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Layered Legacies and Transformations in Central Asia

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Beyond Post-Soviet: Layered Legacies and Transformations in Central Asia

Contents

Layered legacies – an introduction

Henryk Alff, Matthias Schmidt, Michael Spies, Rune Steenberg

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, academic interest in Central Asia experienced a boom, in particular regarding the concepts of post-socialism and transformation. Not only did the new independent states become more involved in world politics, but they also became more accessible to international research activities, especially by Western scholars. Thirty years down the road, the Central Asian republics are still often granted the epithet "post-Soviet." While this is technically true, the region also has a pre-Soviet history of feudalism, Russian colonialism or the imperial Great Game, each of which has influenced Central Asian societies. Moreover, it has been shaped and differentiated by several more recent phenomena, such as the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the importing and re-exporting of Chinese consumer goods, labor migration to Russia and the establishment of important institutions and initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Eurasian Economic Union or the Belt and Road Initiative – all references to important past and recent historical phases that have shaped the region in ways still visible today. As some observers have remarked, Central Asia could also meaningfully be deemed post-post-Soviet, as its particular contemporary problems and challenges seem to derive more from the concrete policies implemented by Western development agencies and international banks in the so-called "transformation phase," meant to mark the West's victory in the Cold War, than from any Soviet legacy (Buyandelgeriyn 2008; Pétric 2005). While still shaped by its Soviet and colonial past, the region's social institutions, political developments and economic asymmetries closely resemble those of other regions on the margins of the capitalist world system. Military instability now emanates less from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and more from the US-led incursion in 2001, the drug trade it helped to spawn and the growing rise of Islamism and its recruiting in reaction to Western aggression in the Middle East as well as home-grown, condescending secularism (Chaudet 2006; McCoy 2017; Montgomery, Heathershaw 2016). Similarly, Central Asia's economic marginality can be said to now reflect global value chains, the effects of the Global Financial Crisis, Russia's economic struggles and China's rise and geo-political tensions with the US (Fehlings, Karrar 2020; Reeves 2012) – at least to a degree as large as Moscow's planning decisions and ecologically unsound resource extraction and agricultural modernization in Soviet times. Thus, one should think of those elements of Soviet legacy that still play a role in current developments as belonging to one of several types of important legacies. In this sense, each social phenomenon observed in Central Asia today has its own unique combination of elements from the past deriving from what we call "layered legacies" – legacies of different phases that reinforce, interact with or contradict each other in complex ways and can have very different consequences in different local contexts (Ibañez-Tirado 2015).

This volume examines some of the on-the-ground, concrete effects of the region's layered legacies. Eclectically zooming in closely on important topics in the region, such as urban planning, water management and access, agricultural production, communal cooperation, migration patterns, ethnicity, Islam and gender, the papers in this volume present the contemporary situation in Central Asia in light of its three most recent historical phases: the Soviet era, post-soviet transformations and capital-driven glocalization. While each contribution engages with particular topics in a concrete and mainly micro-scale manner, the overarching question explored across these different examples pertains to the relative relevance and dynamic interaction of these layers of legacies. Are Soviet structures still relevant today? How much was disrupted and determined by "shock therapy" and other forms of transformation efforts in the 1990s (Kuehnast, Dudwick 2004)? And to what degree are the Central Asian republics and its societies today affected by global socio-economic and political dynamics of power and inequality (Beyer, Finke 2019; Silova, Niyozov 2020)? Moreover, how are the policies, support and demands of China, Russia, the US, the Asian Development Bank, the IMF and the World Bank playing out locally, and what lasting structures have the different phases of modernization, development and coloniality created (Kušić et al. 2019)?

These questions were addressed in two workshops that brought together Central Asia researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds to present and discuss their ongoing research on the region.

The first workshop took place on 7–8 February 2020 at Augsburg University and was entitled "Transformation after the transformation: Central Asia in focus of human geography and social sciences". The second one was held as a virtual workshop hosted by Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development on 4–5 March 2021, entitled "Beyond post-Soviet: Path dependencies and new trajectories of change in Central Asia". These two events also served as the first annual meetings of the Central Asian Studies Network in Germany (CASNiG), an open network of Central Asia researchers and experts set up to exchange ideas, concepts and findings, and to promote collaboration, mutual support and solidarity.[1]

This volume presents selected papers based on contributions from the two workshops, addressing contemporary issues and layered legacies in Central Asia from various angles. The first two papers focus on water. In her contribution on 'Masculinity and water diplomacy in Central Asia', Jenniver Sehring goes beyond the analysis of policy-level water governance. She draws attention to the individual interactions of officials in water management and through a gendered perspective scrutinizes collaborative and confrontational actions shaping water use practices. Thematically related, Kateřina Zách focuses on the material dimension of water use. Highlighting the prolonged roles of Soviet water pumps in Kyrgyzstan's villages, many of which have now fallen into disrepair, she provides a theoretically informed study of heritage and social memory in rural Central Asia.

While also focusing on natural resource use, the next three papers address questions relating to collaborative approaches, participation and local knowledge in a dynamic social-ecological environment. Challenging established claims that cooperative-based approaches to agricultural development have largely failed, due to the negatively connoted Soviet legacy, Ottavia Cima deconstructs the role of development discourses and foregrounds the importance of in-depth qualitative research in achieving this end. Michael Spies and Martin Welp signify participatory approaches, prominently stakeholder-knowledge mapping, as an additional, highly effective and socially just tool that can support socially and ecologically more sustainable land use practices in rural Central Asia – in their case agroforestry systems. Similarly, Andrei Dörre, in his micro-level study of irrigation management in the Western Pamirs, emphasizes the significance of local knowledge as a means of both securing access to resources under conditions of highly fragmented smallholder farming and climatic pressures, on the one hand, and sustaining community cohesion on the other.

Moving away from rural environments, Tabea Rohner and Wladimir Sgibnev, in their respective papers, investigate the social and political dimensions of urban infrastructure and development. Focusing on the monotown of Tekeli in south-eastern Kazakhstan, and addressing the lived realities of its inhabitants, Tabea Rohner calls for a nuanced revision of post-Soviet urban development outside the capital cities. According to the author, such settlements are often falsely regarded as failures. In his explorative analysis of innovation processes in Central Asia's urban public transport systems, Wladimir Sgibnev highlights the often overlooked development dynamics unfolding outside the large metropolitan centers and thus challenges powerful discourses of peripheralization.

Finally, two more papers address critical questions related to changing identities and public discourses. Drawing on deeply contentious societal debates around the migration of Kazakhs from the neighboring countries to Kazakhstan since the early 1990s, Zarina Mukanova and Rune Steenberg explore certain types of social marginalization and inclusion as colonial legacies under the guise of post-coloniality. In her analysis of discourses around the emergence of women's Islamic veiling in the Kyrgyzstani public, Gulzat Baialieva identifies a number of different paths for Kyrgyzstani women to wear a hijab, including pressure from their family but also individual choices in order to take ownership of their own lives and morality. Baialieva describes attitudes to veiling as reflecting generational conflicts in Kyrgyzstan: many younger women choose the hijab over traditional alternatives in order to escape the colonial stigmatization of backwardness tied to local Islam. In a globalized Islam expressed in the hijab, they find a vision of the future away from the "colonial past and postcolonial uncertain present".

The papers each focus on topics highly relevant to contemporary Central Asia and its ongoing societal and economic developments. They provide details of transformations beyond the obsolete imaginary of a teleological "transformation phase" from socialism to capitalism and present today's Central

[1] See www.casnig.geo.uni-augsburg.de

Asia as intertwined spaces and a phenomenon for which the post-Soviet marks but one amongst several phases of shaping influence. We look forward to more exchanges within the frame of CASNiG and hope that the present papers and the overarching concept of layered legacies will contribute to a nuanced historical understanding of contemporary Central Asia and beyond.

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Masculinity and water diplomacy in Central Asia

Jenniver Sehring

Most of the literature on transboundary water governance in Central Asia has approached the issue from a state-centric and rationalist perspective. This paper aims to complement these studies by adding two perspectives: First, drawing on International Practice Theory, I argue that water conflict and cooperation are shaped not only by strategic interests of governments, but also by the practices of diplomats and water officials involved in transboundary water cooperation at different levels. As will be shown, water diplomacy in Central Asia is characterized by both confrontational and collaborative practices and thus the existence of contradictory yet interwoven and complementary paths of water diplomacy. Second, drawing on Feminist Institutionalism, I show the gendered nature of these water diplomacy practices by analyzing how actors explain and legitimize both confrontational and cooperative practices with reference to existing ideas of masculinity. Combining these two approaches sheds light on how state interactions are shaped by social practices and how these social practices in turn are shaped by a gendered logic of appropriateness.

Introduction

The five countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – are connected by the two major rivers of the region, Amudarya and Syrdarya, which flow into the Aral Sea and together form the Aral Sea basin.[1] Other major transboundary basins include the Chu (Chuy) and Talas basin, shared by Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and the Ili-Balkhash basin, shared by China and Kazakhstan. In addition, many smaller rivers and canals of the extensive irrigation system cross national borders. In Soviet times, these rivers were managed according to the region's inter-republican integrated water and energy system: Water from the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers was stored in upstream reservoirs in the Kyrgyz and Tajik Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) and supplied to irrigation systems in the downstream Kazakh, Turkmen and Uzbek SSRs for agricultural production. In exchange, oil, coal and gas were transferred from downstream to upstream republics. This system ensured that water stored upstream would be available for irrigation during summer and not used for energy production in winter. When the Central Asian republics of the USSR became independent in 1991, rivers and interrepublican canal systems became transboundary, the joint water-energy management system disintegrated. Countries had to agree on how to allocate water. The Central Asian successor states, with the support of international donors, established transboundary river basin organizations like the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and its related bodies and the Chu-Talas Commission to jointly manage the transboundary rivers. At the same time, unequal allocation quotas, vested and conflicting interests of the agriculture and energy sectors and the unequal power relations among the states have led to political tensions, resulting even in statements threatening with war and incidents of local violent border conflicts involving water disputes (Bichsel 2011; Menga 2017; Sehring, Diebold 2012). Thus, transboundary water politics in Central Asia is characterized by co-existing conflict and cooperation. Interstate water agreements and organizations have been set up, but compliance to agreements is weak and implementation of joint activities ineffective (Krasznai 2017; Sehring, Ibatullin 2021).

