were taken from their hands and carried into the storage room. On occasions like the cradle feast, the set of *sebets* given by the guests comprises several different kinds of *sebets*: a bread *sebet*, a sweets *sebet*, a

<sup>17</sup> The term *maala* (from *mahalla*) is used by Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan to designate a neighbourhood.

<sup>18</sup> These pieces of cloth are usually about the size that would be needed to sew a dress out of it. They are part of an elaborate system of cloth exchange that is practiced by women in Kyrgyzstan. The pieces of cloth are differentiated according to the fabric, quality, and pattern. The contributions of cloth are recorded in a notebook, in order to be able to return an equivalent on a similar occasion.

<sup>19</sup> Beforehand the women arrange among themselves, who contributes what, each of them specializing on one kind of food.

*sebet* with *kattama* (a special kind of puff pastry), *boorsok* (fried pastry), a *sebet* with toys for children, and others. The biggest *sebet* is called *ene-sebet* (mother-*sebet*), the *sebet* that was prepared by the child's maternal grandmother. The maternal grandmother of the baby also brought with herself the cradle, and other gifts for the baby and the hosts, which is the customary procedure at a *beshtik toy*. The contents of these *sebets* are not consumed by the hosts themselves, but are opened and served to the other guests of the feast, the neighbours, and members of the local descent line (*uruk tuugandar*) of the hosts. After that the empty *sebets* are refilled and later on taken home again by the guests, where they are also opened and the food contained is served to relatives and neighbours.

The differences between the local customs of the two parties involved, the hosts and the group of guests around the maternal grandmother, became evident when the *sebets* were being 'renewed' in the stock room. In this room women who are especially experienced in these matters refill the *sebets* with the bread and sweets that had been contributed to the host by neighbours and relatives.

When I left the stock room to see what was going on in the yard outside, four women were hotly debating some important matter. It turned out that the maternal grand-mother (who had come as a guest) and paternal grand-mother (the host) of the baby, each of them accompanied by a woman, were arguing about the adequate composition of the *sebets* that would be taken home by the guests to Batken in the afternoon.

The guest grand-mother tried to convince the paternal grand-mother how important it was for them to receive the amount of bread that was appropriate to their local standards of a *beshtik toy*, instead of the local standard of their hosts. She went on referring to her own mother in law, who was waiting for the *sebets* upon their return home. Her mother in law was very keen to inspect them, the guest grandmother said, because they would tell her something about the hosts of the *beshtik toy* whom she was not able to visit herself. Also the breads were needed to be further distributed among the local community of neighbours. Similar to the rural region around the city of Jalal-Abad, they also invite their neighbours and close relatives to a small feast after coming home from a *beshtik toy*. On this occasion the food from the feast is served and distributed along with the good news and detailed accounts of the feast. Many women were expecting to receive a loaf of bread each. For these reasons they needed a large amount of bread.

In the end the host reluctantly invited the baby's maternal grandmother to join them in the storage room, where she carefully inspected each *sebet* and the clothes that would be given to them later on.

The discussions of the paternal and maternal grandmothers on the occasion of the cradle feast in the Kyrgyz and Uzbek village south of Jalal-Abad show us that the exchange of bread and sweets in *sebets* involves many people,





Photo 6: *Sebets* filled with bread and sweets from a feast waiting outside to be taken home (L. BECHTOLD, 2011)

neighbours, relatives and in-law guests who bake the bread and bring it to the feast, the hosts who pool and distribute it, and the in-law guests, neighbours and relatives who consume it at home, and in-laws who share the bread with their neighbours and relatives at a small feast upon their return home. All of these people are involved in the bread exchange and thus related to each other. The exact content of the *sebets* is monitored and interpreted according to local standards of appropriateness in order to evaluate the amount of honour and respect that the giving side wants to show the receiving side. In this context the different local standards can lead to diverging expectations and tensions.

## CONCLUSION

The ritual economy of bread in rural southern Kyrgyzstan and the identity of the women involved in it are closely connected. In rural southern Kyrgyzstan, the production of bread involves a lot of labour and is understood as one of the important tasks of a woman. Self-identification with this role and placing it in a religious context can give meaning to these every day routines, which are incorporated by women. In rituals the nourishing aspect of bread is also valued. It is associated with the sacred ancestress of the Kyrgyz, with fertility, health and plenty. However, from the perspective of women that come from an urban context, baking bread might also be perceived as a backward activity that is part of an unequal division of labour.

Bread also has an important function in showing hospitality both in everyday life and at feasts. By contributing food, including bread to feasts and

taking food home from feasts, women help to establish relations between households. However, the details of hosting guests and exchanging food are perceived as part of local custom (*salt*) which differs among the regions and ethnicities in Kyrgyzstan. These differences serve as important identity markers which are used to distinguish one's own and other's practices. In the context of inter-regional marriages these differences in the practices of the ritual economy of bread can lead to tensions and conflict among the women involved in the bread exchange.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bechtold, Louise. 2017. 'Approaching the Ritual Economy of a Hajji Feast: Resources, Status, and Sharing in Southern Kyrgyzstan', in Roland Hardenberg (ed.), *Approaching Ritual Economy. Socio-Cosmic Fields in Globalised Contexts*, Tübingen: SFB RessourcenKulturen, pp. 37–70.
- Beyer, Judith. 2009. 'According to Salt. An Ethnography of Customary Law in Talas, Kyrgyzstan'. PhD-thesis, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.
- Borbieva, Noor O'Neill. 2013. 'Anxiety, Order and the Other: Well-being among Ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks', *Central Asian Survey* 32: 501–513.
- Hardenberg, Roland. 2009. 'Reconsidering 'Tribe', 'Clan' and 'Relatedness'. A Comparison of Social Categorization in Central and South Asia', *Scrutiny: A Journal of International and Pakistan Studies* 1(1): 37–62.
- Hardenberg, Roland. 2015. 'Three Dimensions of Liminality in the Context of Kyrgyz Death Rituals', in P. Berger and J. Kroesen (eds), *Ultimate Ambiguities Investigating Death and Liminality*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 125–146.
- Jacquesson, Svetlana. 2008. 'The Sore Zones of Identity. Past and present debates on funerals in Kyrgyzstan'. *Inner Asia* 10(1): 281-303.
- Light, Nathan. 2015. 'Animals in the Kyrgyz Ritual Economy. Symbolic and Moral Dimensions of Economic Embedding', in Stephen Gudeman and Chris Hann (eds), *Economy and Ritual. Studies of Postsocialist Transformations*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 52–78.
- Privratsky, Bruce. 2001. *Muslim Turkistan. Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Wells, E. Christina and Patricia Ann McAnany. 2008. 'Toward a Theory of Ritual Economy', in E. Wells and P. McAnany (eds), *Dimensions of Ritual Economy*. Bingley: Emerald, pp. 1–16.

# SHARING FOOD IN SOUTHERN TAJIKISTAN

(WOLFGANG HOLZWARTH)

*Wolfgang Holzwarth, a senior scholar in Social Anthropology and Iranian Studies, is a CASCA member based at the Oriental Institute of the University of Halle and associated with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. In his current project, he is tracing long-term developments in multi-ethnic milieus of Southern Tajikistan from the days of the Emirate of Bukhara through the Soviet period to independent Tajikistan in order to understand the impact of changing political and economic arrangements on local society and culture.*

This contribution to the general topic of ‘food and identity’ attempts to depict some features of ceremonial hosting and sharing food as practised in Southern Tajikistan,<sup>1</sup> especially in a cluster of villages in the loess hills (*adir*) of South-eastern Khatlon province, where Tajik and Uzbek groups live side by side. The focus is on ritual occasions other than the great life cycle feasts, mostly on minor and everyday food offerings, which are attended by only a few persons of the immediate neighbourhood, and on large-scale food offerings during the spring festival ‘navruz.’ Accordingly, the stress is more on how food is offered and shared than on what kind of food is eaten. The paper draws on my observation and conversations during various stays from 2009 to 2015, mostly in a Laqay-Uzbek hamlet in the given multi-ethnic mosaic. The Laqays are a Qipchaq speaking Uzbek group, which in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century was part of the Qataghan confederation, and already well established in their present areas of settlement. Today they number at least 100.000 in Southern Tajikistan. There are also sizeable Laqay communities in Northern Afghanistan, mostly descendents of refugees who fled there in the early Soviet period.

## FOOD SHARING AND ALMS GIVING WITHIN THE VILLAGE

A common local term for small-scale food offerings to neighbours on formal occasions is *nan*,<sup>2</sup> meaning “bread” or “food” in general. A standard Laqay-Uzbek formula to invite neighbours to a meal at one’s home is “(Come) to us for eating bread/food!” (*Bizdikige nan jegene!*). These announcements,

<sup>1</sup> My thanks are to Louise Bechtold, Rustam Abdunazarov and Aida Alymbaeva for commenting on a draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Nan’ is a Tajik word that has been incorporated into the local Laqay-Uzbek dialect, where it is pronounced as *nan*; local Tajiks pronounce ‘non,’ Tajiks of the eastern mountain areas ‘nun’ (*noon*).

spread by sons of the food-giver come at rather short notice. Having received the call, one should be there within half an hour.

To bring along presents or contributions to the meal is neither expected nor appropriate. This interdiction is related to the fact that these invitations and food offerings are classified as *sadaqa* in the Muslim tradition that has survived the Soviet period, which translates as “voluntary alms giving,” or “sacrificial meal.” Accordingly, the envisaged immediate reward, or compensation for the meritorious deed of food offering is immaterial, namely the blessing (*du'a*) performed during the closing ceremony of the meal. After a short formal thanksgiving, a knowledgeable person recites the Koran, after which a senior guest invokes a blessing which all those present join by a gesture of supplication. The blessing – in either Uzbek, Tajik or Arabic language – varies according to the person and the context. It often expresses the hope that wishes may be fulfilled, or invokes God’s mercy on the deceased members of the host’s house and on those members of it, who are still left in our world.

Personal situations and considerations motivate these everyday sacrificial meals. Generally, people do not much talk about these reasons, neither on the way to the host nor while sharing the food. Some of the invited did not even seem to care about the cause. “It has become a standard procedure and we do not inquire”, an intellectual who was born in the village once told me. As far as I have become aware of, or was told upon asking ‘why,’ health and labour migration were the most frequent causes for giving food. Some family member may be ill or undergo an operation; some migrant labourer may leave for Russia, or have returned from there. In one of the cases related to health and fate, the inviting person had survived a fall of four metres from a narrow pedestrian bridge into a shallow rivulet virtually uninjured. In another more unusual case, ‘milk has become plenty’ and was hoped to remain so in the host’s farm. Certainly, the food-givers believe in the benefits of their charity, and feel ‘more at ease’ having offered food. Yet, only a few would put all their hopes on food giving.<sup>3</sup>

In a small-scale everyday food giving, people gather in just one room of the house, the number of participants rarely exceeding a dozen – all of them male, and nearly all of them married. Elders and respected guests are placed at the seat of honour, which is the farthest from the door. Those close to the door will have to assist in serving. The tablecloth spread in the midst is decorated with fruits or dry fruits, nuts, biscuits. Tablecloth conversations cover all kinds of daily news and topics, some of these are spiced with anecdotes and jokes. These sessions usually do not last more than an hour. Elder par-

---

<sup>3</sup> An inhabitant of a neighbouring village, who had fallen ill and given food several times, sacrificing even a bull, and who ultimately died without having consulted a doctor, was considered a fool.



Photo 1: Meal in commemoration of a deceased person

(W. HOLZWARTH, 2015)



Photo 2: Commemorating the ancestors on the vigils of Ramadan

(W. HOLZWARTH, 2015)

ticipants at times abruptly stop the conversation and call for the thanksgiving and blessing closing the meal.

Beliefs and practices related to the everyday, small scale food offerings partly overlap with those associated to memorial meals and feasts conducted during the year of mourning, as well as to the commemoration of ancestors on certain days of the Islamic festive calendar,<sup>4</sup> such as on the ten days preceding the month of Ramadan or on the great Feast of Sacrifice. The latter stands out as the archetype of the sacrifice and alms-giving in fulfilment of a religious and moral obligation, which enhances the social cohesion among the community, and the commemoration of those who have passed away, which strengthens the bond between the living and the (spirits of) the dead. The festive day begins with a visit to the graveyard, and the sacrificial meals offered at home offerings are said to be pleasing the souls of deceased family members, especially the ancestors of the host, who receive the news that their descendants have engaged in a commendable act (on their behalf) and rejoice.<sup>5</sup> Commemoration of the ancestors is also an essential part in the food offerings during other days in the Islamic calendar, mentioned above, and to a certain degree also in the food giving in everyday life.

#### FOOD SHARING BETWEEN VILLAGES ON THE OCCASION OF *NAVRUZ*

Just as the households organise ceremonial food offerings to neighbours, the hamlets, at times, organise ceremonial meals for inhabitants of neighbouring ones. In the given local context, various ethnic and social groups tend to live spatially segregated. One of the most important occasions on which these closed entities call all the inhabitants of neighbouring villages to share a meal is *navruz*, the spring festival and New Year of the Old Iranian solar calendar. These joint invitations are communal efforts organised by the hamlet's elected head, or official contact person. The households' contributions can be cash, kind, or labour. Besides public food offerings, the event called *navruzi* includes spectacles such as wrestling, games of horsemanship, and concerts and dancing. On these days, many people meet and enjoy the food, spectacles and spring time together. Women are not excluded from the public meals, though spatially segregated.

<sup>4</sup> In these contexts, besides *nan*, the sacrificial meals are also called by other generic terms, such as *khuda'i*, "(food) dedicated to the Lord," *ash*, "food," and – rarely – *B khayrat*, "charity." Some of the sacrificial meals during the year of mourning, such as the Friday meals (*jum'agi*) are now prohibited. In Tajikistan both, sacrificial meals and feasts are nowadays subjected to strict regulations enforced by government authorities, which aim at cutting down the wasting of economic resources.

<sup>5</sup> This aspect is more pronounced among local Laqay-Uzbeks than among the Tajiks, and can also be observed among other Turkic speakers. For a detailed study of the whole complex of sacrificial meals and commemoration of ancestral spirits among the Uyghurs of Xinjiang, see Schrode 2007.

The way of hosting is called *darveshana*, “in the way of the homeless mendicant,” as seats and tablecloths are spread under the open sky in a public place, where the food is also prepared. The types of food prepared and offered include but also exceed the standard sacrificial meals, which are meat soup and meat rice (see below). One of the hamlets, for example, additionally prepared and offered soups of tripe and cereals – called *gandicha* in Tajiki or *gōje* in Laqayi –, of herbage and noodles (*atala*), as well as milk rice (*shir birinj*), carrot salad, and a cold dish of sliced tomatoes and onions in diluted yogurt (*shakarob*). On the next day, another hamlet would serve its neighbours a meal, and so on. In all, the festive season lasts nearly a week. At the end of the meals, in the closing ceremony, a blessing is invoked on the food-givers. I usually did not photograph these acts, but once took a snap upon the request of an elderly and respected person, which shows inhabitants of at least four hamlets performing the blessing after the meal (see Photo No. 3).

### CEREMONIAL FOOD AND MEAT CONSUMPTION

The food served on small-scale individual offerings is usually meat soup (*kham shorpa*) or meat rice (*pilaf*), sometimes both. The only exception I noticed was milk rice, which the hosting household had offered on the occasion of improved performance of its dairy cattle. The common denominator of the two standard dishes of ceremonial food is meat. As far as I have become aware of, the finesse of the cuisine is less relevant for judging the quality of a certain meal than to quantity of meat served. Those who can afford to offer a meat soup, the meal that contains more meat and is more expensive, do so.