Most of the literature on transboundary water governance in Central Asia has approached the issue either from a state-centered International Relations (IR) perspective, focusing on strategic interests and power asymmetries of the riparian states, or from an economic perspective, focusing on benefit-sharing models. This paper aims to complement these studies by adding two perspectives: First, drawing on International Practice Theory, I argue that water conflict and cooperation are

[1] In this paper, I refer to Central Asia as the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan is also part of the Aral Sea basin, but not considered here and also not a member in the regional water bodies.

shaped not only by strategic interests of governments, but also by what I call water diplomacy practices – meaning the practices of diplomats and water officials involved in transboundary water cooperation at different levels. As will be shown, water diplomacy in Central Asia is characterized by both confrontational and collaborative practices and thus the existence of contradictory yet interwoven and complementary paths of water diplomacy. Second, drawing on Feminist Institutionalism, I show the gendered nature of these water diplomacy practices by analyzing how actors explain and legitimize both confrontational and cooperative practices with reference to existing ideas of masculinity.

This focus on gender deems relevant as water diplomacy exists at the intersection of two highly masculinized fields: diplomacy and water resources management. By masculinized I mean that not only positions are mainly held by men (which requires us to look at male and female actors), but also that the core norms and guiding principles are shaped by men and are based on male experiences (which leads to ideas and concepts perceived as masculine and feminine). In most countries, women were officially excluded from leadership positions in diplomacy until about 100 years ago, and married women even longer (Enloe 2014; Neumann 2012). Still today the vast majority of ambassadors are men.[2] Equally, the water sector is shaped by masculinized practices and discourses (Zwarteveen 2008, 2017). Water experts mainly come from engineering disciplines that have been male-dominated. These engineers decide on and plan water supply, construction of dams and allocation of water. Also at transboundary level, most leadership positions in river basin organizations are held by men: thus, water management, policy guidance and decision-making across a basin is often done by men, and upon the advice of men (Best 2019). Nevertheless, with a few notable exceptions (Carmi et al. 2019; Earle, Bazilli 2013; Lossow 2015), there is hardly any research on the role of gender in transboundary water conflict and cooperation processes.

Also, in Central Asia the majority of the professional and technical positions of the state water administrations, including ministries, agencies and basin management, are held by men (see for example for Kyrgyzstan: Musabaeva 2014, for Uzbekistan: review.uz 2019). At the transboundary level, in all the main bodies of the Aral Sea basin (namely the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination and the Basin Water Organizations) the chairmen as well as national representatives, heads of delegations, scientific centers and secretariats have been almost exclusively men. Notably, the secretariats of the ICWC (until recently) and of the Chu-Talas Commission (until today) have been headed by women. The same holds true for ministers in charge of water and foreign affairs. A few women in deputy minister/director and expert positions are exceptions. A feminist perspective on water diplomacy necessarily has to start with uncovering how – through but also beyond the marginal numbers of women – the dominance of men has led to the dominance of masculinized practices, thus practices that can be performed by men or women but are based on male experiences and ideas.

This paper presents results of an ongoing study and thus should be read as a reflection based on work in progress that awaits further fine-tuning.[3]

Framing the study: International Practice Theory and Feminist Institutionalism

Many analyses and explanations of water conflict and cooperation in Central Asia follow the general approaches in International Relations and studies of transboundary waters: they analyze geographical location, geopolitical conditions, strategic interests, power asymmetries, costs and benefits of the involved states – assuming rational behavior and often taking a state-centric perspective. I want to add to these studies another perspective that

[2] At the same time, women have always played, for example as wife of ambassadors, a crucial – but informal and unpaid – role, see Enloe 2014.

[3] This research is part of a joint study of IHE Delft and the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) on the role of women in decision-making processes related to transboundary water management, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs via DUPC2. I am grateful for feedback received when presenting drafts of this paper at the 10th Hydro-hegemony Conference on "The Power of Representation and the Representation of Power in Water Conflict and Cooperation" (The Hague 4-5 October 2019), at the workshop "Transformations after the transformation: Central Asia in focus of human geography and social sciences" (Augsburg, 7-8 February 2020), and at the IHE Water Governance Seminar (Delft, 23 July 2020), and in particular for the detailed comments of Matthias Schmidt, Rune Steenberg and Margreet Zwarteveen.

sheds light on two aspects that are often overlooked, but are, as I will argue, relevant to understand the dynamics of water conflict and cooperation in Central Asia. These are the actual practices of water diplomacy, and the gendered nature of these practices.

International Practice Theory

Scholars of International Relations (IR) tend to analyze (water) diplomacy and international cooperation as either strategic action based on power asymmetries and interests or as driven by norms. Diplomatic practitioners, in contrast, often refer to common sense and intuition when describing their actions and perceive mainstream IR studies as too abstract and reductionist to capture „what is actually going on in the engine room of global politics" (Sending et al. 2015b:2). Therefore, practice-based approaches aim to understand social change and agency-structure dynamics through the everyday activities of those doing politics and focus on the analysis of social practices and their materialization in artefacts. While having a long history in social sciences, practice-based approaches are relatively new in the field of IR.[4] In this chapter, I will follow Adler and Pouliot (2011:6), who define practices as „competent performances, (…) socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world." The reference to competences stresses that practices, in contrast to a behavior or habit, are recognizable by standards (often based on tacit know-how or common-sense) and are part of a social context. They are the „result of inarticulate know-how that makes what is to be done self-evident or commonsensical" (Pouliot 2008:258). In a concrete negotiation, for example, diplomats have to act with the (restricted) information and guidance they have received and have to rely on their assessment of the situation, on the 'usual procedures' and their intuition. At the same time, water officials in water negotiations and in international water institutions are often not trained in international law or negotiation strategies but master the rules of international politics through implicit learning, relying on their common sense and political instinct, by knowing that they might face political and/or social sanctions if they do not act as expected.

Drawing on the International Practice Theory perspective, I argue that water conflict and cooperation in Central Asia is shaped not only by strategic interests of governments, but also by the water diplomacy practices of the involved actors at various levels. These actors, who I call here water diplomats, are mainly officials from the ministries responsible for water management and diplomats from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, plus representatives of international actors and (few) regional and international experts who support preparing agreements or facilitating meetings. With water diplomacy practices I mean the 'competent performances' employed in doing transboundary water cooperation at intergovernmental meetings at different levels, for example in the bodies and working groups of river basin organizations, during official negotiations, or in informal settings. The questions to be asked are then, for example: What is seen as 'normal' or adequate behavior in negotiations? How is the leader of a national delegation expected to act – toward the opposing parties, or towards his/her own team? Which tactics for securing own interests or reaching compromise are used and how are these justified?

Looking at water diplomacy practices can help to understand how decisions on transboundary waters are not only the result of strategic interests of the highest government levels but are also impacted by taken-for-granted rules and modes of interaction, pragmatic and tactical considerations, and their interrelation with power relations.

Feminist Institutionalism

Given the understanding of practices as being based on common sense, it is essential to keep in mind the claim of feminists that „what is called 'common sense' is, in reality, knowledge derived from experiences of men's lives, usually privileged men" (Tickner 2006:25) – in particular in a field that is dominated by men. To better understand how practices of water conflict and cooperation in Central Asia are gendered, I draw on Feminist Institutionalism, which evolved in recent years as a dedicated school of New Institutionalism in Political Science (Mackay et al. 2010). In general, New Institutionalism has put focus on how actors are being shaped and are shaping institutions, defined here as „a set of rules stipulating expected behaviour and ruling out behaviour deemed undesirable"

[4] For an overview see Adler, Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen 2013; Bueger, Gadinger 2018; Sending et al. 2015a.

(Streeck, Thelen 2005: 12-13) in both formal and informal ways. Different schools putting different weight on power, ideas, rational behavior or historical path dependencies for explaining the persistence or change of institutions (e.g. Cleaver, Koning 2015; March, Olsen 2013a; Streeck, Thelen 2005). Seeing institutions as gendered means to understand gender roles not existing primarily at individual level but emphasize that „constructions of masculinity and femineity are intertwined in the daily life or logic of political institutions" (Mackay et al. 2010:580).

Analyzing gender as a social construct requires to look at structural aspects (division of labor, numbers of men and women working in a certain field), as well as identities (individual perceptions and ideals) and the symbolic, discursive embeddedness of these (Harding 1986; Zwarteveen 2017). Behaviors, roles and identities of, in our case, male and female water diplomats, are determined through processes of socialization, norms and practices in bureaucracies, intergovernmental organizations and culturally considered 'acceptable' behavior for men and women (see also Mackay et al. 2010). For example, certain masculine ideas about leadership can be performed by both men and women but are socially accepted only for men. At the same time, a male leader can show soft, 'feminine' character traits that are ridiculed. To shed light on how these institutions impact men's and women's role in water diplomacy, I will use Chappell's (2006) concept of a 'gendered logic of appropriateness'. Scholars of Sociological Institutionalism argue that rules are followed and norms are powerful not only because of domination mechanisms, but because actors perceive them as natural and rightful. In a specific situation, they act as they (unconsciously) assume it is appropriate given the institutional setting (March, Olsen 2013b). In a gendered understanding, „this logic prescribes (as well as proscribes) 'acceptable' masculine and feminine forms of behavior, rules, and values for men and women within institutions" (Chappell, Waylen 2013:601).

Based on this understanding, this paper will show which institutions in the sense of rules and ideas of expected and accepted behavior are underlying water diplomacy practices in Central Asia and how these practices are gendered.

Methodology

Social practices as well as gender norms are difficult to research as they represent the status quo, unquestioned behavior and 'common sense' (Chappell, Waylen 2013; Kronsell 2006). Qualitative methods in data collection and analysis seem best suited to make such implicit practices explicit. Therefore, this analysis used qualitative interviews conducted in 2019 in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Beyond this, it draws on my own observations by being a participant in many policy events related to transboundary waters in Central Asia over the past ten years. But qualitative methods also have their limitations. When asked about their own experiences, most female as well as male interviewees insisted that in their professional sphere there are no differences between genders, that they are all assessed as experts and on the basis of their professional performance only. Only when digging deeper, different perceptions and assumptions about women and men became visible; and I am sure this paper still scratches only at the surface of gendered practices.

The interviewees were mainly water diplomats, thus women and men who have been members of staff or of working groups of the Chu-Talas Commission and IFAS bodies, have been participating in interstate water meetings as part of country delegations or of international projects. In addition, some interviews were conducted with experts who work in the water sector in general in different functions. A list of interviews quoted in the text with the acronyms used can be found below. While the interviewees included experts with experience in various transboundary water bodies of the region, the focus was on the Chu-Talas Commission, where 31% of staff and members of working groups are women. While the two chairpersons are men, the two heads of the national secretariats of the commission are women. With the assumption that gender norms become more apparent in a mixed-gendered setting, the Commission seemed therefore a suitable case to study. Consequently, the results presented here reflect experiences throughout the region, but are mainly from Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani interviewees and should not be generalized for whole Central Asia. Many interviewees commented on the gender-related differences between countries; these differences play out also in regional water bodies and will be looked at in further research.

Confrontational and collaborative water diplomacy practices: two ideas of masculinity

Understanding water diplomacy as a masculinized field does not mean that there is only one idea of masculinity. Rather, multiple masculinities can have a place and even serve the structure of masculinized institutions (Kronsell 2006; Neumann 2012). In line with the co-existing conflict and cooperation on water in Central Asia, both confrontational and collaborative practices shape water diplomacy. I define confrontational practices as involving talking aggressively, swearing, being uncompromising, or walking out of negotiations, often associated with prioritizing own interests and getting one's voice heard. Collaborative practices include avoiding open confrontation, seeking compromise, using informal and technical levels to find common understandings, and respecting different perspectives, often associated with the ability to reach workable solutions and create a trustful atmosphere among the riparian states. The associated narratives in Central Asia relate to two different types of masculinity, which I call here brotherhood and strongmen.

Confrontational practices: Uncompromising strongmen

Tensions and disputes around transboundary waters in Central Asia, as everywhere, often have their causes in conflicting interests between upstream and downstream countries. Prominent in Central Asia are the tensions that have been regularly emerging about the construction of new dams and around the question if water from the upstream dams should be released in summer (for irrigation in downstream areas) or in winter (for energy production in upstream countries). Other issues at stake are the costs of operation and maintenance of hydro-technical facilities and sharing of costs and benefits, or fear of increasing dependency on neighboring countries for water security. Such disputes can be easily explained with the traditional IR approaches. However, third party actors trying to foster water cooperation in the region often have been stunned by seemingly 'irrational' decisions and resistance to compromise even if own national interests are apparently not at stake. Participants and observers characterize water negotiations as extremely tough and without much room of maneuver for the actual negotiators. Negotiations in regional water fora regularly get stuck not because the issue as such would be controversial or because of easily identifiable contradicting strategic interests of states. Rather, government officials seem to reject compromise as a matter of principle, because they have too strict guidance from higher level and they fear to take political risks if they take decisions that are perceived as too soft (Krasznai 2017; interviews 6INT, 7INT, 15KAZ).

These practices align themselves with the concept of 'strongmen', commonly used to describe political leadership based on personalist and authoritarian forms of power. Media often use this term in their reports on the Presidents and political leaders of Central Asia. Academic scholars employ the concept to describe political leaders at local level and as a particular kind of post-Soviet masculinity that combines (often semi- or illegal) business activities with the reinforcement of 'traditional' patronage networks and gender norms (Jones Luong 2004; Reeves 2014; Uehling 2007). Water negotiations at bilateral and regional levels are part of this general political culture. Using the logic of strongmen to look at water diplomacy helps to understand why reaching compromises in water negotiations is seen as weakness and cooperation becomes difficult even if it would provide benefits for all riparian countries. Public "muscle-flexing" by showing oneself as uncompromising on national water interests is considered important to keep the image as a strongman and keep credibility (interview 6INT). At the same time, the authoritarian command style associated with strongman leadership in the countries prevents delegates in water negotiations to be flexible and innovative in finding solutions. Water cooperation functions with the same logic as overall politics in the region and follows what is considered appropriate negotiation styles and strategies.

The gendered nature of these confrontative practices became even more apparent when I asked interviewees what happens when women sit at the negotiation table. A male interviewee explained: „Any time if we have, at the negotiation table, we have a woman, all attention [goes] to this woman, of course. (…) [Usually] it's a really hard discussion; if we have women, it's more slowly, not so really active and hard" (15KAZ). Similarly, a female member of the Chu-Talas Commission noted: „The [effect of] participation of women in such commissions is, first, probably, tact: Men also try to behave, probably be diplomatic among themselves. Because, I also saw such situations when there were very controversial moments. Men do not hold back, but when there are more women participating,

they all nevertheless, probably, think and try to somehow behave more diplomatically" (13KYR).

These quotes show that confrontational interactions in water negotiations are shaped by perceptions about gender-specific behavior, they reflect the gendered logic of appropriateness of how male water diplomats are expected to behave among men, and how they are expected to behave towards women.

Collaborative practices: The solidarity of brothers

Notwithstanding the confrontational practices described above, there is also a lot of water cooperation to be observed in Central Asia. This is not only evident in the formal transboundary water institutions set up and kept alive (even with minimal political commitment), but in particular at two less prominent levels: the technical level, and informal ways of interaction.

The technical level refers to mid-level experts in the national water bureaucracies and the implementing bodies of IFAS like the Basin Water Organizations (BWOs) or the working groups of the Chu-Talas Commission. Here, operational management issues are often effectively handled even in times of political disagreements, like the operation and maintenance of shared hydro-technical infrastructure, data sharing requests among experts, etc. (Sehring, Ibatullin 2021, 13KYR, 14KAZ). At a political level, numerous examples have shown that on urgent challenges, political leaders or high-level representatives could reach compromise. However, this often occurs outside formal negotiations. One example are temporary water releases in drought periods agreed by phone between the responsible persons of the respective countries and not based on any official written agreement (6INT). Informal practices play an important role in reaching compromises or seeking help from each other. It is important to note that these confrontational and collaborative practices are not existing in contradiction to or independently of each other, but are interlinked: As one interviewee noted, sometimes heads of delegation object to cooperation, but instruct their subordinates to collaborate, nevertheless. Official muscle flexing is accompanied by unofficial mutual help (6INT, 7INT, 15KAZ).

A usual justification to engage in such (often informal) water cooperation is the reference to the moral obligation to help 'your brother', referring to the close historic and cultural ties between the people in the different riparian countries. While incidentally (and in recent years increasingly) also used by diplomats and political leaders, it is mainly the technical water experts who justify their cooperative behavior in this way (6INT, 9KYR, 14KAZ, 15KAZ). They refer to themselves as '*vodniki*' (translatable as water specialist) and constitute a community that shares similar paradigms and approaches. In particular, the older generation has followed a joint education in the USSR, which has provided them with strong personal ties, but also with shared norms on water management and therefore often similar opinions on the best solutions. It is striking, however, that the reference to 'brotherhood' seems to be a stronger justification for cooperation than by referring to professional standards and needs. Beyer and Kojobekova (2019:2) note that „[w]hen actors invoke something as traditional, they engage in an act of sensemaking in which they align their own actions with the expectations of others." In this respect, in water diplomacy the reference to (imagined) brothers with mutual obligations and long-standing relations lends legitimacy to an individual behavior which might be against formal rules or orders (like sharing data or giving access to water) but thanks to this narrative becomes recognized by others as appropriate.

The reference to brotherhood is also evoked at a high political level, most remarkable in the recent rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.[5] In his press statement after his first visit to Uzbekistan after 17 years, the Tajik president Rahmon referred three times to the „brotherly people of Uzbekistan" and both presidents addressed each other repeatedly as „dear brother" (Government of Tajikistan 2018) and set the tone for changing the previous tensions around the Rogun dam to a collaborative approach. This reference to (imagined) kinship might not be surprising in Central Asia, where kinship terms are a steady feature of politics. Historically, it has actually been a crucial element of all known diplomatic systems (Neumann 2012).

[5] The relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been extremely tense, partly related to Tajikistan's plans to finish the construction of the Rogun dam at a major tributary of the Amudarya, which was heavily opposed by Uzbekistan. However, after the former Uzbek president passed away and current President S. Mirziyoyev came into power, relations have eased.