The soup called *kham shorpa* – a Tajik term that found its way into the local Laqay speech – consists of meat and is boiled in a stew with potatoes and carrots. Carrots and potatoes have to be bought at the market. The soup is usually served in large wooden bowls which two or three persons share. The *pilaf* mainly consists of rice, sliced carrots and meat is served on plates, again shared by several persons.

Rarely spoons come along with the tray, and the meals are eaten by hand. The common way to have a soup is by soaking bread in it and taking it by hand. The bread that comes along is generally homemade: either *nan*, a thick flatbread baked in a tandoor oven, or *chapatti* (Laqayi: *chapeti*), a thinner and larger flatbread that is prepared either in the tandoor or on a baking tray above a fireplace.

The meat in the two ceremonial dishes is usually mutton, or else goat or beef. Mutton is the preferred one. The choice for the latter two kinds of meat depends on diet rules; elderly and ailing persons often prefer not to eat mutton, which is classified as ‘hot’ meat, and might harm them. Sometimes the host may have sacrificed a sheep or goat, but in most cases, the meat was bought from neighbours or on a market.



Photo 3: Celebrating Navruz

(W. HOLZWARTH, 2015)



Photo 4: The blessing

(W. HOLZWARTH, 2015)



Meat is by no means a staple food for most of the rural population, even though many households also engage in small-scale stock-breeding to make their living. Compared to the low income level, meat is incredibly expensive. The effect of the food or alms giving, as practiced in the village, is a gender- and age-differentiated consumption of meat. While a small number of male persons eat plenty of meat on these ceremonial occasions, women, youth, and children are excluded from the circle of first rank alms receivers. The female and young of the household, and to a certain extent also immediate neighbours, receive their share from the leftovers of the ceremony. Both, local Tajiks and Uzbeks practise this uneven distribution of ceremonial food. Further up in the mountains, among the Tajiks of Tavil-Darra and Garm, the rules of distribution and consumption are different: men participating in an alms-giving would drink the liquid of the soup and wrap the meat in a *chapat-ti* to carry it home to their families, I was told, when I pointed to the discrepant consumption patterns. “At our place,” one of my interlocutors summed it up, “women cook and man eat.” A way to distribute the alms more evenly is to give out all the uncooked meat of a slaughtered animal. This procedure called *khom talosh*, “raw scattering” (in Tajiki), is however rarely practised.

#### FOOD AS IDENTITY MARKER

The field of food can provide identity and boundary markers in multi ethnic settings, just as language and other features of culture, yet the emphasis may vary according to the wider context.

Between Tajiks and Uzbeks of Southern Tajikistan, who share much of their culture and most of their cuisine, food is not a particularly fertile field for constructing or expressing cultural difference. Nor have I observed the kind of ‘gastro’ competition, or rivalry, which seems to be so popular in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, such as to who cooks the best *pilaf*, between Tajiks and Uzbeks of Southern Tajikistan.

The differentiation, or construction of the other as eaters of different food, however, comes into play when talk is about Koreans, whom Stalin had deported to a place nearby, or about Chinese, who are presently constructing roads and electricity lines on the countryside. Koreans are stereotyped as eaters of unsalted plain rice and dogs, Chinese as eaters of tortoises and snakes.

The Laqay-Uzbek share a number of linguistic and cultural features with the Kyrgyz and the Kazak, but differ in other respects, such as in marriage rules. Among the Laqay, first cousin marriage is common, while among the Kyrgyz and Kazaks marriages partners should not be closer related than by seven ancestral generations. The Laqay do not share the marriage rules of the Kazaks and Kyrgyz, who are linguistically close but spatially distant, but of the Tajiks who are linguistically distant but spatially close. As regards ceremonial food, the Laqay also differ from the Kyrgyz and the Kazaks in some

points, among them the evaluation of horsemeat. In none of the several dozen occasions that I have been invited to a sacrificial meal (*nan* or *sadaqa*), horsemeat was served. This does not mean that they generally exclude horsemeat from their diet. Many local Laqay and some Tajiks eat horsemeat. Still, the price level shows a significant difference in demand. Whereas on a local Sunday market in Southern Tajikistan, horsemeat costs one third less than mutton, in Kazakhstan, it costs one third more than mutton. The etiquette in serving meat of a slaughtered sheep also differs. While Kazaks offer the sheep's head to respected guests, in Southern Tajikistan, both Uzbeks and Tajiks, consider the 'thigh bone' (or elbow joint bone, *qari-jilik*) from the animal's front leg as the most prestigious piece; the sheep's head is not even put on the tablecloth.

There are some differences in the cuisine and eating habits of Tajiks and Uzbeks of Southern Tajikistan, but these are not bigger than the differences between regional culinary cultures of Southern and Central Tajikistan.<sup>6</sup>

In some respects, even the Laqay cuisine shows regional variations. The Laqay Uzbeks fall into two regional groups, a western, and an eastern wing. The western group, generally, stands more aloof from their Tajik neighbours than the eastern group, as indicated by patterns of intermarriage and different degrees of Tajik linguistic imprint on Laqay speech. The slight difference also articulates in the realm of food. The Eastern Laqay have taken over the *chapatti* variety of flat bread from their Tajik neighbours, whereas among the Western Laqay it is rather uncommon.

## CONCLUSION

The notion that one's own wellbeing depends on the formal blessing (*du'a*) of well-wishers is firmly rooted in Central Asian history and culture. Already chronicles of the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries document cases of ritual blessings as expressions of loyalty to the ruler, as well as the notion that a ruler cannot flourish without being supported by the blessings of the ruled.<sup>7</sup> Likewise official letters exchanged between central and provincial agencies of the Emirate of Bukhara around 1900 recurrently point to the importance of the procuring the subjects' blessings for the ruler.<sup>8</sup>

On the local level, which can be observed today, procuring blessings from one's neighbours seems to rank equally important. Ultimately, the power to bless may be treated as one of the 'invisible aspects of group identity,' just as the 'power to curse.'<sup>9</sup> To assure the loyalty, the moral and spiritual support of

<sup>6</sup> On the importance regional and political entities for variations of culinary cultures in Iran and adjacent areas, see Fragner 1994 and Bromberger 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Paul 1996, 173, 176, 206, 231–233.

<sup>8</sup> Holzwarth 2011, 242–244.

<sup>9</sup> Schlee 2010, 71, 76–77.



Photo 5: Sharing food on an informal, non-ceremonial occasion: the meal shared is *ghalmendi*, a sweet dish with a jelly prepared from dried sugar melon,

(W. HOLZWARTH, 2015)

those around in states of stress, tension, and joy through offering them ceremonial alms-meals can be discerned as a main motive and function of this custom. Some of the inhabitants consider this practise a distinctive trait and chief advantage of life in their home village, as well as the mutual labour assistance amongst fellow villagers.

Relations between neighbours are not always harmonious. The rural milieu of Southern Tajikistan is no exception to this. There is competition, rivalry, jealousy, despite, conflict and enmity. Yet, there is also a strong tendency to avoid open clashes. This may be related to the widespread custom of sharing food. On one of the small-scale food offerings on the days preceding Ramadan, I was very surprised to see a person among the guests whom, I knew from an earlier conversation, the host utterly disprized, because his carelessness had greatly harmed the community. He now treated him very respectfully and even seemed to enjoy his presence and company. Food offerings and common meals may not be the main cause of the strong community solidarity, but certainly represent one of the mechanisms that create common identity and loyalty in the given social context.

To add another and closely related concluding remark: the major difference between the food cultures of Southern Tajikistan and my own home in Germany lies not in the material aspect of food, i. e. the preparation of consumed edibles, the diet or cuisine, but in the social aspect of the consumption. One of the villagers once told me that “Don’t eat alone!” (*taqa nanti jeme!*) was one of the basic lessons he had learned from his father while growing up. To

be called “someone who does not eat alone” is considered a compliment. On an informal occasion my neighbours once offered me to taste a delicious sweet dish called *ghalmendi*. They could easily have procured metal or porcelain plates for each of us. They deliberately chose, however, to serve it in a larger wooden bowl for all of us to share – presumably as a token of our friendship (or good taste).

As far as I can tell from my experience, the validity of moral code “don’t eat alone” is not confined to the village where I happened to stay, nor is it specific to a certain ethnic group or region of Tajikistan. An incident involving a Laqay Uzbek and his Tajik friend, who came to visit Berlin in a cold winter, illustrates the case. The Tajik visitor had slipped on ice right after his arrival and had broken his hand, upon which we had to spend the next three or four hours at an emergency hospital. Our patient, tired and hungry as he was, still hesitated to eat the fast food we had brought him, for he was ashamed of eating in front of other patients, who did not eat.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bromberger, Christian. 1994. ‘Eating Habits and Cultural Boundaries in Northern Iran’, in Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (ed.), *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*. London: Tauris, pp. 185–201.
- Fragner, Bert. 1994. ‘From the Caucasus to the Roof of the World: A Culinary Adventure’, in Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (ed.), *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*. London: Tauris, pp. 49–62.
- Holzwarth, Wolfgang. 2011. ‘Community Elders and State Agents: *Īlbēgīs* in the Emirate of Bukhara around 1900’, *Eurasian Studies* 9(1–2): 1–22.
- Paul, Jürgen. 1996. *Herrscher, Gemeinwesen, Vermittler: Ostiran und Transoxanien in vormongolischer Zeit*. Stuttgart: Steiner.
- Schlee, Günther. 2008. *How Enemies are Made: Towards a Theory of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts*. New York: Berghahn.
- Schrode, Paula. 2007. *Die Totengeister der Uiguren: Beobachtungen zu Islam und Gesellschaft in Ostturkestan*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz.

# MEAT DISTRIBUTION RULES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RADIAL BONE (*KAR ZHILIK*) IN KYRGYZ TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

(AMANTOUR JAPAROV<sup>1</sup>)

*Amantour Japarov is a Head of the Ethnology Department at the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences, the Kyrgyz Republic. He has an academic degree of Kandidat nauk in History and Ethnography (2002) focused on the traditional cattle breeding and social organization of the Kyrgyz. Since 2003 he is a representative of the French Institute for Central Asia Studies (IFEAC) in Bishkek. His main research interests are in the nomadic cultures such as of Central Asia and Niger in Africa, Kyrgyz historical and cultural heritage, modernization and tradition. He is author of more than a hundred articles.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this article I discuss some of the aspects of Kyrgyz traditions related to meat distribution. I draw the attention to different cuts of meat and their symbolic meanings and functions in Kyrgyz society. Meat serves as identity markers, and thus different pieces of meat indicate different social status of companions. The representations of Kyrgyz can be analysed through the prism of meat distribution, that is, one of the tubular bones of sheep or radial bone (*kar zhilik*), whose origins go back to the Middle Ages. The practices related to this bone have been continued till the modern conditions and are now widely applied in the region.

This article is based on the long term ethnographic research, conducted from 1998 to 2014 in Kochkor rayon of Naryn oblast, Alay rayon of Osh oblast, Tong rayon of Issyk-Kul oblast of the Kyrgyz Republic. Additional secondary literature on different Turkic people and their meat distribution practices has been used in this article with comparative purposes. The methods of collected data were mostly in-depth interviews and participant observation.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Aida Aaly Alymbaeva for her constructive comments that helped to improve the content of the text. Moreover, I would like to thank Aksana Ismailbekova and Aibek Samakov for their enormous help with the translation of the text from Russian language into English.

## THE MEANING OF MEAT IN NUTRITION SYSTEM AND TREATMENT OF GUESTS

The meat of bred cattle has been and remains to be one of the most important parts of Kyrgyz nutrition. The consumption of meat provides the body with the necessary energy for nomads in cold conditions like in late autumn and winter. These seasons are often accompanied in the territory of the current Kyrgyz Republic by prolonged snowstorms and blizzards. It is hard to imagine any family gatherings and various festivals and rituals without slaughtering a sheep for the family members and guests.

The tradition of hospitality has been one of the main characteristics of the Kyrgyz ancestors, and this included to meet unexpected guests, such as strangers and pilgrims who came from afar in the most appropriate way. The host would make all the efforts to provide the guests with the comfort, by giving fresh meat for dinner and conveniently placing night bad. There is a widespread proverb among Kyrgyz on the meaning that guest will not be offended if he or she is hungry, but the guest will be offended if no sheep is slaughtered for him or her.

## BUTCHERING AND DISTRIBUTION PIECES OF MEAT AMONG THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE MEAL

Basically, any family member could easily slaughter small cattle such as sheep and goats. Except for specific cases, there was no need to invite an external person with the slaughtering of the cattle. When it was necessary to slaughter the large cattle and butcher its carcasses, one of the most experienced relatives with the specialized skills would be invited for help. The local terminology for such a skilled person is *kasapchy*. He is always ready to fulfil his duty for the communities (Moldokulova 2014: 21). In every descent groups and communities, however, there were also people who could chop properly the bones of large cattle into several pieces and cook according to the number of the guests.

Meat and its tubular bones as well as other important bones have a great social significance for social gatherings and collective meals for Kyrgyz. These bones serve as signifiers or markers of one's status and position of the participants of the social gatherings. Therefore it was required to properly distribute pieces of meat and bones (*ustukan*) while taking into account differences of age, gender, and social status of guests. Guests coming from other descent groups or communities, potential affines, or sudden travelers are more respected and have to be treated well by giving them the most important bones, pieces of meat, and other delicious parts. If the pieces of meat were not correctly distributed to the guests without taking into account age, gender, and status, the guests would be offended. As a result, parts of meat and bones were the sources of potential misunderstanding, tensions, and conflicts. A special person (*chygdanchy* or *bökööl*) is appointed for the distribu-

tion of meat during the big life cycle events. His responsibility included correct distribution of food among the guests. In case of making a mistake, according to the customary law – *adat* – this person would take the responsibility or be punished by a fine (*aiyp*) (Kochkuov 2013: 237–238). In relation to such matters, a historian and archeologist, Kubat Tabaldiev highlights the continuity of this tradition from the earlier days to nowadays: “Violation of rules in distributing meat might negatively affect the moods of honored guests. Usually, the guests with the highest status would be informed in advance and be invited to the circle of the most honorable guests – *ucha tabak*. Second, the guests with the middle status will be invited to join the circle of guests – *zhandooch tabak*. These guests then distribute among themselves further a portion of the carcass according to status and age. The preferences will be given to the parents of the groom or parents of the bride. In case if there are both parents of a groom and parents of a bride, they gallantly decide among themselves whom to give which piece of meat, taking into account age, geographical distance, and other characteristics” (Tabaldiev 2013: 157–167).

The order of distribution of piece among the guests in one tablecloth<sup>2</sup> (*dastorkon*) is regarded as a kind of fixation of real social relationships in everyday life. The elderly men *aksakals* or honorable guests would get the most valuable pieces in the distribution of meat cuts. For example: the most honorary men would get the horse bone, a sacrum (*ucha*), cannon bones (*zhambash*), and fat tail of sheep (*byirak*)

If we want to understand the reasons why these of the carcass have received such significant social values, it can be assumed that the meats from indicated bones are usually the soft and juicy. My elderly informants, would tell me that elders would get the head of the sheep before the mid of the 19 century in At-Bashy, Naryn oblast. These elders, in turn, would cut off a small piece of meat from the sheep head for themselves to taste and after they would immediately pass the head to the youngest guests. Today this tradition has been transformed in Naryn. Now head is not given to the elders instead it is given directly to the youngest guests. In contrast, the sheep’s head is given to the respected elder or honored guests in Chui oblast.

In northern Kyrgyzstan, the most honourable piece of meat for women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were *kuimulchak* (tail appendage with the meat and fat) and daughter-in-laws would be content with *küing zhilik* (bone from the knee to the shoulder blade)

In Tong rayon of Issyk-Kul oblast, the brisket of sheep (*tösh*) is given to the married daughters.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a traditional space where guests would eat food together. The term *dastarkhan* can be translated as the tablecloth, which is laid on the ground. This belongs to the traditional Central Asian cuisine and food culture.

The empirical findings of S. M. Abramzon in the northern and southern regions of the Kyrgyz Republic have shown that there is a significant degree of diverse meat distribution rituals. The degree of honor associated with different cuts of meat varies between lamb and horse meat (Kochkunov 2003: 224–226, 2013: 238–240). It is important to highlight that the custom of separating animals carcass into joints has been widely practiced among peoples of the Turkic world.

Particularly, in south-eastern Tuva, usually most honored guests' get the *uzha* and the joint of the rear legs. The brisket of sheep (*tösh*) is given only to the head of the household or host family of the guests, but a head would get (after having the *uzha*) to the most respected and honored guests. The right shoulder, a thigh bone from the back of the legs and other pieces of lamb are offered to the guests of secondary importance (Potapov 1969: 182–183). This is the fact that the *uzha* is the prestigious part of the meat, which highlights the recent results of field studies (Stepanoff 2013: 301, 397).

#### USTUKAN AS THE MEANS OF INFLUENCING ON THE YOUNG GENERATION AND ASSOCIATED CHANGES

Elders of the community and other guests sitting on the same tablecloth would taste a small portion of their meat and share their *ustukan* (bones with meat) with other young people or children. At the same time they would express their wish so that children grow up healthy and reach their own elderly age. This was the form of expression of optimism and prospects for the younger generation to reach status, respect, and honor of young people when they become older themselves. This gesture among other things was the effective leverages of influence on the young people and transmission of cultural heritage of people. *Ustukan* helped to maintain social ties between people of different generations. While receiving piece of meat according to one's status, guests appreciated honor and shared their meat with other tablecloth companions. "If a guest receives *ucha*, he has to thank the person by giving a monetary reward. After that he has to share the meat by cutting into several pieces" (Tabaldiev 2013: 157-167). In a similar fashion, among Tuvinians, when the guest receives the best parts of the carcass *uzha*, he or she also has to share this with other individuals in the same tent and one small piece of meat has to be thrown to the fire for the ancestors (Potapov 1969: 183). There are parallels in the etiquette of giving and receiving meat between Kyrgyz and Tuvinan people, which highlights the common food culture patterns of two ethnic groups.

At the present time as well as in the past, the youngest person sitting on the tablecloth should be responsible for distributing the pieces of meat of the bone for the tablecloth companions. But sometimes it is possible that the younger generation might not know well the task of distributing meat according to the rules, in such situations the elder person or any knowledgeable





Photo 1: Enjoying Meat brought as *ustukan* at home from a feast (A. JAPAROV, 2015)

person would take over the task to himself. Usually, in the process of eating, the younger people should cut the meat neatly into small pieces, which were later added to the noodles. This dish is called *bashbarmak*. Nowadays the host tries to prepare the meal in advance including chopping into small pieces of meat before the arrival of the guests. As a result, cooked meat is not as finely-chopped in comparison with the traditional way of cutting. The release of the young person from his role leads to the loss of his meat cutting skills and also changes the whole atmosphere of collective meat consumption. The act of cutting meat into small pieces has been always a social act because the elders would teach the young about the techniques of cutting, give some comments, and praise if the young person cut it correctly. Thus every guest can participate not only in the eating processes, but also in its preparation with lively and leisurely discussions. The process of simplifying the preparation of *bashbarmak* is inevitable. In particular, this came due to the loss of skills and changes in the organization of hosting guests and preparation of the main meal in advance.

According to A. S. Kochkunov, it was important to leave a small piece of meat on the bone, some *ustukan*, and a small amount of chopped meat (*turagan et*) for the service personnel and children so that they could also en-

joy the meat (Kochkunov 2003: 226). This would partially correspond to the reality of the first decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century. At present, there are rare cases when the guests give some part of their meat *ustukan* to a serving person, a host, and children. By contrast, this custom is slowly becoming forgotten or ignored as part of the transformation in the food consumption system. Now only the chopped meat mixed with noodles remains as the strong meal consumption custom for the families. But the guests giving the *ustukan* to their wives or husbands and taking it home became a frequent phenomenon, which was not previously possible. This practice shows the drastic change of personal food consumption, which was not typical for Kyrgyz society till the independence of the Kyrgyz Republic. This can be explained by the fact that the Kyrgyz society has experienced a very difficult socio-economic crisis in the transformation from command economy to free market economy, in which people could not/give pass meat to the serving guests instead of taking it home for their own family members.

**BELIEFS AND LEGENDS ABOUT THE *KAR ZHILIK*:  
“YOU CANNOT BREAK THIS BONE!”**

Kyrgyz leading for centuries the nomadic lifestyle used the bones of sheep for different purposes, and each of those bones has had its own significance and value. Among many other bones, according to the legends, the radial bones have sacred qualities and magical powers. Much has been written about how local people carefully used to treat that cortical bone, mostly in folklore, ethnographic field materials, and additional results of research scientists.



Photo 2: *Ustukan* brought at home with *kar zhilik* is on the top (A. JAPAROV, 2015)

It was important to eat the radial bones with a knife as the best method properly cleaning meat from the bones. It was forbidden to nibble meat (*tish menen mülzhügön bolboit*) which was the manifestation of bad education and shame. The life-style of Kyrgyz herdsmen and their worldviews are connected to the bones, and thus bones are subject to certain rules and norms that have been cemented as the local custom.

Toleubaev (2013) describes the beliefs associated with the radial bones among Kazaks which is identical to Kyrgyz. Both Kyrgyz and Kazaks gave the radial bones mostly to young people, wishing them a long life. This suggests that the radial bones as a piece of meat could embody the collective consumption, which signifies the longevity. At the same time, young unmarried women would not hold the radial bones, due to fear that they would not get married in the future. Teenagers and young boys were not given any tubular bones with *alchiki* (the knee bone), because this implied that once young men reached their marriageable ages they would keep delaying their marriage for a long time (Toleubaev 2013: 276).

For some Kyrgyz radial bone was considered as the bone of young men (*zhigitter*) and for others as the bone of horse herders. The ethnographic material of S.M. Abramzon also states the importance of radial bones for horse shepherds due to its protective qualities. If the bones were hung at home, a herder would not feel alone and be secured under their protective qualities. In addition, the bones meant to protect horses (*kar zhilik zhilki kaitarat*) as well. Any wolf and robber would be afraid of these bones (Abramzon 1971: 299). The elder generation would spread information among children about the protective qualities of the radial bones in the process of joint eating. Many elders would respond to the questions of the children and satisfy their interests towards the magical qualities of bones. That is how the knowledge on the importance of the radial bone and its protective skills was transferred through oral histories from one generation to another. Among many other bones of cattle, the first meat that was put into water was the radial bone (*kar zhilik*). In a similar way, Kazaks have the same practice with the radial bone (*kar zhilik*) in terms of putting it first into the water. The knowledgeable persons of folk tradition would claim that newborn animals forth out of the womb from this bone.

According to the beliefs of the ancestors, the radial bone protects the family members, house, property and livestock from possible robberies and assaults. In one of the folk legends it is stated that once upon a time a beautiful and intelligent young woman came to visit her natal parents, but she could not go back home together with her husband due to serious reasons therefore she had to prolong her stay at her own family's house. Before the departure of her husband, however, she put several cleaned radial bones of sheep into his bag.

The young woman explained to her husband, that the bones would be his fellow companions during his long trip. She warned her husband in advance

that he had to break only one bone per day with the aim to extract the contents for his own daily food consumption. He followed the request of his wife as long as he was very close to his camp. And he decided to chop the remaining bones before reaching his camp. Immediately after that he became a victim of robbers who would not dare to attack him otherwise if he had the bones in the bag. According to the legends, if he had reserved at least one bone, he would have reached home safe and sound. There are of course other variations of legends in Kyrgyz folklore, which all underscore the protective qualities of the radial bone. The legends were one of the most effective tools in the transmission of cultural traditions from one generation to another generation.

Within the existing framework of custom, Kyrgyz try to not break the radial bones into pieces, as the legend highlights above; the consequences in case of the violation of the customary practices might be harmful. The taboo has been widely spread and is strictly followed. This can be included into the number of prohibitions which Frazer has mentioned in connection to magic in his studies (Frazer 1980: 26). According to legends, the life of man who broke to extract intraosseous fat (*chuchuk*) could become very difficult. The radial bone has never been given to dogs or thrown away. The well cleaned bone was always hung in the corral or in the barn for cattle on the right side of the front of the building. Ancestors used to hang the bone on the wide woven stripes (*zhabyk bash*) or they could also put it on top of the folding latticework walls of the wood (*kerege*) and believed that it could protect them from those who had bad intentions. In 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries people would tie the bone near the saddle (*kanzhiga bailap alishkan*) especially when they would make a long journey. According to legends, the bone would burn like a candle (*sham*) and protect the surrounding areas. The number of burning candles would depend on the number of bones. People believed that in case of enemy attack, the bones would transform into warriors and be engaged in battle. Many nomadic warriors also had taken with them radial bones, when they had to fight with the enemy<sup>3</sup>.

For Kyrgyz radial bone has a magical meaning, which can protect not only from robbery but also from dark and evil forces (Japarov 1999: 46). A similar pattern can be observed among the Kazaks who hung a radial bone at the front door in an effort to protect family and property from various afflictions (Toleubaev 1992: 41).

In many cases, especially those who believe in the magical power of the radial bone, people used to put some sticks in the hole as a means of protection from potential attacks. Valikhanov also mentions how Kazaks used to hang a radial bone at their homes like Mongols. The Mongols also strung a

---

<sup>3</sup> This is based on empirical material collected in Naryn, Issyk-Kul, Talas, Chui oblasts.

little blade of grass in the hole: in this way the bone looked like an armed fighter (Toleubayev 2013: 276).

#### PHENOMENON OF MAGIC AND THE RADIAL BONE

As mentioned above, people sincerely believed in the power of the radial bone. While discussing the phenomenon of magic, Aaron Brudnyi claims, that “In existential terms, particular interest is the experience of human situations in which the existence of magic seems natural, but an appeal to the magician justified. The roots of these kinds of emotions go deep into the prehistoric past of mankind, highlighting logical thinking of a primitive man. In the conditions of human existence, men are forced to search for satisfying their own basic needs, protect themselves against threatening realities. This is actually to go along a narrow strip of shade separating the light of life and darkness nothingness” (1994: 61). Paying attention to the peculiarities of magic, A. Yuber and M. Moss state that “magical rite is the always the matter of individual and individuals operating in private domain, and their actions and practices are shrouded in mystery” (cited in Tokarev 1990: 410).

Obviously, traditional imaginations related to the radial bone have not lost its significance even nowadays, which give all the reasons to consider this



Photo 3: A radial bone *kar zhilik* hang up a door  
(A. JAPAROV, 2015)

bone as the symbol of determination and courage for those who genuinely believe in its magical power. In the eyes of those who believe it has only positive qualities.

If we look the radial bone through the prism of binary opposition ‘my (or our) friend makes me (or us) good deeds by protecting from enemies and evils’, this highlights the causal relationships that explain the attitude of the individual, family and community to the radial bone. In case of accident or troubles within the family could be interpreted in terms of careless attitude of some of the family members towards the radial bone. For this reason, in order not to incur further trouble, ancestors strictly prohibited to break the bone into pieces. People would say that if the rules related to treating the radial bone with respect are violated, this can led to the deterioration of vigilance and further weaknesses of one’s condition. The result of serious consequence such as various troubles and woes were due to disrespecting the radial bone. The Soviet ethnographer B. H. Basilov gives an example from his ethnographic findings among Turkmen. Once upon a time, one Turkmen man was informed of the robbery in his village, for which he replied by saying that “personally he did not break the radial bone, therefore his house should have been avoided from troubles” (Basilov 1973: 196–197).

#### REGIONAL FEATURES OF TUBULAR BONES AND RADIAL BONES

Kyrgyz people living in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan began to break the bones of small cattle into several parts earlier than the northern Kyrgyz counterparts did. According to the respondents, they began to practice this since the mid-1960s. As T. Aitbaeva, the specialist of food supply systems of the Kyrgyz southern regions, states that during that skilled people (*bölökchü*) were appointed to break or chop the bones of the slaughtered cattle into pieces. This was done because of economic difficulties of southern region and the small number of cattle in the valleys. People have come to believe that by this way they could treat more people with a small amount of meat.

During the Soviet time there was a prohibition on the cattle breeding more than the state standardized norms. In other words, the herders should not have generated cattle beyond the existing standardized norms. Therefore many villagers could not expand their herds. Moreover, the vast majority of areas in southern Kyrgyzstan were mostly used for agriculture, limiting the opportunity to provide the cattle with pasture. In the Fergana Valley during the Soviet time the priority crops were technical plants, such as cotton and tobacco. Under the conditions with a minimum number of cattle in almost all farms, people tried to be more rational and economical. Obviously, there is a visible factor which was ethno-cultural interaction with neighboring Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups.

Traditional cuisine and system of nutrition of these ethnic people allowed treating more guests with a limited amount of meat. While living side by side

with Uzbeks and Tajiks in a compact and scattered zone, Kyrgyz could have borrowed the experiences of neighbors. It is important to mention that southern Kyrgyz have a slightly different order and significance of meat distribution. In particular, the majority of the population of Batken oblast consists of the representatives of descent groups *ichkilik*, who value more carcass from the ribs to thighs (*karchyga*) compare to cannon bones (*zhambash*), which is a contrast picture from the northern Kyrgyz Republics. They call it as *ucha* and consider it very honorable.

In the southern part of the Kyrgyz Republic, the radial bone is not as sensitive as in the northern part of that region. In the southern Kyrgyz Republic, the radial bone as well as other tubular bones can be chopped for cooking or be split into two parts. In the spiritual culture of the local population there is no faith in the miraculous power and magic influence of the bone. Perhaps such belief had existed before among the ancestors in the south during the pre-Islamic times, and after that this practice had been lost for some reasons.

While jointly consuming meat, southern Kyrgyz do not serve the radial bone to the guests. This part of meat is eaten by the members of the family, considering it as not honorable. At the same time, despite loss on the beliefs of the radial bone, southern Kyrgyz still practice the significance of meat distribution according to social status, age, and geographical locations of the guests.

#### USING RADIAL BONE FOR CAUSING HARM

Kyrgyz herders just like other nomads could easily turn into warriors in case of outside threat during difficult politico-military situation. They also believed that radial bone could be used to weaken and worsen their adversaries' military power. In such cases human radial bone were used as opposed to that of an animal. According to traditional beliefs, burying or sticking a pair of adversary's radial bones in the ground was enough to prevent an emergence of a strong, respected and high-status leader in the opposing tribe. An example from 14<sup>th</sup> century illustrating the above-mentioned argument can be found in the works of Belek Soltonoev who was one of the earliest Kyrgyz ethnographers and historians. Soltonoev (1993: 25) mentions that Alybek-baatyr of Sayak tribe was a prominent figure in the feud of Sarybagysh and Bugu tribes. When Alybek-baatyr was captured and being escorted, a person named Kydyk of Sarybagysh tribe attacked Alybek and killed the latter. After that Alybek-baatyr's radial bones were buried in the Kotmaldy area, which is in the vicinity of modern Balykchy town. By doing so, the attackers intended to weaken the strong adversary's family and tribe, and prevent emergence of strong and brave people among Alybek's descendants. (ibid.: 25). This example illustrates well the belief in the magical capacity of the radial bone.