Strongmen-like muscle flexing in official meetings (confrontation) and brotherly cooperation in less visible and informal settings go hand in hand. At the same time, also in formal high-level water diplomacy, reference to brotherly relations can justify cooperation. However, be it formally or informally, at technical or political level, the kins are named as brothers, not as sisters. Male water diplomats can easily identify with both, brothers or strongmen, and thus have the space to choose their behavior accordingly. Both practices together constitute dynamics of water diplomacy that cannot be fully grasped with explanations looking for strategic or rational reasons but are equally important for both understanding the challenges of water cooperation in Central Asia and for identifying possible avenues for conflict resolution.

Female water diplomats and the gendered logic of appropriateness

The analysis in the previous section showed highly masculinized practices of water diplomacy. But it did not show a field where women are absent. As mentioned above, although in small numbers and varying for different organizations and countries, women are part of national delegations, of working groups, participate as experts and in rare instances also in leading positions. If the practices and narratives of water diplomacy in Central Asia are shaped by ideas of masculinity, what does this mean for female professionals in this field? How do women (and men) make sense of their presence and absence in certain positions and how does this reflect on their tactics and behavior?

There are many ways in which gender perceptions affect the role of women in water diplomacy, and this chapter cannot provide a comprehensive analysis. I therefore choose to focus on one aspect, the perception of leadership, because leadership (in the form of strongmen) is such an important feature of the hegemonic idea of masculinity in the region.

Strong, masculine leadership

An obvious pattern in the interviews was that (male) water diplomats are expected to be strong leaders and being a strong leader is seen as something masculine. Among my female interviewees, leadership was commonly associated with male behavior and "male character" (12KYR): „The male logic is to govern, to command" (8KYR). The characteristics that are considered as needed for a good leader, like making clear decisions and giving commands, are associated with men. And even when talking about female leaders, their 'male characteristics' would be stressed: „She was a good deputy director. Well, she was like a man. Honestly, we were all afraid of her. A very strict woman. (…) If a woman, for example, has a male character, then she makes a good leader. But if a woman is, so to speak, soft, she will not be suitable for a leading role" (12KYR).

If leadership, strong will, commanding and making decisions are seen as male characteristics, what are considered female characteristics? A common assumption in the interviews (both of men and women) was that men are better leaders, and women more accurate workers: „A woman is more assiduous and does more analytics. And men mainly command" (2KAZ). This was also given as an explanation for why there are many women at mid-level but not at high-level positions: „The middle level is the heads of departments. In this range, the executives, the heads of departments are mostly women, because paperwork can only be scrupulously done by a woman. (…). Where you need to count a lot, [work] with papers, with numbers" (5KAZ). Consequently: „In my opinion, for solving the tasks of water diplomacy at a higher level, men who can take responsibility for making decisions are more suitable. Women are better suited for tasks requiring diligence and daily performance, for example, to fill out daily reports, to keep various materials in order, etc." (12KYR). These perceptions reinforce the dominance of men in leadership positions.

However, there is also a second narrative, and this relates to how women (are expected to) behave when they are in leadership positions.

Caring, feminine leadership

The characteristics associated with women are the opposite of a strongman. If women are in leadership roles, then it is assumed that they would not pursue their own power interests but care for society: „A woman, of course, knows better all the details, and more – she feels everything. (...) and regarding leadership roles of women, they will always try to do good not only for themselves but for you and for someone, because children are in the first place for her. She does not say this is my child, this is your child. For her, this is a child as a whole. Yes, a woman thinks about everyone, right" (4KAZ)? In a similar vein, an NGO leader

stated: „Why does the civil society sector have a female face? All say that is because women are more worried about the health of the family, children, the planet. They are more sensitive, open to it" (3KAZ).

For the Chu-Talas Commission, one female interviewee noted the following: „We work more with our soul. We invest more emotionally, we are more responsible, empathize. I thought that I was the only one, it turns out all of them" (11KAZ). She mentioned as an example the work of a women-dominated working group under the Chu-Talas commission, who would not present two separate national reports at the meeting, but coordinate and agree beforehand and present a joint report. One of the female members of this working group remarked: „we always try to find some kind of compromise" (13KYR).

In the idea of masculine leadership, it is essential to keep the image of being strong and powerful. For women in leadership positions, however, it is considered inappropriate to show their power. The reason seems to be located less in professional life but in the private sphere: They should not hurt male dignity but respect 'mentality'. Many women interviewed said that this is rather a phenomenon of rural areas, thus of female heads of farms or Water User Associations, but it would not affect them as urban, educated women. However, a female university professor stated: „I am a Doctor of Science, and my husband is a Candidate of Science. I will never tell him, you are a candidate, I am a doctor. Never, he will be offended. I do not say that I have a higher salary than he. He turns away, he feels bad and is offended. This topic is painful for him, so I try to somehow not touch these things" (4KAZ).[6]

Thus, if women are in leadership positions, they are assumed to be less self-interested, more caring and modest – characteristics contrasting the masculine leadership ideal of strongmen. While there are obvious examples of female leaders who are as tough as (or even tougher than) their male colleagues, these cannot (yet) challenge the internalized gender stereotypes. One male interviewee, when asked about a previous female water diplomat in a leadership position who was known for her uncompromising attitude, simply said: „she is no good example" (15KAZ).

Conclusion

The institutions and processes that shape international water conflict and cooperation are often described in gender-neutral terms. However, moving beyond a state-centric approach and looking at the social practices of those who are engaged in water diplomacy through leading negotiations, participating in joint working groups, working for transboundary commissions, etc. can reveal not only how these practices shape state interactions but in addition how practices are shaped by a gendered logic of appropriateness.

I identified two distinct yet interwoven sets of water diplomacy practices in Central Asia: confrontational and cooperative practices. Both are linked with certain ideas of masculinity – either strong leadership or brotherly solidarity. For the first, compromise in water negotiations is seen not as solution but as failure for the strongmen; hard negotiation styles are the norm. At the same time, technical and informal collaboration and, when convenient, high-level statements, make reference to the idea of brotherhood. Thus, male experts and policymakers can justify both confrontational and cooperative practices with certain ideas of masculinity, but women are excluded from these narratives. Since strong leadership is such an important aspect, I chose to focus on how ideas of leadership are gendered, and how female leaders are perceived. I have shown that both male and female water experts explain the lack of women in leadership positions with essentialist ideas about gender differences: Women would be good in diligent, analytical work, and men in taking decisions and getting them executed. This relates to the ideal of a strong leadership associated with confrontational practices – and with men. For female water diplomats, a more collaborative narrative could be observed: The role of many women as mothers feeds the idea of a more caring, responsible leadership of women and an associated more compromising approach to water negotiations. This narrative is in line with stereotypical ideas of feminine leadership and negotiations styles, observed (and questioned) globally (e.g. Due Billing, Alvesson 2000; Maoz 2009). For women in leadership positions who show confrontational behavior, there is no equivalent idea of 'strong feminine leadership'. In contrast, these

[6] In the former Soviet system, "Doctor of Science" is a higher degree than "Candidate of Science", the latter being equivalent to a PhD.

women are portrayed as 'being like men'. This gendered idea of leadership is closely linked to ideas of appropriate behavior of women, which excludes for example aggressive negotiation styles. Finally, also when female water diplomats are not per se more compromising, the inclusion of more women in water negotiations is perceived to contribute to more cooperative dynamics in the meetings: male water diplomats, adhering to the gendered logic of appropriateness, soften their confrontational practices in mixed-gender settings.

List of quoted interviews

Acronym	Interviewee	Place	Date
2KAZ	Male Kazakh member of IFAS	Almaty	19 September 2019
3KAZ	Female Kazakh head of environmental NGO	Almaty	20 September 2019
4KAZ	Female Kazakh university professor	Almaty	19 September 2019
5KAZ	Female Kazakh water expert	Almaty	19 September 2019
6INT	Female international water expert	Tashkent	3 April 2019
7INT	Male international water expert	Tashkent	3 April 2019
8KYR	Female Kyrgyz water expert and former member of the Chu-Talas Commission	Bishkek	20 December 2019
9KYR	Female Kyrgyz member of the Chu-Talas Commission	Bishkek	19 December 2019
10KYR	Female Kyrgyz water expert	Bishkek	18 December 2019
11KAZ	Female Kazakh member of the Chu-Talas Commission	Bishkek	18 December 2019
12KYR	Female Kyrgyz member of the Chu-Talas Commission	Bishkek	20 December 2019
13KYR	Female Kyrgyz member of the Chu-Talas Commission	Bishkek	19 December 2019
14KAZ	Male Kazakh member of the Chu-Talas Commission	Bishkek	18 December 2019
15KAZ	Male Kazakh water expert	Almaty	23 September 2019

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Rethinking the heritage of the Soviets' *blue wells*: Progressing from highly essential to unneeded