## RELIANCE ON MAGICAL ACTIONS AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION AND FEW EXAMPLES FROM 2000S

Main elements of traditional beliefs were sought-after by mass consciousness during the difficult transition period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Kyrgyz Republic was experiencing economic hardship, which negatively affected socio-cultural domain. Some people deprived of state support started appealing to irrational practices that had existed latently in their consciousness. It appears that “when a particular human need gets aggravated, one involuntarily seeks refuge in something primitive, yet very convincing in matters that cannot be analysed rationally but touch precisely on feelings” (Brudnyi 1994: 62). Archaic perceptions dominated minds of not only less educated people working in low-skill jobs but also of highly educated and skilled ones. Mass consciousness was ready to accept archaization of everyday life as an unalienable part of modern society’s culture.

As theft, robbery, fraud and violence became more frequent in cities and villages, people started turning to traditional knowledge about amulets, including protective powers of the radial bone. People started using this bone to protect themselves from misfortunes. One could see hanging radial bones in apartments, yards and cattle barns, both in cities and villages. It was curious to see that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, long-haul truck drivers hanged the radial bone inside of their trucks believing in its protective powers. Truck drivers saw it as a necessary precautionary action given that they had to stop in deserted areas and in villages where local youth could be hostile or even aggressive. Having radial bone as an amulet made them feel safer. Such a belief in magical powers of the radial bone had a positive effect on the drivers, e. g., increasing self-confidence and self-control. Folklore researcher Nurjan Narynbaeva (2015, fall), who researches myths and legends, notes that she always saw radial bones beside the house entrance to her relative who back in the day studied in one of the technical universities in Eastern Europe. She mentioned that she herself does the same now and has two radial bones displayed on the left side of the wall beside the entrance. Left side is considered to be the ‘male’ part of the yurt.

Cloths (such as cloak and other apparel) displayed at the edge of a farm also performed protective functions. It resembles scarecrows used by peasants but in this case cloths are used to scare off wolves. Carol Ferret documented and photographed such practice in one of the summer pastures while taking part in migrations of Kazakh herders in 2012 (Ferret 2015: 160). I witnessed the same practice with a Turkologist Klyashtorny at the Son-Kul summer pasture in summer of 2000. Such type of magical beliefs can be classified as apotropaic and the logic behind is “to repel, ward off, and scare off evil forces and prevent their forthcoming. Various amulets and avertysks as well as gestures and sounds are used for this purpose” (Tokarev 1990: 429).



Beliefs in protective powers of the radial bone and respectful attitude to it is widespread in all parts of northern Kyrgyzstan. In some cases radial bone is still used by people who do not necessarily believe in its protective power. Some young people keep the radial bone and refrain from breaking it due to the tradition without acknowledging the sacral qualities of this bone.

There are cases when all bones of a slaughtered animal are divided in half before being cooked during big feasts and rituals. According to traditions it is neither encouraged or prohibited to break tubular bones except for the radial bone. In northern Kyrgyzstan, people still adhere to this belief and do not break the radial bone. The following example shows the regional differences in Kyrgyzstan towards the radial bone. During my field research in Alay district of Osh province in 2009, I saw the radial bone broke in half during a communal feast. The feast was a part of *kudayi* ritual and was conducted on the bank of the river (this ritual can be understood as an ancient land fertility ritual (*zher suu taiuu* – A. J.). In northern Kyrgyzstan this ritual is known as *tülöö*. By conducting this ritual, people asked for good weather and well-being. In 2007, I took part in a communal feast called *tülöönün tamagy* in Kochkor district of Naryn region. As opposed to the first example, radial bones of the slaughtered sheep were not broken, although all other tubular bones were. This can serve as an evidence that the traditional prohibition for breaking radial bones is still observed in northern Kyrgyzstan.

My observations suggests that people started relying on more rational methods as difficult transitional times are being overcome and as people learn to adapt to changing conditions. Some part of population has a negative attitude towards traditional beliefs perceiving the latter as rudiments that need to be left in the past. Moreover, transmission of knowledge from older generations to the younger ones ceased to be the important part of upbringing and therefore, a big chunk of traditional knowledge gets forgotten not only in the cities but also in the villages.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramzon, Saul. 1971. *Kirgizi i ich etnogeneticheskie i istoriko-kul'turnye svyazi*. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Basilov, V.N. 1973. 'Khoziaistvo zapadnykh turkmen-iomudov v dorevolutsionnyi period i svyazannye s nim obriady i verovania', in *Ocherki po istorii khoziaistva narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*. Trudy Instituta etnografii. Tom 98. Leningrad: Nauka, pp. 172–206.
- Brudnyi, Aaron. 1994. 'Magia kak fenomen individual'nogo i massovogo soznania', in *Okoldovannaia real'nost'*. Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura.
- Valikhanov, Chokan. 1984. *Sobranie sochinenii v 5 tomakh*. Tom 1. Alma-Ata.

- Japarov, Amantour. 1999. 'Kar zhilikke bailanyshkan yrymdar', in *Obychai, traditsii i obriady narodov Vostoka*. Bishkek, pp. 45–48.
- Kochkunov, Aidar. 2003. 'Sistema pitania kyrgyzov (opyt etnologicheskogo analiza sootnoshenii traditsii i inovatsii)', *Koomduk ilimder jurnaly* 8: 213–233.
- Kochkunov, Aidar. 2013. *Etnicheskie traditsii kyrgyzskogo naroda (sotsiokul'turnye aspekty i nekotorye voprosy genezisa)*. Bishkek: Ilim.
- Moldokulova, D.T. 2014. 'Kyrgyzdardyn üi-bölölük mamilelerinde zhana turmush-tirichiliginde koldonulgan salttyk zhürüm-turum madaniaty (19-kylymdyn aiagy – 20-kylymdyn bashy)'. Avtoreferat dissert. Kandidat Nauk in History. Bishkek.
- Potapov, L.P. 1969. *Ocherki narodnogo byta tuvintsev*. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Soltonoev, Belek. 1993. *Kyzyl Kyrgyz tarykhy*. Tom 2. Bishkek: Uchkun.
- Tokarev, S. A. 1990. *Rannie formy religii*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury.
- Toleubaev, A. 1992. *Relikty doislamskikh verovaniy kazakhov*. Avroreferat doktorskoi dissert. Almaty.
- Toleubaev, A. T. 2013. *Kazak khalk etnografiasynyn maseleleri*. Almaty, pp. 268–287.
- Frazer, James. 1980. *Zolotaia vetv'*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury.
- Ferret C. 2015. 'Un transhumance dans le sud-est du Kazakhstan', in C. Bromberger and A. Kian (eds), *De l'Iran au jazz, à cheval. Mélanges en hommage à Jean-Pierre Digard*, CNRS éditions, Paris: pp. 141–162.
- Stepanoff Ch. 2014. *Chamanisme, rituel et cognition chez les Touvas (Sibérie du Sud)*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.

# CHANGING FOOD HABITS IN WESTERN MONGOLIA

(PETER FINKE)

*Peter Finke is a Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Zurich and one of the co-directors of CASCA. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Cologne and a postdoctoral degree (habilitation) from Leipzig University. From 2000 until 2005, he was a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and in 2005 became Head of the Research Group on Central Asia. In 2002/2003, he was a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of New Hampshire, U.S.A., and from 2004 until 2006 at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. He has conducted long-term fieldwork in various parts of Central Asia, particularly Mongolia, Uzbekistan and Kazakstan. His main research interests include economic anthropology, social transformation processes, identity and human cognition.*

## INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists have analysed food habits throughout the world from a variety of perspectives. One prominent was the study of taboos on specific substances, such as particular types of meat or the consumption of alcohol (Harris 1985; Simoons 1994). In hunter-gatherer studies attention was given to the optimization of nutritional intake and related expenditures, modelled in optimal foraging theory (Winterhalder and Smith 1981). Another line of thought looks at the political economy of food and why specific products spread or lose popularity as well as chains of production and exchange (Mintz 1985; Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Yet a fourth strand of literature takes a more cultural or social approach, studying consumption patterns as an expression of social class or a marker of identity (Bourdieu 1979; Miller 1997; Wilk 1999).

This paper will analyse changing patterns of food habits in Western Mongolia with a focus on the local Kazaks<sup>1</sup>, a Turkic-speaking Muslim minority, among whom I have conducted long-term field research since the early 1990s. This was also a period of great economic and social changes, beginning with the dismantling of the socialist system and the deep economic crises that hit Mongolia in the following years. As a consequence many Kazaks left the country to resettle in newly independent Kazakstan, hoping for a better future in their alleged 'homeland'. Both, the post-socialist trans-

<sup>1</sup> I use this writing of the ethnonym (қазақ) because the more commonly used Kazakh is in fact a transliteration of the Russian version (казах). In particular for Kazaks who have not been citizens of the Soviet Union this invokes a colonial heritage, of which they have not even been part of.

formation process and the out-migration to Kazakhstan had far-reaching impacts on local livelihoods and food preferences, influenced by changing terms of trades, new social distinctions, and global cultural influences. It is not only the affordability of goods bought on the market in relation to domestic ones that has changed during those years but also the preferences people have.

Mongolia is traditionally a land of pastoralism like few others in this world. Due to the peculiar – and precarious – environment there is little else that people can adopt as a livelihood rather than extensive animal husbandry to provide for basic needs and goods to trade. This has obvious consequences for food preferences as well. While it is generally believed that people can not persist for a long time solely on meat and milk products, these do form the basic nutrition of most pastoralists in Central and Inner Asia, be those Mongols, Tibetans or Turkic-speakers (cf. Bollig and Casimir 1993).

In such a setting, basically all families, irrespective of their main occupation, aim at owning a herd of mixed species, sheep and goats, cattle, horses and (occasionally) camels. Of course, livestock holdings vary a lot but there are few families in the study area who have less than 100 animals at their disposal. These would be considered poor while prosperity in livestock in the local understanding begins somewhere between 300 and 500 animals. In the district of Hovd, where I did most of my research, today 3.000 individuals own a total of 120.000 livestock, or 40 animals per person.<sup>2</sup> This relatively high number, for a district that was considered rather poor in livestock until recently, was enabled by the fact that half of the population has moved to Kazakhstan during the last 25 years, allowing those who stayed higher numbers of animals and larger areas of pastures. Due to the specific ethnic composition in the region, with some 90 per cent of the local population being Kazaks, there have been few immigrants from other districts, as most Mongols prefer to stay amongst themselves and thus keep outside of the Kazak-dominated district of Hovd (cf. also Finke 2004).

Luckily enough the district also harbours some of the best agricultural fields in Western Mongolia, although the total amount of arable land is pretty small, less than one per cent of the territory. But for many families growing potatoes, vegetables and melons is a welcomed addition to one's own nutrition as well as for marketing.<sup>3</sup> The major trading post is the nearby provincial capital, also called Hovd, some 30 kilometres from the district centre and nowadays easily reached by car or motorbike. It has in recent years devel-

---

<sup>2</sup> Source: Statistical Office of Hovd District (2015)

<sup>3</sup> Many of the agriculturalists in the region have traditionally been Uyghurs but have been firmly assimilated into local Kazak society, in terms of language use, inter-marriage and self-understanding (Finke 2004).



Photo 1: A herd of sheep and goats on its move from summer to fall pasture  
(P. FINKE, 2004)

oped into a major commercial hub for the larger region and is also regularly served by merchants commuting with the capital Ulaanbaatar or the Chinese provinces to the south. Kazaks dominate the local trade in agricultural products, enabled through their access to respective goods via kin and other networks.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF KAZAK FOOD

As already indicated, meat plays a large role in the diet of pastoralists in Mongolia, and the Kazaks are no exception to that. Part of this is due to the fact that, in contrast to pastoralists in Africa or the Middle East, markets and agriculturalists have been comparatively far away, which means that terms of trade were rather unfortunate and the convergence of livestock into grain and vegetables less profitable. But environmental reasons may also play a role, as generally in colder regions on average humans consume more meat (Bollig and Casimir 1993). While Kazaks in principle utilize the meat of all five species, traditionally horse and sheep were most highly esteemed, followed by cattle. Camels were rarely slaughtered and goats, though a common source of food, less appreciated. These patterns are by and large true also for the local Mongol community (Finke 2004).

Milk products come in a great variety of forms. Most famous for Central Asian pastoralists is fermented horse milk, called *qimiz* in Kazak, which is highly esteemed and considered a kind of national drink. By contrast, camel milk is seldom fermented in Western Mongolia because it demands a great deal of labour force, not readily available for most periods of the year. All other milk is usually boiled together to either add it to tea or converted into different types of yoghurt, cheese, cream, butter and the like. Of particular importance is curd (*qurt* in Kazak), which is dried and thus serves as a major



Photo 2: *Qurt* drying on top of a yurt

(P. FINKE, 1991)

source of food during winter.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Kazakstan, *qurt* in Mongolia is usually not salted.

During the day, milk products are consumed when drinking tea, added by *bawirsaq*, or pieces of flour deep-fried in animal fat. This is not only cheaper than other oils, as it is readily available with every slaughtered animal, but also considered of better quality. Traditionally, only very few families prepared bread. Cooked meals, mostly eaten in the evening, come in different varieties. Most famous is *beshparmaq*, literally five fingers, or large quantities of boiled meat, which may be served with self-made noodles. Sometimes onions are added, although this is rare. *Beshparmaq* is primarily a dish for ceremonial events or the entertainment of esteemed guests<sup>5</sup>. It is followed by the broth (*sorpa*), in which the meat was boiled for three or four hours. On ordinary days a plain noodle soup, boiled for similar long hours together with meat and bones, is the most common food. There are other meals, like *quyrdaq*, which is fried meat usually with potatoes, occasionally consumed during the day.

But by and large fruits and vegetables, including potatoes, have not been very high on the agenda of food preferences until recently and were con-

<sup>4</sup> Curd is made from fermented milk, which is then heated and the remaining substance left to dry. During this process the alcohol content evaporates and is, among Mongols, collected and turned into liquor. Kazaks, to the best of my knowledge, never distil milk, although some of them would drink it when visiting their Mongol neighbours.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Kazaks in Mongolia – as well as in many parts of Kazakstan – do not use the term *beshparmaq*, although this became like an official term for the dish – but usually call it simply “et” (meat) or “tamaq” (food). As the pronunciation of the word is actually borrowed from Uzbek or Kyrgyz it is more likely that this came into the language as a kind of ‘loan word’.



Photo 3: Serving tea

(P. FINKE, 2014)

sumed more regularly only by people who did some agriculture by themselves. Others were dependent on gifts by relatives or friends and thus would eat vegetables less often (Finke 2004). Compared to their Mongol neighbours, however, Kazaks had always more access to potatoes and vegetables who were hardly engaged in agriculture at all and only rarely exchanged its products with livestock. This is perceived as an ethnic distinction, although not the major one when it comes to food. Rather, this is primarily about the types of meals both groups consume regularly. Mongols and Kazaks in the western provinces eat the same types of meat and produce the same milk products but the way of preparation differs. One key issue in this regard is the way, or rather length, of boiling meat. While for Kazaks three hours is kind of a minimum, Mongols need only half an hour to think of boiled meat as being edible. It is not so in the eyes of most Kazaks (although they will usually take a bite when offered for reasons of being polite). As important is the way of slaughtering. As Muslims Kazaks kill the animal by slitting its throat and have the blood run out. Mongols, by contrast, put a small cut into the belly, insert their hand and then press the aorta until the animal is dead. The blood thus stays inside the corpse, a fact even worse in the eyes of their Muslim neighbours than the 'half-raw' character of the prepared meat.

#### CHANGES DURING THE EARLY 1990S

The early 1990s brought great changes to pastoral livelihoods in Mongolia. For most families these were not for the better. De-collectivisation meant first and foremost a disruption of marketing channels and the end of regular incomes. At the same time, with the sudden disappearance of the socialist system and the consequent stop of subsidies from Moscow, the government

was no longer able to maintain a countrywide provision with infrastructural services and imported goods, including foodstuff.