Kateřina Zäch

Materiality and heritage beyond protected pathways have been the subject of many recent debates in social sciences. Harrison (2020), for instance, mentions 'heritage as future-making practices', while Holtorf (2020) writes of a 'conservation as creative construction for the future'. In this paper, I seek to demonstrate how the materiality of everyday objects is often disregarded by conventional heritage discourses, thereby making them carriers of social memory and signposts of modernization and environmental awareness. The focus of this paper is the materiality of water pumps set up in two Kyrgyz villages during Soviet times. The pumps were water-lifting devices operated manually to withdraw water from surface sources, groundwater or reservoirs for daily use by people in the villages. They were installed in the 1950s as part of a public infrastructure project. The paper examines two small communities in rural Kyrgyzstan whose Soviet pumps are historically relevant and have played a longstanding social role. These material objects allow for more insight into the cultural heritage discourse. My increasing contemplation of materiality is tied to the fact that these Soviet pumps, which I refer to as blue wells*, are disappearing from village environments, as they have lost their practical value to their communities; however, I believe they still retain social value in the form of material heritage and as carriers of memory. The social reality and material memory of these objects (Hartog 2015) have an uncertain future. Some scholars have addressed the disintegration and evacuation of the meanings behind places, buildings or even objects, and they have also discussed the different ways of acknowledging material changes in the field of conservation and preservation (DeSilvey 2017; Pétursdóttir 2013). Yet, without a broader conception of heritage that includes everyday material objects as carriers of social memory, these objects are likely to disappear and be forgotten by those people and communities who have depended on them over many years. We can reimagine material culture as being rooted in the experiences and skills of local actors with water as part of their social lives. Taking this perspective allows us to acknowledge the underappreciated human efforts to combat the social consequences of everyday water politics. As such, this paper calls for preserving these Soviet pumps in their function as drinking water infrastructure and examining social measures connected to them. Highlighting the history of the* blue wells *may help us widen our notion of heritage and bring us closer to more critically aware ways of thinking about people, places and the relation of water to social life, moral values and social rules that are important in the preservation of memories of the past.*

Introduction

Kara-Suu and Kyzyl-Tuu are two small villages in the Naryn region of Kyrgyzstan. They are neighboring communities only a 10-minute car drive apart. In both villages, the locals are predominantly farmers, although a few people work in the public sector, mainly in governments or schools. Due to the high altitudes at which the villages sit, it is not possible for residents to grow a wide variety of vegetables and fruits, so in order to these climatic conditions, most farmers specialize in growing potatoes and wheat. The villagers also engage in pastoralism, and Kyzyl-Tuu is especially well-known in the area for raising good quality livestock.

The main body of this paper focuses on the hand-operated, cast-iron pumps (see Fig. 1) in these villages that were installed in the 1950s Soviet period as a source of drinking water. They were attached to a piped water system that supplied water to both villages. The system was built deep into the groundwater as a series of interconnected pipes, while stations above the ground gathered the pumped water. Access to better infrastructure was a high-value issue for the Soviet government, in order to provide good living conditions. Directed by the state, the economic focus during the Soviet era lay in stabilization and the support of production output, in order to promote economic growth. In the 1950s, but especially the 1960s,

rural villages received direct payments from the state to compensate their gas and water expenses, or even to cover childcare costs (McMann 2007). Likewise, construction of the water pipe system was paid by the state, and a local person was assigned to monitor it. Duties included managing the area around the water pumps and reporting any repair issues.

Fig. 1: While the *blue well* remains, it has lost its functionality

Source: Photograph taken by Zäch in Kyzyl-Tuu, 2019.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and both villages became part of the newly established Kyrgyz Republic. They continued to use their respective water pipe systems for many years; however, today, in Kyzyl-Tuu, the use of these Soviet pumps has declined and they have become less visible, because a new water system was put in place in 2017 with support from the Asian Development Bank. In Kyzyl-Tuu, the new water pipe system now facilitates easier access to water for local private households; water is fetched next to the houses on private ground. Before 2017, the pumps were situated at points throughout the village, and so locals needed to walk from their property to collect water. Nowadays, a few of these pumps still remain, because they have not been totally destroyed or have simply been left in place. Overall, in Kyzyl-Tuu (home to 320 households), approximately 50 pumps have been removed, relocated (see Fig. 2) or disassembled over the years.

The village of Kara-Suu, in turn, still depends on its pumps, and so the old system continues to operate without a set time scheduled for modernization and replacement. To date, the piped system is operated via 77 pumps servicing approximately 1,000 households.

Local actors accumulate rich memories encompassing many perspectives, including awareness of the materiality of objects (i.e. the pumps) and their place in their everyday water-related tasks and politics. The Soviet pumps in this memoryscape signify places from where water was drawn at certain points in history, where important modernization and technology developed over time and where villagers met and talked to each other. With respect to the *blue wells*, local knowledge produced about accessing and protecting water is tied to the engagement of people with these pumps. This tie constitutes the historical and current values of these pumps and suggests that the past helps understand better the present discourse on water use, availability, access and limitations. Working with micropolitics that affect the management of specific places, such water pumps also help acknowledge the technical modifications made to this equipment and understand how social practices are shaped by technologies.

Fig. 2: The *blue well* has been relocated on the edge of the street. It has lost both its functionality and its place within the community in Kyzyl-Tuu

Source: Photograph taken by Zäch in Kyzyl-Tuu, 2019.

To describe the changes that these Soviet pumps have undergone, it is necessary to acknowledge material changes embedded in the social structures that guide everyday life. Approaching materiality and sociality in the debate surrounding heritage involves various new ways of highlighting the value of these places. Regarding heritage studies, I consider the Soviet pumps as memory-making objects, with more potential points for a new field of heritage preservation in the future. By remaining attentive to water, I identified the connection between the role and hidden effects of these pumps in everyday life and clarified the points that accompany and shape memories of

how people accessed water to fulfil their daily requirements and duties (Sultana 2011).

Kyzyl-Tuu's pumps are no longer active, have been relocated and are no longer needed. In Kara-Suu, however, they are still in use, and local people go to the blue wells day after day to collect water. The pumps in Kara-Suu are usable and somehow connected to Kyzyl-Tuu's through insights and memories about their past roles, as well as the material processes they underwent and what I hypothesize will happen to these remnants of water infrastructure in the near future.

Preservation of the Soviet pumps will assist in conserving the region's heritage. In doing so, I believe it will be necessary to think about their past interwoven relationships with the people and how locals integrated them into their social life and modified specific parts of the pumps in order to restore or enhance their technical functionality. A new social and cultural scenario for them begins with exploring the process of ruination (Stoler 2013). There is an assertion tied to the Soviet pumps installed in Kyzyl-Tuu that they decayed after the new water pipe system was installed. Furthermore, the village of Kara-Suu's dependency on them remains unchanged, thereby allowing to see the dependency between people and material objects. Both cases underline the role of the pumps in forms of social life.

This paper argues that the value of these objects, in both the present and the past, should be rethought, and I examine them in order to determine if they should be preserved. The focus of this research will be on the technical modifications made to the pumps by local actors. Therefore, I will pinpoint two particular examples in this regard and discuss how they have been taken care of within their enclosed environment. Material culture tied to technical modifications may be considered of some value for water-related social life. Materiality and sociality allowed me to consider the field of heritage and ask whether, how and where these objects may be preserved for the future. Can they be preserved where they were originally installed and used for many years? Should specific spaces for conservation be considered more deeply? Answering these questions allows to determine how to preserve and conserve *blue wells* in the future. The following explorations are based on two months of field research in Kyzyl-Tuu and Kara-Suu in 2019.

Invitation to the Soviet pumps

When I started my fieldwork, I initially perceived the importance of the Soviet pumps as being somewhat devoid of life, generally viewing them as mere mechanical objects to extract groundwater. Only after further consideration I comprehend their material presence and begin to consider their value for opening up thought about a place for organizing water and being home to a diverse range of activities for everyday life. This perspective led me to think differently about the pumps, by considering how their materiality related to social life, to socialization based on rules and to the collectively perceived ideals and emotions (Durkheim 1973) that guide human perception of what is related to the history of Soviet pumps. This history combines the processes of moldering, disintegrating and readapting.

Preserving the Soviet pumps requires understanding a pump as an "object of knowledge and field of intervention" (Harrison 2015:34). Behind such a notion lies the preservation paradigm of cultural heritage motivated by conservation of the past, as defined by (Holtorf 2015). It is vital to study the politics of 'heritage processes' (Holtorf 2020:280) from the historical perspective in terms of 'presencing' the past, i.e. putting the past into the present, in order to determine how they might affect the future. This perspective on studying these water pumps underlines the importance of the preservation domain in which manifestations of the past are still relevant for opening up and taking responsibility now for the future preservation, in this instance, of the *blue wells*. It may encourage to create a new space and new infrastructure to value and conserve these objects better. However, establishing specific regimes of care for these pumps requires considering how they may be reused or preserved in the new social and cultural conditions that unfold in everyday life (Holtorf 2020). Moreover, establishing these regimes may involve a 'new heritage' view, as posited by Holtorf and Fairclough (2013) that is neither 'fixed' nor 'inherent' but emerges in dialogue among individuals, communities, practices, places, and things.

Since the late 1990s, scholars in the social sciences and humanities have sought new ways to readjust the study of the history of objects and to convey a 'return to things' (Domańska 2006). Ewa Domańska (2006), for example, emphasizes the agency of objects, while Jane Bennett (2004) dis-

cusses the concept of 'thing-power' in materialism, which counts items as more than simple passive objects. Bennett (2004) writes that an object's power of life should not be ignored, and materials have an inclination toward being constantly engaged. 'Thing-power' applies to an item "by virtue of its operating in conjunction with other things" (Bennett 2004:354). Speaking of a 'return to things,' Domańska (2006) states that objects not only exist, but also become incorporated as active parts of a social life. From her perspective, there is relevance in the way objects act and maintain a particular relation to people. In this respect, I describe social life and the fact that water takes precedence in culture. As such, I find the material beauty of the Soviet pumps an insistent invitation for investigation into materiality and social life with water, and I narrow down specific parts of the pumps that are not usually mentioned in the same breath. I draw particularly on their robust metallic surface, whose technically derived parts help people operate them – and which can be seen as both beautiful and legitimate.