In terms of nutrition this had a number of consequences. While the Hovd district has indeed some of the best agricultural lands in the country, these are still small compared to the amount of pastures and, more importantly, they do not produce any grain. Thus with the stop of Soviet imports wheat was now imported from China and, consequently, not only expensive but also blamed for its bad quality. In any case, the price ratio with meat had changed dramatically to the worse. Now, the indicator of poverty was no longer if people had enough meat on the table but if there was flour to be found in the household (Finke 2004). People were still eager to buy sufficient supplies because it was the basis of *bawirsaq* and the standard noodle soup for dinner. But flour was consumed less than before. Comparatively speaking, meat became much cheaper and was, in fact, consumed in large quantities. *Beshparmaq*, would indeed be prepared without noodles in most cases and consist solely of meat.

This was, indeed, a very specific case for Mongolia. In contrast to Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, where livestock numbers had crumbled and most people had to severely restrict their meat consumption, the opposite happened here. As the cities in Mongolia were even more hit by the economic downturn than the countryside, many former industrial workers or set-off civil servants returned to their place of origin and started a pastoral livelihood again. Livestock figures accordingly increased constantly and so did the consumption of meat. This was even more the case as prices for animals were low and people had little incentives to trade them with other goods (Müller 1995; Finke 2004).

At the same time, those with access to agricultural products – self-produced or exchanged with relatives – made ample use of this. It was often part



Photo 4: Harvesting melons

(P. FINKE, 1996)



of a diversification strategy within households or between close kin who decided to send some of the sons and (younger) brothers to work on the fields. Potatoes, vegetables and melons were highly appreciated and became standard gifts on mutual visits. They were also increasingly traded on the market in the provincial centre, the city of Hovd. Not only the growing of vegetable, fruits and potatoes was largely in the hands of Kazaks and Uygurs but also their trade. At the same time, a large part of the products was exchanged within kin networks or bartered with neighbours and friends. A common saying by that time was that one should have one's daughter marry an agriculturist because the stomach would always be full. Pastoralism was by and large still considered a more prestigious activity but in purely economic terms for short-term benefits less lucrative (Finke 2004).

### CONTEMPORARY FOOD PATTERNS

Since the early 1990s, things have been changing again for a number of reasons. Some of these are economic. By now, there is a functioning market system in Mongolia and transport prices are reasonable as well. Price fluctuations have become manageable and, thanks to modern technology, easier to follow. At the same time, there now exists an emerging middle class in the cities with moderate incomes, a perfect consumer market for pastoralist products given the traditional preferences of Mongols and Kazaks alike. On the other hand, the insecurity of the early post-socialist period regarding high transactions costs and the enforcement of contracts is largely gone. Therefore, imported goods or domestic foodstuff from other regions have become cheaper while selling one's own products promises higher profits than used to be the case. People have come to utilise this, which is visible by a look at the regional market in Hovd – probably a hundred times larger than it used to be in the mid-1990s.

While trade with livestock also increased significantly, a particular striking case was the expansion of the market for potatoes in the early 2010s. By that time, a series of natural disasters, called *zhüit* in Kazak, had stroke the pastoral sector all over Mongolia. The losses in Hovd district were equally devastating, approximating half of the livestock numbers, which dropped from 130.000 in 2000 to 75.000 by 2010. People reacted to that by selling off their animals, moving to town or switching to agriculture. In 2011, virtually everyone who could lay claim on arable land (which is still on lease basis) did so. Potatoes were particularly popular. And they were easy to market and fetched profitable prices. Every week big trucks would drive all the way from the capital Ulaanbaatar, some 1.400 kilometres by off-road tracks away, right up to the fields and buy of the harvest. While prices might be slightly higher on the market in the provincial centre, this provided a welcomed income for rural households in times of crisis. It also went hand in hand with a growth of domestic consumption of potatoes and other vegetables.

Other reasons are cultural. With half of the population having migrated to Kazakhstan and a constant exchange of information among relatives on both sides of the border, new ideas of good and healthy nutrition have found their way into the local community. This has begun to change the perception and popularity of different substances used in the local cuisine. It has also, partly as a consequence of this, changed the way these substances may be used and different food is prepared. Kazakhstan has in many respects become a model of modernity and desirability, even for those who do not have any plans to move there.

This has not turned Mongolian Kazaks into vegetarians – a way of life hardly existing in Kazakhstan either – but people developed an idea for more variety and, in particular, including more vegetables into their diet. Apart from potatoes, cabbage and onions, this also includes carrots and beets, which became much more popular in recent years. Rice is also a product more regularly consumed these days, most often in the form of *plov*, a kind of stew made with meat and carrots. During the 1990s rice was a very scarce commodity, as it is not grown in the region. It is still the norm that any dish by definition needs to contain a certain amount of meat to be counted as ‘real food’ but the combination with other ingredients is more varied and more regular than it used to be the case.

What consequently also increased is the amount of flour consumed. One reason is that it is, relatively speaking, a lot cheaper than it used to be in the 1990s. Most of it is now also produced in Mongolia, or at least this is what people believe, and thus considered healthier than flour imported from China. Besides the omnipresent *bawirsaq* and soup it has also become more common that *besparmaq* is served with homemade noodles. What is also more regularly eaten is dumplings (*manti*), which was rare in rural areas dur-



Photo 5: Kazak traders selling flour on the bazaar in Hovd

(P. FINKE, 2013)

ing the 1990s, although it is still a rather special dish due to the amount of labour needed to prepare. A very popular dish in Kazakhstan, it is in the local setting more typical for Mongol households. The smaller *buuts*, as they are called, are the national cuisine *per se*.

As a consequence the total amount of meat consumed over the year has decreased, although no robust data on this exists. But people reported to consume fewer animals. This becomes most evident during the winter slaughter (*sogim*). Usually in late November, which sets the period of permanent frost, a large number of livestock is slaughtered to last for the domestic meat supply until May or June when the herds have gained strength again (cf. Finke 2004). During the 1990s average families would often slaughter two large stock and up to fifteen small stock. This number has been greatly reduced today and in most cases include reportedly one large stock and less than ten small stock, thus roughly half of the earlier number (although household sizes may on average also be smaller).

What has also changed is the relative importance of different types of meat. As mentioned, horses and sheep were traditionally valued highly. This is still the case today. On the other hand, the increase of goats in the herds – due to the importance of cashmere as a marketing product – has made this meat be more regularly consumed. While traditionally considered inferior to sheep, it is nowadays consumed as often and with little mentioning of any preference. People would not state they like it more than others but seem to have lost their dislike to it or tend to downplay it. When entertaining guests ideally still a sheep should be slaughtered but on occasions a goat may do as well.

When animals are slaughtered – and that is the only way to acquire meat, as it is never traded in pieces – almost all of its parts are utilized for consumption. In particular, on the very first day, when big chunks of meat are boiled and served, the meals contain a high amount of innards and fat. This makes, of course, perfect sense, given the fact that they rot quicker than the meat itself. While the consumption of innards has not decreased significantly, that of fat has. The explanation for this is probably again ‘cultural’, as people say they learned that eating lots of fat is unhealthy. As with other changes this one seems particularly pronounced among those families who have been to Kazakhstan or have intensive relations with their kin over there. It is also more common among those families settling in the district centre.

The growing importance of vegetables has been mentioned. This is also true for fruits. Since the 1990s, in particular the consumption and trade of melons has greatly increased. Other fruits such as apples and pears, by contrast, play less a role than they used to. I have no explanation for this, except for the fact that melons are highly appreciated also as gifts and for the entertainment of guests. Being cut into slices they confirm much closer to the ideal picture of joint consumption that is also true for proper meals. And this, at the same time, makes them also more profitable for selling on the market.

But melons, both water and sugar melons, are also still an important item within barter exchange. Considered as a 'natural' sweet they are appreciated as a healthy substitute for chocolate or candies.

What has also changed fundamentally is the proportion of ready-bought foodstuff. There are next to no pre-processed meals to be found in the shops in the district but people today often buy factory noodles and other packaged goods from the market in the provincial centre. Even bread may be bought there and then consumed back home. I do not know if people actually prefer the taste of ready-made bread, usually of the quadrangular Russian-type, or see it as a symbol of modern life – as well as good for saving labour. But ideas of modernity certainly do play a role when it comes to other packaged foodstuff, such as noodles. And all of these figure very prominently in the new supermarkets in town and, in much greater variety, in Kazakhstan. They are rarely utilized, however, for feasts, and many people still prefer self-made noodles as tastier.

These changes have been helped also by the arrival of refrigerators, which enable people to preserve certain kinds of foodstuff for much longer than in the past. In fact, refrigerators existed already in socialist times but had fallen out of use during the 1990s due to the lack of provision with electricity. Since then the western provinces of Mongolia have been connected to the Russian supply lines, although this is still somewhat shaky during certain periods of the year. When the provision from Russia is interrupted, which may sometimes happen for days, people are again forced to take action to preserve their foodstuff. But the very existence of refrigerators has changed attitudes and expectations profoundly.

## BEVERAGES

Another striking example of a health discourse and its impact on local food preferences is tea. Traditionally, local Kazaks, as well as Mongols, drink this brewed together with milk, butter, cream and salt. And they do so in large quantities. In the course of a day adults may often drink three and more litres of tea. Most of it is consumed during the smaller meals that people have with *bawirsaq* and milk products. After a feast, tea is served to all guests and usually signals the end of the hosting.

This is still the case but some people have started to abstain from salt inside the tea. Abstinence from salt is generally explained by the negative health consequences related with excessive use of it. Some families have, due to different tastes according to generations and gender, begun to cook separately two jugs of tea, one with (*tuzdi* or *tuz bar shay*) and one without salt (*tuzsiz* or *tuz joq shay*). This is, however, more common in the central settlement while the pastoralists tend to drink tea the way it was done before.

What has also changed is the type of tea consumed. Until the 1990s it was common to buy brick teas imported from China, of which for consumption

small quantities were chopped off. Nowadays, the preference is for Indian teas and those imported from the post-Soviet space, usually as loose tea but occasionally also in bags. The double advantage in the local understanding is that these are both more modern and do not force one to rely on Chinese goods, considered to be unhealthy by definition. And, of course, it is less labour-intensive. Besides the ingredients, also patterns of preparation have been modified. In the countryside it is still the norm to boil water in a huge pot and then add tea, salt, milk and cream as one sees fit. But in the district centre it has become common to put the milk aside, as one would do in Kazakhstan, and add it later when serving the tea at the table.

Other beverages have also experienced significant changes. As described above, fermented mare's milk has always been a staple and culturally highly esteemed drink. But it has greatly gained importance during the last ten years or so, particularly as the ceremonial drink *per se*. It has done so at the expense of vodka (or locally mixed variations of it). Religion is one aspect of this transition, although apparently not the major one. As vodka is still a common drink, also for the younger generation, its absence during ceremonies is primarily to be seen as an expression of national culture and tradition. Part of this switch may again be interpreted with the model of Kazakhstan, where the same has happened more or less simultaneously. It is accompanied also by a growing popularity of beer, again in line with Kazakhstan, which was very rarely consumed until recently.

## CONCLUSION

Significant changes have transformed at least some of the food patterns among Kazak pastoralists in western Mongolia. These had, as shown, to a large extent economic reasons. Within the last 25 years the relative prices of



Photo 6: Milking mares

(P. FINKE, 1991)

different foodstuff, such as meat, flour or vegetables, has changed several times and this had profound impacts on their relevance for consumption. This has also affected the meaning of different types of meat, which reflects changes in the overall composition of livestock herds. Thus goats became ever more important while camel products play hardly any role in domestic consumption these days.

But it is about more than just economics. Some of the changes could readily be labelled as cultural. Human tastes for food are, of course, never neutral but reflect perceptions and collectively shared schemes as much as they are a response to the change in relative prices. It has been noted that Kazakhstan is a model in many respects for the people in the district of Hovd (and other parts of Mongolia). It has set the pace for ideas about a modern lifestyle as well as a healthy nutrition. Not everyone is equally fond of this and thus there is some variation in adopting ideas imported from there. As mentioned, some people started to drink tea without salt because they heard this to be better for ones health. Others do not. The same is true for the consumption of fat. Drinking alcohol, by contrast, seems to be less seen as a threat to health but as a mismatch with traditional Kazak culture. That is probably the reason why particularly on ceremonial events it is refrained from or approved of only in the form of *qimiz*. By contrast, informal gatherings of men, young and old alike, would rarely see the consumption of *qimiz*, of which one has to drink a lot to become intoxicated, but rather beer or vodka.

Clearly, different aspects come together when looking at changing food preferences in western Mongolia or elsewhere. There is not a story of straightforward political economy to explain what is happening. Cultural ideas, as I have labelled this a bit old-fashioned, are of equal significance, although I would probably argue that they work only as long as they do not inflict severe costs of some kind; financial or ideological. Thus, a retreat from meat consumption would be unthinkable not only because rearing animals is the obvious choice in this natural environment but also due to the reason that the idea is very solidly engraved into the shared cultural understandings. Thus, as mentioned above, a meal without meat is not considered a proper meal and will leave people with a feeling of being still hungry, as they say.

But the case also shows that ideas of modernity can become quite strong and pervasive in a short period of time. Among Kazaks in Mongolia the alleged homeland, where many of their relatives have migrated to, has turned into a very important model for changing ones food preferences. The fact that many of these changes have been less pronounced among the local Mongols underlines this. Much of this has apparently also to do with ideas of a settled way of life, which for many is identical with modernity and progress. It does, at the same time, relate with different forms of food preparation and ingredients that are now easier in reach. It will be interesting to follow these developments as they continue to happen.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bollig, Michael, and Michael J. Casimir. 1993. 'Pastorale Nomaden', in Thomas Schweizer, Margarete Schweizer and Waltraud Kokot (eds), *Handbuch der Ethnologie*. Berlin: Reimer, pp. 521–559.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1979. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Finke, Peter. 2004. *Nomaden im Transformationsprozess: Kasachen in der post-sozialistischen Mongolei*. Münster: Lit.
- Harris, Marvin. 1985. *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. Prospect Heights: Waveland.
- Miller, Daniel. 1997. *Capitalism: an Ethnographic Approach*. New York: Berg.
- Mintz, Sidney. 1985. *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin.
- Mintz, Sidney and Christine Du Bois. 2002. 'The Anthropology of Food and Eating', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 99–119.
- Müller, Franz-Volker. 1995. 'New Nomads and Old Customs: General Effects of Privatisation in Rural Mongolia', *Nomadic Peoples* 36/37: 175–194.
- Simoons, Fredrick. 1994. *Eat Not This Flesh: Food Avoidances from Prehistory to the Present*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wilk, Richard. 1999. 'Real Belizean food: building local identity in the transnational Caribbean', *American Anthropologist* 101(2): 244–255.
- Winterhalder, Bruce and Eric A. Smith (eds). 1981. *Hunter-Gatherer Foraging Strategies: Ethnographic and Archaeological Analyses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.





# THE CAREER OF A ‘HEALTHY DRINK’ *AKTYK* IN TODAY’S KYRGYZSTAN: MEANINGS AND USES OF TRADITION

(DANUTA PENKALA-GAWĘCKA)

*Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka received her Ph.D. and doctor habil. degrees in ethnology and cultural anthropology from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. She works as Associate Professor at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and specializes in medical anthropology and Central Asian studies. She conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Her interests focus on medical pluralism, health-seeking strategies and practices, healing and religion in Central Asia. Among her publications there are books on traditional and complementary medicine in Afghanistan and Kazakhstan, edited and co-edited volumes on medical anthropology in Poland and articles in journals such as Anthropology & Medicine, Curare, and Central Asian Survey.*

I came across *aktyk*<sup>1</sup> for the first time just at the beginning of my fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, in September 2011. During an introductory visit to the Centre of Folk Medicine *Beyish* in Bishkek, which was one of the most important places where I conducted my research, I noticed a small shop located there, selling this product as both a ‘healthy drink’ and a remedy against many ailments.