During the fieldwork, I became increasingly interested in analyzing the material culture of water and how it relates to people. I also studied it as a manifestation of human subjective experiences while living with the Soviet pumps. To conduct fieldwork effectively, it is necessary to develop synergy between observations and people's perceptions (Nora 1989), albeit always within the scope of the research. Such ethnographic fieldwork accentuates local knowledge and meaningful interpretations of local people's memories (Nora 1989). In this regard, it becomes crucial to facilitate debate regarding cooperation between scholars and local actors (Anyon, Ferguson 1995; Marshall 2002; Silberman 2015). Enabling this collaboration may promote understanding of social livelihoods in rural communities, as well as how local actors effectively communicate their current concerns (Merill et al. 1993). The instrumental role of these pumps in rural communities is referred to as one of the most outstanding elements of the modernization process related to Soviet-era water infrastructure. In this sense, I see a need to write about the Soviet pumps' value since their installation, as well as about how the installation changed the everyday lives of local villagers. This imbues them with a place of value in a locally embedded history and a particular social relationship, namely that of meeting while collecting water, caring for a pump and clearing the environment around it. Moreover, it is a material object that allows me to think about the material processes and changes related to the pumps as well as other aspects I observed during my fieldwork, or through certain explanations that were shared by local residents.

Heritages: Processes of becoming heritage

Anne Pyburn (2018:716) states that Kyrgyzstan contains a heritage of "cultural complexity and diversity". Moreover, Pyburn argues, the Central Asian region offers different ways in which the complexity of its cultural and historical contexts, i.e. "a heritage of ferocious cosmopolitanism" (Pyburn 2018:711), is ordered. Soviet history and thinking about cultural heritage have been discussed by scholars to highlight the results of nomadic everyday life (Khazanov 1984) and its traditional felt-making practices (Bunn 2010), in order to portray cultural boundaries (Scott 2017) or to investigate the heritage of Silk Road trade (Pyburn 2018). In the interface between materiality and sociality, the micropolitics of how locals' knowledge is integrated into the management of particular places may be tied closely to social processes (Bunn 2011).

Such an approach to the local environment embedded in everyday practices is rooted and performed in line with nature (Humphrey, Onon 1996; Vitebsky 2002). Furthermore, Ruggles and Silverman (2009) highlight the ICOMOC Florence Charter (1982), in which the heritage of natural resources is underscored by historical value. They argue that this also includes water and the surrounding environment in the entirety of the material. Bunn (2010) also reflects on 'harmony with nature', in that humans' entanglement with nature is evident from the way in which they are affected within and by the surrounding environment.

In recent years, the increased preservation of new forms of material mnemonics has prompted a discussion around integrating everyday objects into cultural landscapes in the field of heritage studies (Pétursdóttir 2013). DeSilvey (2017) highlights the temporal character of materials and asks what lessons we can glean from the past, in order to understand better our present and future. Her thoughts about valuing the material past apply to places that "extend […] beyond cultural frames of reference, and inviting in other agencies and other narrative forms" (DeSilvey 2017:6). In her book Curated Decay (2017) she discusses the

processes of material dissolution and disintegration. She looks at ecological and chemical processes that have produced effect leading to ruination. Drawing on new materialist approaches in heritage studies, Pétursdóttir (2013:43) calls for a shift toward "an active but non-intrusive acceptance of objects in their remote otherness", in which the ethics of objects or materiality in their otherness, such as ruination, is grounded. In addition, Pétursdóttir (2013) introduces a case study on the ruins of herring factories in Iceland to highlight their value to the nation's modernization process and their independent and economic viability during the first half of the 20th century. In her work, the disused herring factories may be understood as "an evolving and dynamic context in [their] own right" (Pétursdóttir 2014:338). Lingering in their corroding state, these industrial units become matter out of place in the Icelandic ideological context (Pétursdóttir 2013:33). Thus, they provided a space for reflection on their historical use or cultural meaning in heritage discourses.

Likewise, ongoing theoretical debates call for a new understanding of cultural heritage. Holtorf (2020) turns his attention to the investigation of heritage in terms of how it defines traditions and memories as an entire way of everyday life and collective identity. Rather than being owned by one or more individuals, most cultural heritage focuses collectively on what people are able and allowed to do; in this sense, their actions are often spiritual and integral to collective identities. Hodder (2010) expresses concerns about the kinds of social relations that are produced in everyday life, with or between objects, monuments, environments and places. Harrison (2013), in the meantime, argues for more active integration of future changes in heritage management, clarifying how certain objects may surface in the present with new values that are no longer tied to the past. As such, a regular review is of considerable value, to see whether heritage reconciles the needs of future generations from a contemporary viewpoint. Harrison (2012) also recognizes how cultural responses connect objects to people and thereby reveal a variety of aesthetic, social and political judgments that produce different cultural values.

It therefore follows that there is no universal category of value for how and which objects, places and practices should be conserved according to heritage-making and heritage management processes. The criteria for preservation are thus culturally determined (Harrison 2013). The discussion about heritage goes beyond what is high-value vs. what is low-value and cannot be applied to the present only; instead, it requires an act of reorientation to take responsibility "*in* and *for* the future" (Harrison 2015:35). Furthermore, if cultural heritage is actively cultivated, more discussions on the forms of heritage and the sustainable production of social memory are required. It is vital to explore how everyday life is considered generative, in order to understand how material objects were appreciated in the past but are not in the present.

Here, I see a fundamental point for defining cultural heritage, as Hodder (2003:66) shows insufficient scrutiny in terms of more in-depth analysis of what is "the local". However, this point needs further development, in order to question the disintegration or decay of particular material objects. What are the standards and measures for preserving and conserving Soviet pumps, and how and where should they best be preserved? Considering the aim to define heritage, Hodder (2010) opens up a debate regarding how people participated in the past, how they are connected to various objects and identities and how capable they are in terms of accessing, performing or appreciating being part of the process. Theoretical heritage debates increasingly emphasize people's subjective experiences, along with the cultural aspects of heritage (Nora 1989; Ruggles, Silverman 2009). Kopytoff (1986:66), for instance, suggests accommodating "biographies of things" in shaping memories and representations of the past, as well as acknowledging long, mutual and multiple processes between people and objects (Hoskins 1998; see also Appadurai 1986). Returning to Kopytoff (1986), he offers a relevant question in 'biographies of things' discussion: "How does the object's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?" (Kopytoff 1986:67). In addition, the decay of some items is caught up in social practice, thus helping scholars understand local communities that use them every day as part of their lives. Thus, social practice is a worthwhile criterion to consider when thinking about historical preservation.

Calling for a way to identify cultural heritage undermines certain pathways to learning about objects' historical significance (see also Thomas 1991) as well as the social interaction between them and people (Gell 1998; Gosden, Marshall

1999). In Hodder's view (2012), this entails a mutual interlinkage, as people depend on objects that in return depend on the people using them to live, form, produce and fulfill all manner of additional activities and practices in their social life. Sven Ouzman (2006:277) suggests that objects retain "the right to a life history, agency, and home". Therefore, I believe we need to recognize an outcome that will help see that, in Ouznam's view, objects are part of social life. As described above, cultural heritage discourse depends on the subjective human perspective, which emerges as a means of creating cultural memories of objects in everyday life. It also indicates relations and meaning between people and objects. Moreover, and in the same way in which cultural memories are produced, it is helpful to reference a particular time in which that meaning is seen as inevitable for the significance of heritage.

Embodied memories beyond everyday life and water

In 1991, Kyrgyzstan's independence placed the villages of Kyzyl-Tuu and Kara-Suu in a new light, due to failed attempts to improve their water infrastructure. Informants from both villages lamented the failure to fulfil the dream of modernizing water access within a reasonable time frame. Looking back on my data from Kyzyl-Tuu and Kara-Suu in 2019, I observe that people had little infrastructural support from local political representatives, due to a lack of finances. The villages have long sought the financial means needed for replacing the old water pipe system, which may be the fundamental point that led local actors to take on new ways of thinking about what could be done in this regard. A lack of financial means prevented the Soviet piped water system from being replaced as quickly as many residents wished, and in many rural villages, such as Kara-Suu, this dream is yet to become reality.

I do not believe that makeshift style changes made to the pumps display a lack of care on the side of the inhabitants – they are merely due to a lack of resources. The improved materiality of the pumps created potential and constraints in allowing new things to be seen as relating to the people. Furthermore, practical skills applied to the pumps heightened their technical efficiency, and purposeful modifications were undertaken by locals. When reflecting on the changes that have been made to the pumps, scholars are stepping through a new window of thinking about cultural heritage in which all technical transformations of the pump illustrate how its past was materialized, or is taking place in the present for the future (Harrison 2012; Holtorf 2020).

All accompanied transformations played a part in orchestrating how local actors organized themselves in their social lives and established their relations with the Soviet pumps (see Fig. 3). The term 'entanglement' captures the ways in which local folk rely on the pumps to ensure water supply while pinpointing social constraints leading to new pathways. In this vein, I agree with Hodder's view (2012) on a mutual interlinkage between people and objects. As the author states, people are tied to objects, and, in return, objects depend on people using them to live, form, produce and fulfill all ranges of additional activities and practices in their lives. One of these activities involves repairing and furthering their usage in everyday life.

Fig. 3: *Blue well* reinstalled into a tap system
Source: Photograph taken by Zäch in Kyzyl-Tuu, 2019.