I have found it interesting for several reasons. First, since I was researching, between 2011–2013, attitudes to health and illness and health-seeking strategies of the inhabitants of Bishkek,<sup>2</sup> *aktyk* and some other beverages drew my attention because they were widely used for prevention and self-medication. As such, they belonged to the diversified ‘therapeutic landscape’ of the city, or, to put it another way, contributed – together with many other ‘objects’ and forms of treatments – to the local form of medical pluralism. Second, which was later confirmed during my fieldwork, I had presumed that the shop would be a good ‘observation point’ and a place where I could easily talk with people and learn not only about their motivations to

<sup>1</sup> Transliteration of the Kyrgyz words in this paper is based on the BGN/PCGN romanization system for Kyrgyz language.

<sup>2</sup> This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under Grant N N109 186440.

use *aktyk* and opinions on its effectiveness, but also about general attitudes to health, illness and treatment. Moreover, I took an interest in the contemporary popularity of a variety of drinks based on milk or grain, which through the process of commodification appear in many kinds on the market. It is well recognised by anthropologists that food can be an expression of national identity and a component of notions of national pride (e. g. Zanca 2007). Medicines may play a similar role, being treated as part of the cultural heritage and representations of traditional values (Penkala-Gawęcka 2011). In the case of *aktyk*, which is considered both a tasty, nourishing drink and a medicine, I wanted to learn if it had any connections with the Kyrgyz ethnic/national values, or – possibly – its growing popularity had nothing to do with such associations.

In this paper I focus on relationships between *aktyk* and ‘tradition’. I will not try to identify to what extent *aktyk* or other new drinks use traditional components and recipes, and whether it is justified to call them traditional or not. Instead, I am interested in the ways in which ‘tradition’ is understood, used and manipulated in the process of introducing, distributing and advertising such products. I will also discuss whether the efforts to connect *aktyk* with tradition are reflected in ‘ordinary’ people’s attitudes and opinions.



Photo 1: Entrance to the Centre *Beyish*. Bishkek. (D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, 2011)

Could such reference to ‘tradition’ attract people, make them more eager to buy the product and believe in its efficacy? Do they themselves perceive this new drink as ‘traditional’?

This paper is based on my talks with the sellers of *aktyk* (usually called ‘consultants’) and with many clients of the shop, as well as on my observations made in the course of numerous visits there. I also used other materials, in particular occasionally published newsletters and leaflets which served for advertising.

To begin with, I will briefly characterise an official policy towards folk medicine in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, because such macro-level actions influence endeavours of the actors on a micro-level. In the analysed context, it is worth noting that Kyrgyz folk medicine – together with some other complementary/alternative forms of treatment – received significant governmental support in the Kyrgyz Republic. It was treated as an important part of the national heritage, useful for the process of nation-building. Similar processes have been described in other countries of the Central Asian region, e. g. Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan (see for Kazakhstan: Penkala-Gawęcka 2013; for Uzbekistan: Kehl-Bodrogi 2008; Hohmann 2010).

The discourse of tradition strongly influenced an official attitude towards folk medicine, especially in the early 1990s, when the above mentioned Centre *Beyish* (full name: Republican Scientific and Production Centre of Folk Medicine *Beyish*) was founded in Bishkek, under the auspices of the Ministry of Health. While the official support for folk medicine has diminished during the last decade, which was reflected in ‘restructuring’ or, actually, closing down *Beyish* near 2011<sup>3</sup>, healers are allowed to compete freely in the market and many of them enjoy popularity.

In the first section of the paper, I give a short overview of the most popular Kyrgyz beverages used in the past and presently. The next part describes *aktyk* as a newly introduced and commodified drink, with the focus on the use of ‘tradition’ in the producers’ efforts to popularise it. In the following section, based on my talks with the users, I present their attitudes to *aktyk* and discuss if connections of *aktyk* with tradition are most appealing to them or if other pull factors could be identified. In conclusion I compare the role of the discourse of tradition for actors involved in the processes of production, advertising and marketing the drink, and for ‘ordinary’ people who use it with the general aim to prevent or cure their ailments.

---

<sup>3</sup> In 2011 the remnants of *Beyish* were transformed into the International Academy of Traditional and Experimental Medicine, whose work, according to the Ministry of Health, should be directed towards a more ‘scientific’ approach to folk medicine. Such changes suggest that, as the discourse of science and modernity becomes stronger, only those elements of ‘tradition’ which are considered ‘rational’ can get official approval.

## POPULAR KYRGYZ DRINKS

Although, as I have already stated, it is not the aim of this paper to decide whether *aktyk* is traditional or not, it would be illustrative to present here some examples from a wide array of beverages which were a significant part of the Kyrgyz diet, as described in ethnographic sources. This context, in my opinion, may be useful for understanding the contemporary popularity of both ‘old’ and newly invented – though often referring to tradition – drinks among the Kyrgyz.

Russian ethnographers usually stressed that with the introduction of agriculture a previous diet of the nomads which had consisted of dairy products and meat was complemented with grain-based meals, which became particularly important as everyday food in winter season (Abramzon 1971: 140–141). However, contemporary researchers (e. g. Khazanov 1994) demonstrate that the economy of nomadic societies was never entirely self-sufficient – they were closely connected with sedentary societies which provided them with agricultural products.

Among milk beverages, the Kyrgyz widely used *ayran*. According to Abramzon (1971: 141), it was sour sheep’s milk with an addition of water, while today it is a kind of yoghurt drink. However the favourite drink was definitely kumiss (*kymyz*) – fermented mare’s milk.

The most popular grain-based drink, as Abramzon (1971: 141) claimed, was *maksym*, prepared from barley. Besides, there was *bozo*, an alcoholic drink made from millet (mentioned also, as *buza*, by Fiel’strup 2002: 287).

The majority of the mentioned above beverages are popular in today’s Kyrgyzstan, including its capital Bishkek. However in the city, people rather use commercial products than prepare these drinks at home.

*Kymyz* has been raised to the rank of a national symbol; it is commonly called a national drink of the Kyrgyz<sup>4</sup>. It is worth mentioning that, as Svetlana Jacquesson convincingly argues in her paper, it is not *kymyz*’s widely recognised medicinal properties<sup>5</sup> and taste values which have been crucial for its ‘career’, but the social qualities – strengthening kinship, friendship and neighbourhood ties (Zhakson 2005).

*Maksym* is widely used as a refreshing drink during the hot season. Some women, even in the city, still prepare it at home, although I was told that they use wheat, not barley as it was mentioned in ethnographic sources. It is valued not only for its refreshing qualities, but also for digestive and presumed cleansing properties. *Maksym* was introduced as a commercial product in Bishkek by the company *Shoro* and today it is produced by several firms. It is widely available in summer, sold everywhere in the streets and supermar-

<sup>4</sup> The Kazakhs and Mongols lay similar claims to kumiss.

<sup>5</sup> It is a well-known fact that already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian medicine adopted kumiss for treatment of tuberculosis and other lung diseases (see: Afanas’eva 2008).



Photo 2: A street stall selling *maksym*, *tan* and other drinks produced by the companies Shoro and Arshan. Bishkek. (D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, 2011)

kets. Among other beverages which underwent the process of commodification there are *chalap* and *tan* – fizzy drinks made from *ayran*.

#### AKTYK AND ‘TRADITION’ – MARKETING AND ADVERTISING THE PRODUCT

*Aktyk*, undoubtedly, has connections with some popular, well-known Kyrgyz drinks made from sour milk. However, it is a new product which entered the market in 2010 and, at first, was presented simply as a ‘sour milk drink’. Then, in the advertisements, it was stressed that in addition it contains ‘ecologically clean roots of the herbs’ from the mountains. Besides, it is stated that during the process of production, a special spring water is used. We can learn about a ‘unique composition’ of *aktyk*, but no accurate specification is available. As the sellers from the shop explained to me, most important are those ‘secret herbs’ which should not be revealed. There is also a statement about ‘biological validity’ of *aktyk* (repeated in successive issues of an advertising newsletter) signed by a deputy director of the Institute of Preventive Medicine, subject to the Ministry of Health. According to this document, *aktyk* differs from other sour milk drinks by the content of extracts obtained from the roots of eight medicinal herbs from the Kyrgyzstan mountains (*Aktyk* newsletter of June 2011 and following issues).

After sanitary and epidemiological checks in accredited laboratories, *aktyk* received an approval from the Institute of Preventive Medicine, a patent and certificates which confirmed that it complied with the standards accepted in the Kyrgyz Republic. It has been widely advertised since introduction, and during my visits in the shops selling *aktyk* I saw documents certifying that it



Photo 3–4: A leaflet with *aktyk* use recommendations – in Russian (left) and Kyrgyz (right). Bishkek. (D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, 2012)

had got several prizes and medals at exhibitions and fairs in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. It must be remembered, however, that a practice of displaying a great amount of certificates of quality, diplomas and medals is widespread in the countries of the former Soviet Union which often makes us wonder about a dubious validity of such documents.

In the advertisements it was described as both a prophylactic and therapeutic drink, recommended for people suffering from diabetes and other metabolic disorders, kidney and liver problems, asthma, allergies, joint pains, skin diseases, intoxication and many other ailments. Among its virtues, the abilities to protect people from radiation, strengthen the body’s immune system and rejuvenate the organism were also mentioned. In fact, it looked as a cure-all. Its qualities were listed by physicians whose opinions and recommendations could be found in the advertising newsletter *Aktyk*. It was irregularly published in Russian and Kyrgyz by the producers, as it can be assumed, although there was no information on this besides contact addresses and telephone numbers for those who would like to buy the product. The newsletter was available in the shops where this drink was sold, together with leaflets (in Russian and Kyrgyz) containing some basic information about *aktyk*’s healing properties and the proper use.

The product, often called a ‘source of health’, was also widely advertised on TV, in newspapers and magazines, especially in *Vestnik ZOZh* (*Zdorovyy obraz zhizni*), a local version of the popular Russian magazine published in



Photo 5: *Aktyk* – ‘green’ and ‘yellow’. The shop in Bishkek.

(D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, 2013)

Bishkek. During three consecutive seasons of my fieldwork in Bishkek (about four months altogether) I observed an increase in *aktyk*’s availability, as new shops in Bishkek were opened. I visited two of them several times and there were usually many clients coming there, some for the first time but also regular users. According to the ‘consultants’ – sellers, *aktyk* became popular not only in the capital, but also in other, even distant parts of the country, as well as in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Russia. It was already in the 2011 (June) issue of the newsletter *Aktyk* where the publishers included enthusiastic opinions by users from one of the regions of Kazakhstan (*Mankyshlakskiy rayon*). Besides, a telephone number was given in the advertisement for those who would like to buy *aktyk* in Kazakhstan, and then, since 2013, the drink has been also manufactured there<sup>6</sup>. As stated in the 2013 (February) issue of *Aktyk*, apart from several places in Bishkek (three special shops and several chain stores) there were also shops selling this drink in Osh, Jalalabad, Talas, Naryn and Karakol.

Along with two initial sorts – ‘yellow’ (made from whole milk) and ‘green’ (made from skimmed milk), the company later introduced *shay-aktyk* which came in several variants. It was based on the regular kind of drink, with an addition of iodine, calcium, iron or bifidobacteria, respectively. In the 2013 issue of the newsletter there was a long list of diseases provided, which – according to the ads – could be prevented by using this product, including diabetes, cancer, asthma and paralysis. Besides, it might be helpful in case of

<sup>6</sup> According to Adel Baatyrbekovna Ismailova, general director of the company *Em-Aktyk*, a daughter of Baatyrbek Ismailov (‘inventor’ of *aktyk*) (*Vestnik ZOZh*, No. 17, September, 2013).



Photo 6: *Shai-aktyk* in several variants. The shop in Bishkek.

(D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, 2013)

many serious internal and skin ailments. At the end it was added that *shai-aktyk* was good for everyone and might be used on a daily basis by all people, including the old ones and infants, as a tasty, energising drink, raising spirits and ‘fulfilling with health’. Thus, it was presented, similarly to the ‘old’ *aktyk*, as a kind of panacea.

It was noticeable that references to ‘tradition’ played an important role in marketing the product. How is this notion understood, what are its meanings as revealed in advertisements? In the newsletter the inventor and producer of *aktyk*, Baatyrbek Ismailov<sup>7</sup>, repeatedly refers to the Kyrgyz heritage. The beverage is described as an exclusive product based on a ‘national’ Kyrgyz sour milk drink, with an addition of eight secret herbs that come from *jayloo* (summer pasture) in the mountains; from the ‘ecologically clean zones’. So, it is apparent that the discourse of tradition is mixed here with recourses to ecology and nature.

What is interesting, Ismailov calls the drink “God’s gift to our nation”. He stresses the exclusive rights of the Kyrgyz to this gift, when he states: “Investors from Europe offered two million dollars for the formula of *aktyk*. I have not agreed”. A story presented by the ‘author’ of this drink in the newsletter (issues of June and September 2011) depicts its invention as a revelation from the heavens. The voice from above passed to him secret knowledge about the herbs, once used by his mother. It uttered: “Your mother used to

<sup>7</sup> I could not find any reliable information about his background. Although in the issues of the newsletter *Aktyk* Ismailov repeats his story of the invention of this drink, there are only few remarks on his previous severe diabetes which was cured thanks to *aktyk*.





Photo 7. Advertisement displayed in the shop: *Aktyk – Source of health!!!* Bishkek.  
(D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, 2013)

make *those medicines* from *those herbs*<sup>8</sup>”, and Ismailov hastened to note all the ingredients. The story not only connects *aktyk* with the Kyrgyz ‘traditional knowledge’, but also provides it with a special, sacral legitimisation by presenting this drink as a miraculous gift to the nation ‘from above’. In addition, the inventor claims that drinking this beverage helps to clean both the body and the spirit. He presents himself as a pious man, invokes God and asks him for help “in the great work of unifying the nation” (*Aktyk*, issue of February 2013). It is worth noting that the photos of Ismailov show him in a national garment or at least a hat (*kalpak*), sometimes with a mountain valley in the background.

Significantly, just the trade name made up for the product expresses the efforts to connect it with traditional values. *Aktyk* means ‘whiteness’ or ‘purity’<sup>9</sup>. In this context it seems important to refer to what Gulnara Aitpaeva writes about *kyrgyzchylyk*. She notes that *kyrgyzchylyk* (‘Kyrgyzness’) – which, widely understood, comprises the complex of traits connected with traditional identification of the Kyrgyz – is sometimes also called *aktyk* (‘whiteness’) (Aitpaeva 2009: 252). So, ‘whiteness’ in the name of the drink may appeal to such associations – not only with purity and right, but also with the Kyrgyz ethnic and cultural identity.

The discourse that refers to the national cultural and natural treasures, to the Kyrgyz traditions which should be remembered and nurtured, can be found in opinions of some of the users of *aktyk* expressed in the newsletter.

<sup>8</sup> Indications in italics come from the author of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> *Ak* means both ‘milk, milk products’ and ‘white’, ‘clean’, ‘innocent’, ‘righteous’.



Photo 8: Inventor of *aktyk* and his story in the newsletter distributed in the shop. Bishkek. (D. PENKALA-GAWĘCKA, 2013)

Clients of the small shop which I visited were sometimes asked to write down their experiences and thoughts about *aktyk* in a special notebook. The sellers were encouraged by the managers of the firm to collect such opinions and to choose some most telling excerpts, which were then published in the newsletter together with a photograph and the name of the author. If it was a well-known person, his/her profession and position were mentioned too.