Figure 3 shows the efforts expended by local actors and illustrates how they think about technicalities as well as the limitations and possibilities of pumping water to the surface. The photograph shows a pump that gained new life through the installation of a tap, after the original handle had been removed. The introduction of the tap enhanced the pump's efficiency and saved water. Figure 3 shows a circular cement platform on which people stand to operate the pump. This platform needs to be cared for and cleaned on a regular basis, including ice and snow removal in winter. This area is still looked after today by the community.

The handle was the pump's most sensible component. Inappropriate movements would easily result in the pump being broken, and without the

handle, it was impossible to operate it. Therefore, the residents made permittable, suitable material modifications. Figure 4 illustrates a pump where the water outlet has been extended through a soft metallic part installed in front of the outlet to narrow the water flow, thereby saving water. The handle has been replaced with a carefully selected robust metal, fit in such a way that the movement that pulls the water up requires more power. This enables children to play with the handle while ensuring that no damage will be caused. The reshaped handle eliminated the risks of destroying the pump and allowed it to continue providing water.

Fig. 4: *Blue well* with a modified handle and water outlet

Source: Photograph taken by Zách in Kyzyl-Tuu, 2019.

Both villages also had pumps that had not been materially altered since their installation during the Soviet era. Nevertheless, once they ceased working after becoming outmoded or irreparably broken, they were finally replaced in 2017. Recognizing the pumps' current ineffectiveness (see Fig. 5) leads scholars to think about the physical presence of still being embedded in an environment in which they were previously useful, but now they need preservation to survive. In this sense, I found that in relation to the Soviet pumps, heritage is deeply entangled with relationship experiences and practical skills, and it needs to be understood as a series of material practices created by people to retain an object's effectiveness. Their preservation is connected in accordance with Appadurai's (1986) meaning of the 'social life of things', which, in our attempt to preserve objects, we must use to examine past roles. In essence, this refers to the meaning that objects hold for people at the local level and how they retain them in the efficient mode of functioning – all of which act as a key to understanding the relevance to people of specific objects, as well as their effects and changes. As Appadurai (1986) writes, objects should not be divorced from the human capacity to act; instead, they need to be understood as being enmeshed in social life. In this way, cultural heritage is specific to certain historical occurrences and local conditions in terms of managing water for everyday life, and rather than order a new part for the pump, people developed a local knowledge of practical skills and gained experience with materials. Past social practices have been brought back by reusing the pumps, and people's efforts in and long-term experiences of efficiently modifying them align with this development (see Figs. 3 and 4).

One of my informants, a local resident from Kyzyl-Tuu, told me that all technical adaptations installed on the pump involved a process of familiarizing oneself with the relevant technical issues, trying to understand how the pump worked and then thinking about possibilities for improvement. When the first pumps were broken and had not been repaired within a short period of time, local residents rethought their technical skills in improving the pumps by themselves. This underlines the value that local actors place on the pumps and their desire to support the community.

What became apparent to me was effort mirrored in the technical improvements regarding the important task of finding a solution for the whole community. Working with the materials of collectively used objects led me to observe the shared attitude of people toward these objects. All technical modifications to the pumps reflected people's interactions with these objects – shaped by their skills, the availability of certain materials and their lack of financial means. Activities of disuse caused by a pump being taken out of function do not necessarily diminish its ongoing cultural significance. In relation to the decay of the Soviet pumps, I need to stress that they have an enduring meaning, as locals still use them to extract water – as is currently the case in Kara-Suu. The pumps are in a shoddy material state and some parts have been removed, but they are still functional.

Whether "things-for-us" (Introna 2009:30) are considered as culturally informed may be relevant to whether they are culturally endowed with specific meaning within communities. According to Kopytoff (1986), what makes us feel culturally informed is dependent on how and from what perspective we view an object. A local resident shared his memories in relation to the important

societal role the *blue wells* play: "For 23 years of my life, I walked to the *blue well* to get water. The water was not free, and we had an obligation to the community to keep [it] and the area around [it] clean. The children were not allowed to play with the individual parts [of the well]. Parents were obliged to educate their children [about] how they were expected to behave [at the well] when collecting the water" (Interview, Kateřina Zách, 2019, Kyzyl-Tuu).

Fig. 5: *Blue well* in Kyzyl-Tuu
Source: Photograph taken by Zách in Kyzyl-Tuu, 2019.

I would claim that heritage can be understood as human memories collectively defining how people behave and treat the Soviet pumps in their everyday lives. In the realm of value, the *blue wells* also had an educational effect on people during Soviet times. The clean area around the pumps was seen as a place of duty, where individuals were tasked with preserving the pump and, consequently, the water. In this way, residents fulfilled their moral and social obligations toward society. Seemingly, all social practices have to be considered as a dynamic collective entity that provides people with a sense of belonging, as meeting at the Soviet pumps was a focal point for everyday village life – and something that continues in Kara-Suu to this day. Similarly, I recognized that the pumps embodied practical skills regarding how people fetched water from them in the most convenient way.

As described above, people tended to educate their children as to how they should behave at these places, and in this way, the Soviet pumps have more historical significance than scholars might assume at first glance. These pumps are still used in everyday life in Kara-Suu, and people seemingly feel obliged to teach their children about water and the accompanying social practices in relation to how it should be retrieved. The historical significance of the pumps thus extends into the present by prolonging their operating life through technological modification and the passing on of social duties necessary for their maintenance and use.

The value of these Soviet pumps may be situated historically in a particular context, as they are material objects, metallic, bounded by material practices, representative of a mutual relationship between people and objects and culturally important for the behavioral tasks that are motivated by strong water-use ethics within these communities. Moreover, they are as much about objects as they are about the people who use them. In my view, they characterize an assemblage of practices embodied in everyday life, as they reflect human ideas around transformed materialities and live on in the collective memories in anticipation of new material practices concerning water.

Conclusion

In this paper, I turned to the assertion that scholars have paid little attention to Soviet pumps as objects of cultural heritage. I presumed that pumps in Kara-Suu will be removed once the financial funds to provide a new piped water system has been secured. In this vein, they are in an unstable position in the current environment, as they are overlooked and in danger of disappearing from the local village entirely. The disappearance of Soviet pumps has become integral to political decisions, thereby allowing me to analyze and conceptualize their relation to local actors.

In a more profound sense, I sought to demonstrate that the preservation of Soviet pumps begins with the debate about including local actors and their communities' collective memories (Silberman 2015) regarding the objects that they use daily, such as water pumps. Memories related to such objects shape heritage-making in the field of everyday water politics, and they are based on people's experiences and values as they change over time (Harrison 2012). Harrison (2020) emphasizes material practices, particularly the contexts that anticipate what he calls 'distant futures' in the present. Nevertheless, I suggest that these *blue wells* should be taken into consideration for historical appreciation. In the current situation, they have been replaced, destroyed or removed, and they may have already lost their relevance in terms of being preserved for the benefit of future generations.

To see heritage as ongoing changes in conservation, we must carefully list social measures concerning the kinds of objects that need to be protected, according to critical heritage studies. We must also remain interested in those objects lacking interventions in the form of protection or conservation.

In this paper, I explored a series of material modifications made to Soviet pumps as key influences that come as part of the modern effects of water on social life. Materialities represent the development of local actors' technical skills, as well as their collective identity, in an effort to move towards new opportunities to improve life and living standards for other people in the community. Fundamental to the value of these Soviet pumps, their meaning is linked to the material culture of the pumps, which is closely tied to all ranges of technical adaptations that have been made to the pumps in recent years. All of these meanings emerged from the daily social practices that renegotiated the process of using the object. This was done in close connection with local actors' ideas on how the parts may be reproduced or replaced to make the pumps more sustainable. Remodification of the Soviet pump, as illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4, is shaped by residents' skills to satisfy collective needs, which I perceived herein as caring for the community.

Exploring the Soviet pumps engenders a range of heterogeneous elements – people, practices, economic means and political apparatus – together with the Soviet pumps, as they function and affect everyday life in various ways. Besides, it is interesting to think about how these pumps are bound up with people and how they both are implicated in the process known as everyday life. For this reason, I suggested taking into consideration local voices and how they are concerned with local policy-making and political, ecological, social and economic issues of a specific time within the community. While acknowledging the pumps' key roles within the community as a whole set of relations (Harrison 2012), I argue for an increased emphasis on recognizing the cultural heritage of *blue wells* in the fields of material culture and the processes of socialization. I suggest preserving the Soviet pumps so they can keep their historical role and social meaning, which cannot simply be cut off and then disappear from everyday life or be erased from the past. By valuing and appreciating Soviet pumps according to the ideas introduced in this paper, I hope to encourage a better understanding of sustainable values in similar long-term cultural heritage situations.

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The "failure" of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan? A postcapitalist critique of a biased narrative

Ottavia Cima

After Kyrgyzstan's independence from the Soviet Union, international development agencies promoted the establishment of service and marketing cooperatives in the agricultural sector. However, the dominant narrative claims that cooperatives of this type in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in other postsocialist countries, have failed. This apparent failure is commonly explained by the legacies of the past socialist regime. This paper questions such narrative and causality highlights their problematic consequences. I first present the narrative as it is reproduced by scholars, development actors, governmental representatives and farmers. I then turn to scholars of postdevelopment, post capitalism and postsocialism to set the theoretical basis for the deconstruction and critique of the narrative of failed cooperatives. On this basis, I argue that the narrative is part of a broader hegemonic discourse on development and on the economy. I conclude by sketching a postcapitalist approach to building alternative representations of cooperatives and cooperation in Kyrgyzstan and beyond it.