These are some examples of the opinions from the newsletter that refer to mystic/sacral values, tradition and nation, worth quoting:

- “Aktyk is a great miracle and a *prize for our nation*”<sup>10</sup>;
- “I think that Aktyk is *created for our nation*”;
- “It is well-known that our ancestors took care of their health and ate ecologically clean food (...) so I appeal to the youth to drink Aktyk and value this national product!”.

In such declarations the drink was sometimes equated with *kymyz*, for its taste and qualities. There are also statements like: “I am deeply grateful to Aktyk”, which attests to its specific authority and agency.

However, the discourse of tradition, national heritage, etc. does not take a

<sup>10</sup> Indications in italics come from the author of this paper.

central place in the opinions published in the newsletter, although this seems to be especially sought by the managers as worth stressing. Such attitudes are, actually, not numerous if compared with others. What the people who were asked to publicise their views usually emphasise themselves, is health improvements or even recovering from various illnesses and ailments, which they attribute to the use of *aktyk*.

In my view, the users' opinions about *aktyk* quoted in the newsletter could not be taken as representative, for several reasons. First, as I noted earlier, quotations regarded as most suitable for advertising are chosen from the entries written in the notebook. Second, those people who agree to write down their assessments are gratified with several free bottles of the product, which may affect both the will to take part in this endeavour and the contents of the written pieces. In fact, this is part of the advertising politics of the managers of the *Em-Aktyk* company.

In the next section I will describe the attitudes and reflections on *aktyk* of the people who visited the shop at the former *Beyish* premises and the other shop nearby, whom I spoke with during my fieldwork.

#### AKTYK AND 'TRADITION' – PERSPECTIVES OF THE USERS

In the course of my fieldwork, I observed the encounters between the sellers of *aktyk* and the clients and listened to the communication between them. I also initiated short or longer talks with the users and people who wanted to try *aktyk* for the first time, and sometimes was able to hear more about their views and attitudes when we went out from the shop together. I met several dozen of people, but spoke to about twenty of them. The clients were ethnically diversified, although the Kyrgyz comprised the majority of them. People who came were of different age, both men and women. Maybe men came more often because they were sometimes commissioned by women to go to the shop and fetch heavy multi-packs of *aktyk* bottles.

I would like to point out that my talks with the clients revealed wider contexts of their choices, decisions and experiences with drinking *aktyk*. While the people who visited the shop often highly prized this drink, I could hardly ever hear references to the Kyrgyz traditions or national values. The Kyrgyz clients seemed not to differ from people of other ethnic backgrounds in this respect. Men and women, aged and young, told me about their (or their relatives' and friends') experience with drinking *aktyk*, which was often only one of the 'healthy products', medicines and methods they had tried or more stably used, from a wide array of complementary/alternative treatments available in Bishkek.

For instance, one of the clients, a 79-year-old Tatar woman Mayram<sup>11</sup>, told me about her extensive, long-term search for health improvement. She had

---

<sup>11</sup> I have changed the names of my interlocutors, in order to preserve their anonymity.



Photo 9: A ‘consultant’ selling *aktyk*. The shop in Bishkek. (D. PENKALA-GAWEĆKA, 2012)

tried *aktyk*, then another, similar drink *agar*<sup>12</sup>, yet she has returned to using the first one. The woman claimed: “*Aktyk*, certainly, will be very helpful in lowering blood pressure”. But first of all, Mayram was very fond of various diets which she generally preferred to medications. She stated: “Yes, I take medicines, but not to excess ... I try to wean myself off medicines”. In her opinion: “If you do not drink *aktyk*, but follow a diet, you will not get ill”. So, for prevention, as she thought, a proper eating was the most important.

When asked about the values of *aktyk*, users tended to praise its ‘natural’ components, as opposed to chemical substances contained in pharmaceuticals. My interlocutor, a 72-year-old Kyrgyz woman Gulmira, spoke about her former problems with bladder stones, which had been resolved thanks to drinking *aktyk*. Shortly before our encounter she began to drink it again, this time for gallstones. Gulmira told me that this treatment was less expensive than taking medicines. She added: “Medicines are chemicals, and this is natural milk and roots of the herbs. So I decided to drink it and I continue to drink”. In my opinion, such statements do not reveal people’s nostalgia for the past and for traditional Kyrgyz ways of life. They rather show an influence of the ideas about the values of ‘natural substances’ as opposed to ‘harmful chemicals’, a kind of discourse which has become globally popular today.

Newcomers inquired the sellers and other clients about effectiveness of various types of *aktyk* for particular ailments and details concerning its use. Those who already were regular users, simply asked the sellers for a ‘green’

<sup>12</sup> *Agar* is another newly invented drink, based on grain components with an addition of skimmed milk, spring water and lemon juice. It was sold in the shop also located in the premises of the former *Beyish*, close to the shop selling *aktyk*. It was not, however, so widely advertised and evidently lost in the rivalry with *aktyk*.

or 'yellow' kind, since the most clear difference was that the first one was intended for persons with hypertension, and the second for those suffering from hypotension (besides, the green version was recommended for people with obesity and high cholesterol levels). The 'consultants', who themselves did not have any medical background, sometimes asked for more information about the client's condition, but in many cases sold the demanded product without any hesitation or only shortly commented on the properties of 'green' and 'yellow' *aktyk*. When asked, they usually gave some general information, like: "this is a sour milk drink"; "medicinal drink"; "recommended for everybody"; "with no contraindications"; "at first there is a cleansing effect, then the proper metabolism is restored". One of the sellers, an Ukrainian woman in her fifties, Oksana, added that the third stage in the process of using *aktyk* is 'rejuvenation'. However, what I observed was rather a kind of the short buyer-seller encounter, although from time to time the 'consultant' showed a greater interest in the client's health problems<sup>13</sup>. I described the situation of such encounters more widely in order to show that in this context references to tradition or national heritage are not used and do not really matter, even if both the seller and the client are Kyrgyz. What matters is revealing medicinal and preventive virtues of the drink, though this also usually does not require much explanation, unless it is a first visit of a client. Moreover, *aktyk* attracts people of various ethnic backgrounds and for those who are not Kyrgyz, any references to Kyrgyz traditions would not be appealing.

I will add here a more general remark – that 'ordinary' people's opinions and attitudes to tradition should be taken into account and thoroughly studied, in order to avoid applying to them the views of the elite, politicians and other actors who use and manipulate this notion for various purposes (cf., for remarks concerning different perspectives on nation-building, Isaacs and Poiese 2015). In this case it is the inventor, managers and producers of *aktyk* who put effort into 'traditionalising' this product whereas it does not seem really important to the majority of the users.

## CONCLUSION

Based on my research, I draw the conclusion that 'tradition', 'national heritage' and similar notions are of special importance for those actors who have been engaged in the process of designing, producing and marketing *aktyk*. They tried to associate the new product with traditional drinks, popular among the Kyrgyz, *kymyz* in particular. The uses and manipulations of 'tradition' by the producers of *aktyk*, described earlier in the paper, were intended, on the one hand, to attract the clients. But on the other hand – as they were in

<sup>13</sup> In one case the seller made a call to the director, Adel, to ask whether *aktyk* might be drunk by a breastfeeding woman. When I talked to this seller later, she explained that the director had no medical background, however "she had a great experience with *aktyk*".

line with the governmental re-appropriation of ‘national heritage’ – they were meant to help in receiving an official approval and certificates necessary for marketing the drink. In the attempts to get a better position in the market, the producers and managers have used the discourse of ‘tradition’, referring to its various aspects. They evoked what can be called a ‘tradition-place’ – fabulous mountain pastures of the nomads, and a ‘tradition-time’ – idealised old times of the Kyrgyz prosperity and life in harmony with the nature.

In the light of the analysis, I argue that such evocations did not have much importance for the users of *aktyk*. The motivations of the people, as it appears from my research, were pragmatic. It does not mean that advertisements which resort to the idealised vision of the traditional Kyrgyz life could not influence people’s choices. However, in my view, the clients were focused on achieving health improvement, and it was rather the kind of advertising which pointed out the efficacy that made them come and try *aktyk*, as one of many available options of complementary treatment. In fact, people did not pay much attention to the producers’ efforts to ‘traditionalise’ this drink. But it should be noted that the popularity of such new drinks as *aktyk* is largely based on the importance of similar beverages in the traditional Kyrgyz ways of life.

I think that further research on *aktyk* and other similar drinks might follow the concept of ‘biographies of medicines’ as suggested by Whyte, van der Geest, and Hardon (2002). This approach would require a careful study of all stages of a ‘social life of a medicine’, including its production and marketing, its use at home, current opinions about its efficacy, as well as a wider context of its popularity. Maybe it would reveal other meanings and uses of ‘tradition’, which could not be caught in the course of my research whose main focus was not just on *aktyk* but on various health-related strategies of people in the context of urban medical pluralism.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramzon, Saul M. 1971. *Kirgizy i ikh etnogeneticheskie i istoriko-kul'turnye svyazi*. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Afnas'eva, Anna. 2008. ‘Osvobodit’ ot shaytanov i sharlatanov’: diskursy i praktiki rossiyskoy meditsiny v kazakhskoy stepi v XIX veke’, *Ab Imperio* 4: 113–150.
- Aitpaeva, Gulnara. 2009. ‘Sacred Sites in Kyrgyzstan: Spiritual Mission, Health and Pilgrimage’, in Sigurd Bergmann, Peter M. Scott, Maria Jansdotter Samuelsson and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm (eds), *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, pp. 249–263.

- Fiel'strup, Fedor A. 2002. *Iz obryadovoy zhizni kirgizov nachala XX veka*. Moskva: Nauka.
- Hohmann, Sophie. 2010. 'National Identity and Invented Tradition: The Rehabilitation of Traditional Medicine in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan', *The China and Eurasia Quarterly Forum* 8(3): 129–148.
- Isaacs, Rico, and Abel Polese. 2015. 'Between 'Imagined' and 'Real' Nation-Building: Identities and Nationhood in Post-Soviet Central Asia', *Nationalities Papers* 43(3): 371–382.
- Kehl-Bodrogi, Krisztina. 2008. *'Religion is Not so Strong Here.' Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism*. Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- Khazanov, Anatoly M. 1994 [1984]. *Nomads and the Outside World*. Transl. by Julia Crookenden, with a foreword by Ernest Gellner. Madison, London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2nd ed.
- Penkala-Gawęcka, Danuta. 2011. 'Some Complementary Medicines in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan as Conveyers of Meaning and Manifestations of Values', *Curare* 34(1+2): 29–35.
- Penkala-Gawęcka, Danuta. 2013. 'Mentally Ill or Chosen by Spirits? 'Shamanic Illness' and the Revival of Kazakh Traditional Medicine in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan', *Central Asian Survey* 32(1): 37–51.
- Reynolds Whyte, Susan, Sjaak van der Geest, and Anita Hardon. 2002. *Social Lives of Medicines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zanca, Russell. 2011. 'Fat and All That: Good Eating the Uzbek Way', in Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (eds), *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 178–197.
- Zhakson, Svetlana. 2005. 'Kakovy vse-taki dostoinstva kumysa? Ekologicheskiye ili sotsiyal'nye?', in *Naslediye material'noy i dukhovnoy kul'tury Kyrgyzstana*. Bishkek: Natsional'naya komissiya Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki po delam YUNESKO, pp. 77–86.





# INDEX

## A

*adat* 129  
 Afghanistan 21|49|117|155  
 Africa v|127|143  
 Alay 40|127|139  
 Aq-tepe 96  
 Arabic v|118  
 Asia v|94  
     Inner Asia 93|142  
*atala* 121  
 At-Bashy 129  
*ayran* 158–159

## B

Batken 49|113–114|137  
 beef|cow 12|27|50|74–75|82|  
     86–87|121  
*bish-barmak*|*bishbar-*  
     *mak*|*besharmaq* 2|4|7|9|  
     26|33|37–38|44|131|144|  
     146|148  
 Bishkek 35|127|155–166  
 blessing(s) x|13|33|38|57|110|  
     118|120–122|124  
*bawirsaq*|*boorsok* 33|35|104|  
     114|144|146|148|150  
*bozo*|*buza* 158  
 bread v|x|2|3|6|25|32–44|58|  
     73|79–84|89|93|95–97|99|  
     101|103–115|117|121|144|  
     150  
     flat/round bread 5|35|42–43|  
     52|96|103–105|107|109|  
     121|124  
     *lepishka* 35|82  
     *tokoch* 35|104|109  
 Bukhara 95|98|117|124  
 butcher|butchering 76|128  
 butter 13–15|17|19|33–34|  
     36–37|39–40|44|83|104|  
     113|143|150

## C

camel 12|142–143. 152  
 Central Asia v–viii|xi|21|33|  
     46|49|61|67–68|71|84|  
     93–95|97|101|105|112|  
     127|141|155  
*chapatti*|*chapeti* 121|123|124  
 cheese 14–17|19|26|113|143  
 Chelpek ix|31–46  
 chicken 26|35  
 China 7|11–12|15|17|61–62|  
     66|68|146|148|150  
 Chinese v|vii|ix|11–15|17–20|  
     67–68|123|143|151  
 chocolate 4|7|28|150  
*chuchuk* 134  
 Chui 33|35|43|129|134  
 commemoration x|5|44|104|  
     106|109–110|112|119–120  
*curd*|*kurut*|*kurud*|*kurt*|*qurt* 13|  
     68|143–144

## D

*dastarkhan*|*dasturkhon*|  
     *dasturkhan*|*dastorkon* 22–23|  
     26–28|72|105–106|111|113|  
     129  
 dumplings ix|27|37|50|63|98|  
     148  
 Dungan|Hui ix|11|35|61–62|  
     66–68

## E

Eid-al-Adha 33  
 Eid-al-Fitr 23|33  
 ethnicity ix|1–4|8|50–52|  
     67–68|73|99|101  
 ethnic identity  
     vi|ix|2–3|6–7|11–12|21–23|  
     25–26|29|49–52|56|61|

- 67–68 | 90 | 98–101 | 120 | 126 |  
130 | 136 | 145 | 163 | 165 | 167
- F**
- fat 13 | 33 | 35 | 39–40 | 65–66 | 75 |  
78–79 | 82 | 98 | 109 | 129 | 134 |  
144 | 149 | 152
- Fergana/Ferghana ix–x | 71 | 75 | 77 |  
81 | 98 | 104 | 136
- food | ethnic v–x | 2–3 | 5 | 8 | 14 |  
17–19 | 23 | 26 | 28–29 | 31–33 |  
38 | 40 | 43 | 45–46 | 49–52 | 56 |  
61–62 | 66–68 | 93 | 95 | 97–98 |  
117 | 120 | 123 | 125 | 130 | 132 |  
141 | 143 | 150–152
- everyday/mundane vii | 39 | 44 |  
117 | 125 | 144 | 158
- festivity x | 23 | 25–26 | 28–29 |  
34 | 111 | 113–115 | 121 | 123
- national vii–x | 4–5 | 7–9 | 14 |  
19 | 28 | 33 | 35 | 45–46 | 49–50 |  
66–67 | 93–95 | 129
- white ix | 12–14 | 17–20
- fruit 7–8 | 24–25 | 35 | 50 | 74 | 94 |  
113 | 118 | 144 | 147 | 149
- funeral 34 | 44
- G**
- gender v–viii | x | 33 | 62 | 72 | 123 |  
128 | 150
- German ix | 2 | 4 | 6–9 | 84
- Germany 3–4 | 7–9 | 44 | 125
- H**
- halal* | *khalal* 25
- Han Chinese ix | 11
- health ix–x | 7 | 17 | 33 | 45–46 |  
115 | 118 | 150 | 152 | 155–157 |  
159–160 | 162 | 164–165 |  
167–168
- hierarchy x | 33 | 45 | 72
- homeland 1–2 | 4 | 8 | 14 | 152
- horsemeat 124
- hospitality v–viii | 6 | 8 | 13 | 33–34 |  
62–63 | 73 | 90 | 104 | 106 | 115 |  
128
- Hovd 142 | 146–148 | 152
- Huhhot 12 | 13 | 14 | 17 | 18 | 19
- I**
- intimacy x
- Islam 45 | 105 | 111
- K**
- Kalmyk/Kalmak ix | 31–32 | 36 |  
38–43 | 46
- Karakol 31 | 38 | 40 | 42 | 161
- karta* 35
- kasha* 68
- Kazakh | Kazak vii | x | 2–4 | 6 | 9 |  
22–29 | 33 | 67–68 | 93 | 104 |  
138 | 141–143 | 148 | 151–152
- Kazakhstan | Kazakstan vii | ix |  
1–2 | 4–9 | 21 | 23–24 | 26 | 37 |  
41 | 49 | 61 | 63–65 | 69 | 84 | 95 |  
124 | 141–142 | 144 | 146 |  
148–152 | 155 | 157 | 161
- kazan* | *qozon* 74 | 100 | 104
- kelin* 35 | 75 | 85 | 88 | 94 | 105 | 108
- Khorezm | Khorezmian 95–98 | 100
- kinship ix | 31 | 99–101 | 158
- kitchen 50 | 62–65 | 73–74 | 78–79
- Köktal 26 | 28–29
- konfeti* | sweets 4 | 8 | 13 | 25 |  
34–36 | 66 | 68 | 94 | 104 | 111 |  
113–115
- Korean 2–3 | 6–7 | 11 | 35 | 123
- kudalar* | *kudagyylar* | *qudalar* 27 |  
32 | 34 | 112
- Kunya-Urgench 96
- kymyz* | *qimiz* | *qymyz* 26–27 | 50 |  
143 | 152 | 158 | 164 | 167
- Kyrgyz ix–x | 31–35 | 37–39 |  
41–42 | 44–46 | 49–59 | 67–68 |  
93 | 103–105 | 107 | 109–110 |  
113–115 | 123 | 127–128 | 130 |

132–134 | 136–138 | 144 |  
155–160 | 162–163 | 165–168  
Kyrgyzstan ix–xi | 21 | 31–33 | 37 |  
40–41 | 43 | 45 | 49–53 | 55–57 |  
61 | 78 | 95 | 103–106 | 109 |  
111–113 | 115–116 | 123 | 129 |  
136 | 139 | 146 | 155 | 157–160  
Kyzyl-Kiya 49 | 54 | 56

## L

labour | distribution viii | 72 | 80 |  
100 | 103 | 109 | 115 | 120 |  
149–150  
*laghmon* | *laghman* 68 | 75  
lamb | sheep meat 4 | 7 | 12 | 24 | 27 |  
86–87 | 121 | 124 | 128–130 |  
139 | 143 | 149  
language viii–ix | 11 | 15 | 22 | 24 |  
29 | 31–32 | 38 | 45 | 61–62 | 69 |  
71 | 93 | 95 | 118 | 123 | 127 |  
142 | 144 | 155  
Laqay Uzbek 117 | 123–124 | 126  
liminality 62 | 64

## M

*mahalla* | *maala* 81 | 100 | 113  
*maksym* 158  
*manty* | *manti* 27 | 37 | 50 | 148  
marker | border vi | ix | 4 | 100 | 123  
marker | identity ix | 2 | 22–23 |  
31 | 40 | 49–50 | 73 | 94–95 | 99 |  
101 | 116 | 123 | 127 | 141  
meat distribution x | 31 | 34.  
50 | 127 | 130 | 137  
memory 1 | 5 | 32 | 40  
Middle East 83 | 88 | 143  
migration v | 1 | 3–4 | 9 | 12 | 58 | 95 |  
118  
Mongol v | ix | 11–15 | 17 | 19 | 31 | 40 |  
43 | 46 | 134 | 143–145 | 147 |  
149–150 | 152 | 158

Mongolia x | 11 | 18 | 141–148 |  
150–152  
Inner Mongolia ix | 11–13 |  
19–20  
Muslim ix | 33 | 42–43 | 78 | 83 | 88 |  
118 | 141 | 145

## N

*nan* | *non* 32 | 34 | 36 | 38 | 41–43 |  
52 | 82 | 95 | 104 | 107–109 | 117 |  
120–121 | 124  
Naryn 127 | 129 | 134 | 139 | 161  
Navruz | Nooruz  
99 | 111 | 117 | 120 | 122  
Nikah 33  
*nohat shürva* 26  
nomad | nomadic way of life v | 13 |  
15 | 33 | 35 | 40 | 45 | 84 | 132  
noodle(s) 4 | 32–33 | 35 | 37–38 |  
44 | 50 | 68 | 75 | 121 | 131 | 132 |  
144 | 146 | 148 | 150  
Nookat 49 | 51 | 54 | 56–57

## O

Oirat 31 | 33 | 42  
Osh | town ix | 49–50 | 53–54 | 78 |  
81 | 127 | 139 | 161  
Ozgen 49 | 78

## P

*plov* | *pilaf* | *palov* | *osh* ix | x |  
33–34 | 73–79 | 87 | 89 | 95 |  
97–99 | 101 | 121 | 123 | 148  
politics viii–ix | 49 | 54 | 68 | 72 |  
97 | 165  
pork 4 | 7 | 68  
post-Soviet vii | x | 21 | 45 | 83 | 85 |  
151 | 157

## Q

Qataghan 117  
*qazy* | *kazy* 25 | 26  
Qipchaq 22 | 117

## R

Ramadan | *Orozo* 33–34 | 119–120 |  
125  
retraditionalisation x  
ritual v | viii | x | 13 | 35 | 64 | 66 | 96 |  
103–104 | 106 | 109–110 | 115 |  
117 | 124 | 139  
Russian v | 3–4 | 6–7 | 9 | 28 | 35 |  
41 | 50 | 61 | 66–68 | 71 | 79 | 97 |  
127 | 141 | 150 | 158 | 160

## S

sacrificial | sacrifice x | 33 | 87 | 111 |  
118 | 120–121 | 124  
*sadaqa* 118 | 124  
salad 6 | 24–25 | 35–36 | 38 | 113 |  
121  
*salt* 111 | 116  
Samarqand 95 | 98  
*samsy* | *samsa* | *somsalar* ix | 36–37 |  
50 | 52–59 | 81  
Sart-Kalmak 31–33 | 38 | 40 |  
42–43 | 45–46  
sausage 3 | 5–6 | 25–26 | 35 | 113  
*sebet* 111 | 113–114  
settled way of life 152  
*shakarob* 121  
*shashlik* | *shashlyk* 57 | 82  
sheep bone | radial | thigh x | 124 |  
127 | 130 | 132–139  
*shi* 64–65  
Shymkent 25–28  
*sogim* 149  
*soop* 108  
*sopra* | *shorpo* 36–37  
*sumalak* | *sümölök* 99–101 | 111  
symbol | symbolic v–vi | x | 4–5 |  
17 | 23 | 74 | 83 | 96 | 127 | 136 |  
150 | 158

## T

Tajik x | 28 | 105 | 117–118 |  
120–121 | 123–124 | 126 |  
136–137  
Tajikistan x | 21 | 49 | 117 | 120 |  
123–126 | 161  
Taldykorgan 1 | 3 | 5  
*tandyr* | *tandir* | tandoor 36 | 41–43 |  
45–46. 50 | 52 | 53–59 | 81–82 |  
95–97 | 103–109 | 121  
taste viii–ix | xi | 1–2 | 4–9 | 34 | 41 |  
65 | 67 | 73 | 98 | 106 | 126 |  
129–130 | 150 | 152 | 158 | 164  
Tatar 35 | 165  
tea | *chai* | *choi* 2 | 13–14 | 24 |  
32–40 | 44–46 | 52–53 | 58 |  
61 | 63–64 | 66–67 | 77–79 |  
83 | 89 | 104 | 106–108 |  
143–144 | 150–152  
Tekes 32 | 42 | 45  
Tibet | Tibetans 142  
Tong 127 | 129  
*toy* | *tüü* | *toi* 23–27 | 75 | 85 | 88 |  
113–114  
tradition vii–viii | xi | 38 | 55 | 71 |  
118 | 127–129 | 133 | 139 | 151 |  
156–158 | 162 | 164 | 167–168  
Turkic 22 | 120 | 127 | 130 | 141–142  
Turkmen 93 | 136  
Turkmenistan 95–96 | 100  
*tuuralgan-et* 33  
Tuva | Tuvianian x | 130

## U

Ulaanbaatar 143 | 147  
urban viii | 13 | 25 | 34 | 66 | 81 | 105 |  
115 | 168  
*uruu* 112  
*ustukan* 37–38 | 128 | 130–132  
Uighur | Uygur | Uygur | vii | 28 |  
33 | 35 | 37 | 42 | 142 | 147

Uzbek ix-x | 21–27 | 33 | 35 | 37 |  
50–56 | 71 | 74 | 79 | 82 | 85–86 |  
88 | 90 | 93 | 95 | 96–97 |  
104–105 | 114 | 117–118 | 136 |  
144  
Uzbekistan 21 | 26 | 50 | 59 | 61 | 71 |  
73–75 | 80 | 93 | 95–100 | 109 |  
113 | 123 | 141 | 157 | 161

## V

vegetable 7–8 | 19 | 24 | 50 | 74 | 77 |  
142–145 | 147–149 | 152  
vodka 3 | 38 | 72 | 77 | 86 | 151–152

## W

wealth 5 | 26 | 66 | 84–85 | 103  
wedding x | 2 | 24–28 | 34 | 42 | 64 |  
66 | 69 | 75–77 | 85–88 | 109

## X

Xinjiang vii | 28 | 42 | 43 | 120

## Y

yoghurt 13 | 15 | 143 | 158  
Yssyk-Kul 31 | 33 | 35 | 45

## OTHER VOLUMES IN THE SERIES

In the FIELD NOTES AND RESEARCH PROJECTS Series the following titles have been published so far:

2012

(I) Schlee, Günther (ed.): *Pastoralism in Interaction with other Forms of Land Use in the Blue Nile Area of the Sudan: Project Outline and Field Notes 2009–10*

(II) Schlee, Isir, Beleysa Hambule, and Günther Schlee: *The Moiety Division and the Problem of Rendille Unity: A Discussion among Elders, Korr, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2008 / Belel Ichoow Sagi Ren’ dille is Liikeeno af Ren’ dilleka Kiiye Torro af Ingereza Liilaabe: Tooloo Makhaballe, Korr, Tarehe 21 Januari, 2008*

2013

(III) Awad Alkarim, and Günther Schlee (eds): *Pastoralism in Interaction with other Forms of Land Use in the Blue Nile Area of the Sudan II: Herbarium and Plant Diversity in the Blue Nile Area, Sudan*

(IV) Lenart, Severin: *The Complexity of the Moment: Picturing an Ethnographic Project in South Africa and Swaziland. Vol. I: Photo Essays and Fieldwork Reports, 2007–11*

(V) Lenart, Severin: *The Complexity of the Moment: Picturing an Ethnographic Project in South Africa and Swaziland. Vol. II: Photo Essays and Court Cases, 2007–11*

(VI) Finke, Peter, and Günther Schlee (eds): *CASCA—Centre for Anthropological Studies on Central Asia: Framing the Research, Initial Projects*

2014

(VII) Schlee, Günther: *The Social and the Belief System of the Rendille – Camel Nomads of Northern Kenya (English Version: Halle 2014/German Original: Berlin 1979)*

(VIII) Schlee, Günther: *Das Glaubens- und Sozialsystem der Rendille – Kamelnomaden Nord-Kenias (German Original of Volume VII, Reprint)*

(IX) Isir and Günther Schlee: *Rendille and Ariaal: A Linguistic and Cultural Affiliation Census I. Logologo: Sabamba, Odoola, Manyatta Juu; Namarei: Ong’eli (Lomurut, Harugura, Ilmongoi); Goob Lengima; Korr: Bosnia, Lorora; Laisamis: Rengumo; Lepindira*

2015

(X) Awad Alkarim, Elhadi Ibrahim Osman, Günther Schlee, and Jutta Turner: *Pastoralism in Interaction with other Forms of Land Use in the Blue Nile Area of the Sudan III: The Methods of Citizen Science in the Study of Agropastoralism*

(XI) Schlee, Günther: "Civilisations"

(XII) Kohlhagen, Dominik, and IMPRS REMEP (eds): *REMEP – Retaliation, Mediation and Punishment: Research Agenda and Projects*

(XIII) Isir and Günther Schlee: *Rendille and Ariaal: A Linguistic and Cultural Affiliation Census II. The Western Reaches (South Horr, Loiyangalani, Haro, Kulal, Ngurunit)*

2016

(XIV) Jiménez Tovar, Soledad: *The Anthropologist as a Mushroom: Notes from a PhD Research Project in Central Asia*

(XV) Köhler, Florian: *The Sedentarization of Dwelling: Continuity and Change in the Habitat of Fulbe Wodaabe Pastoralists and Urban Migrants in Niger (Text and Photo Essays)*

2017

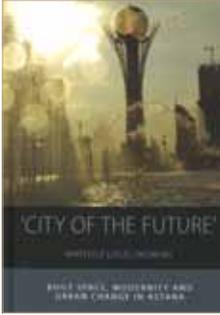
(XVI) Schlee, Günther, and Al-Amin Abu-Manga: *Fulbe in the Blue Nile Area of Sudan: Field Notes and Interviews*

(XVII) Bedert, Marteen (in collaboration with Freeman B. Bartuah): *Notes on Settlement Histories of Gbelay-Geh Statutory District, Nimba County, Liberia*

(XVIII) Abu-Manga, Al-Amin. Old Fulani in the Sennar Area (Sudan) /  
قداامى الفولانيين فى منطقة سنار (السودان)

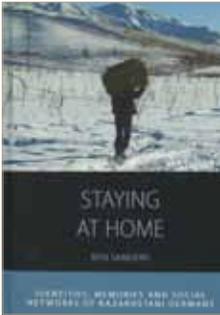
For teaching purposes, all volumes are available as online PDFs under [www.eth.mpg.de/dept\\_schlee\\_series\\_fieldnotes/index.html](http://www.eth.mpg.de/dept_schlee_series_fieldnotes/index.html)

# BOOK PUBLICATIONS

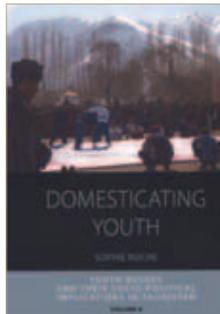


BERGHAHN BOOKS SERIES

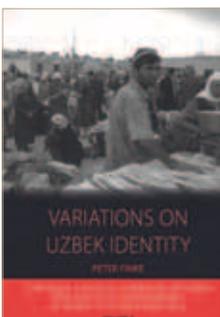
Mateusz Laszczkowski  
*'City of the Future'. Built Space, Modernity and Urban Change in Astana*  
(New York, 2016)



Rita Sanders  
*Staying at Home. Identities, Memories and Social Networks of Kazakhstani Germans*  
(New York, 2016)



Sophie Roche  
*Domesticating Youth: Youth Bulges and their Socio-Political Implications in Tajikistan*  
(New York, 2014)



Peter Finke  
*Variations on Uzbek Identity: Strategic Choice, Cognitive Schemas and Political Constraints in Identification Processes*  
(New York, 2014)