Introduction

After the end of the Soviet Union, international development agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank supported the establishment of formal institutions for community-based cooperation in several postsocialist[1] countries, including Kyrgyzstan. Such institutions included, for instance, water users' associations (Sehring 2009; Soliev et al. 2017; Theesfeld 2019), pasture users' associations (Baerlein et al. 2015; Dörre 2015) as well as agricultural service and marketing cooperatives or, in short, service cooperatives (Lerman, Sedik 2014). However, several scholars, including the ones just mentioned, state that institutions of this kind were often unsuccessful in these contexts. In particular, it seems that they rarely managed to implement effective rules for the sustainable management of natural resources or mechanisms to support farmers in accessing services and markets. Scholars often explain these difficulties by pointing to the legacies of socialist regimes, insisting on the persistent discrepancy between formal policies and informal institutional arrangements, and the continual predominance of the latter (Sehring 2009; Theesfeld 2019). Many also point to a widespread inherited distrust of formal institutions and of people more generally, resulting in a lack of social capital (Gerkey 2013; Kaminska 2010).

In the particular case of agricultural cooperatives in postsocialist countries, some scholars suggest that farmers' experience within socialist production collectives (*kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*) – both also called *kooperativ* in Russian – today represents a persistent referent for farmers' representations of cooperatives (Gardner, Lerman 2006). This referent, they maintain, constitutes an obstacle to the understanding and acceptance by farmers of the principles of service cooperatives, a model of cooperative where, in contrast to the collective production on socialist farms, farmers produce separately but join together to market their produce and to access specific services. Gardner and Lerman, two agricultural economists known as specialists in the transformation of the agricultural sector in postsocialist countries (see Lerman et al. 2004), claim for instance, borrowing the words of a study by the Plunkett Foundation, that „the use of the word 'cooperative' in Central and Eastern Europe will not only create the wrong impression, it will also create barriers to progress. The old style of cooperative or collective has no relevance in the new free-market approach" (Gardner, Lerman 2006:5). The authors argue further that „among many of the rural population [… there is] a strong psychological resistance to cooperation, bred from years of abuse of the whole concept by socialist regimes" (Gardner, Lerman 2006:5).

Such ideas (and even turns of phrase) about the negative legacies of the socialist past not only appear regularly in publications on agricultural transformation after socialism (Lipton 2009; Theesfeld 2019); they also emerged in my interactions with

[1] The category "postsocialist" has been questioned (Müller 2019) and will be discussed later. It is still used in this paper to refer to countries of the former Soviet Union and in Central and Eastern Europe that experienced a Soviet or Soviet-inspired regime before 1989/1991.

different actors in Kyrgyzstan. Similarly, the distinction between the "old style" of cooperatives (meaning the socialist farms) and the "modern" cooperatives (meaning the model of service cooperatives promoted by international agencies after the end of the socialist regimes) is recurrent in publications and in verbal interactions. The second type of cooperative is presented as the only "proper", "true" and desirable type, while the first is dismissed and stigmatized as a "pseudo" (Theesfeld 2019) or "improper" application of the cooperative principles.

In this paper[2] I question the narrative of failed community-based cooperation in postsocialist countries for the specific case of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan, and highlight its problematic consequences. I first describe how not only scholars but also development workers, governmental actors and farmers reproduce and internalize this narrative. I discuss how its internalization by these actors produces a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness, in addition to limiting the possibilities for supporting and expanding effective and inclusive cooperation practices. I then turn to scholars of postdevelopment, postcapitalism and postsocialism to set the theoretical basis for the deconstruction and critique of the narrative. On this basis, I will argue that the narrative of failed cooperatives is part of a broader hegemonic discourse on development and on the economy that imposes a normative teleology and marginalizes local knowledge and experience. In particular, I will show that the idea that cooperatives have failed is constructed in relation to a specific understanding of success, i.e. a limited and narrow definition of a "true" cooperative but also of "development" or "progress". I conclude by sketching an approach to building alternative representations of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan that would not only allow a better grasp of the complexity of local realities, but would also nurture a more hopeful perspective on postsocialist ruralities, which suffer from a double stigmatization as postsocialist and as ruralities (Kay et al. 2012).

Agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan: a narrative of failure

As a consequence of the decollectivisation process in the 1990s, the agricultural sector in several postsocialist countries is highly fragmented today (Lerman, Sedik 2014, Fig. 1). In Kyrgyzstan, most of the agricultural production originates from private smallholdings with an average plot size of 3 hectares (Lerman, Sedik 2009). Farmers face the typical challenges for smallholders, which concern access to markets for agricultural inputs, to marketing channels for agricultural outputs, to machinery, information, credit and insurance (Abele, Frohberg 2003). International analysts, in particular agricultural economists, have supported the establishment of cooperatives as a solution to the challenges produced by the decollectivisation process (Deininger 1995; Lerman 2013).

Fig. 1: Fragmented plots in the Issyk-Kul province

Source: Picture by the author.

The International Co-operative Alliance defines a cooperative as „an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise" (ICA 2019). The model proposed by analysts for the agricultural sector in postsocialist countries is the service cooperative: individual farmers maintain their private production and cooperate with other farmers for the joint marketing of their produce, the joint purchase of agricultural inputs or for financial services. Service cooperatives are widely known in Western economies, where they emerged from the individualized

[2] I am grateful to Paulina Simkin and Matthias Schmidt for organising and hosting the workshop "Transformations after the transformation" in Augsburg in February 2020: this paper is a revised version of my presentation at the workshop. I thank Matthias Schmidt, Michael Spies, Rune Steenberg and Lucie Sovová for their comments on an earlier version of the paper.

marketing strategies of farmers as a way to reinforce their private farming enterprises. This model differs from the model of production cooperatives where, on the basis of a collectivist vision, the means of production are pooled or collectively owned, and farmers carry out agricultural production collectively. The most notorious example of production cooperatives are socialist agricultural collectives such as the Soviet *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*. However, these examples can hardly be considered cooperatives in the sense advanced by ICA, since usually membership was not free but imposed, and internal governance was controlled from the top down.

In their academic publications and policy reports on the agricultural sector after socialism (which inform policymaking by local governments) and based on often implicit assumptions about the primacy of the neoliberal capitalist economic model, analysts tend to present service cooperatives as the only desirable and viable type of cooperative (Deininger 1995; Gardner, Lerman 2006). They build a neat opposition between service cooperatives and production cooperatives. The model of production cooperatives is usually equated with socialist agricultural collectives and is therefore dismissed as an improper application of the cooperative principles that „has no relevance in the new free-market approach" (Gardner, Lerman 2006:5). Other, more democratic, examples of agricultural cooperatives (Agarwal 2010) do not appear in these considerations: this omission suggests in fact that what has no relevance in the free market is the collectivist vision that underpins the model of production cooperatives more generally.

The topic of agricultural cooperatives gained visibility in Kyrgyzstan in the 2000s, when international donors integrated the promotion of service cooperatives into their rural development programs (Beishenaly, Namazova 2012). These activities included the establishment of special credit funds for cooperatives, information campaigns about the structure and functioning of cooperatives, and support provided to the government in the revision of the legislation on cooperatives. Although the number of registered cooperatives boomed in those years, today many scholars and development actors claim that cooperatives did not succeed in the country (Lerman, Sedik 2013; Rijsoort, Berg 2012). These accounts suggest that in many cases farmers registered a cooperative only as a way to access the special credit schemes and without reconfiguring their agricultural practices according to the cooperative principles (Beishenaly, Namazova 2012).

The explanation of the assumed failure of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan put forward by scholars reproduces the recurrent argument that some kind of legacy from the socialist past is the cause of the difficulties in implementing community-based cooperation in postsocialist countries. The explanation provided by foreign and local development workers, governmental representatives, local authorities as well as farmers and villagers I met while conducting fieldwork[3] in Kyrgyzstan reproduces the same argument. Most of my interlocutors stated that the attempts to establish agricultural cooperatives in the country have been unsuccessful, that most of the registered cooperatives today exist only "on paper" and that the Soviet past is somehow responsible for this failure.

Development workers insisted on the distinction between the two models of cooperatives. In their narratives, service cooperatives are the "modern" cooperatives, the only "true" ones and the only ones worthy of support. Production cooperatives, on the other hand, represent the past and the "Soviet style": they should therefore be avoided at any cost and forgotten as quickly as possible. According to this category of actors, the failure of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan derives from a misunderstanding of and a lack of knowledge about the concept of cooperative amongst the local population. They maintain that this, in turn, is a problem originating in the Soviet past: because farmers (and governmental actors the like) refer to the Soviet model of agricultural collectives, they are unable to understand the "true" model of cooperative and therefore cannot recognize its advantages. Moreover, the argumentation continues, because farmers remember the negative experiences with Soviet *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*, they are mistrustful of any form of cooperative and are not ready to engage with other models of cooperative that would facilitate their work and increase their revenues.

If one discusses cooperatives with governmental actors or farmers in Kyrgyzstan, one will quickly confirm that both indeed lack knowledge about the

[3] Fieldwork took place between 2013 and 2017; expenses were covered by the Fonds de recherche du Centenaire of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, and by the research budget of the Geography Unit of the same university. My acknowledgments go to both.

definition and classification of cooperatives. On several occasions, I asked civil servants what type of cooperative governmental programs wish to promote. My questions usually resulted in awkward moments of misunderstanding: my interlocutors did not understand my questions and offered what seemed to me random answers. Similarly, when asked about local cooperatives, villagers provided confusing answers: they mentioned some development projects, some small enterprises that individual villagers established recently, or the private activities of the chairpersons of a registered cooperative.

Despite this confusion about definitions, governmental actors and villagers too reproduce the idea that cooperatives have failed in the country. The former lament the lack of available resources to realize the governmental programs for the promotion of cooperatives. They point simultaneously to the lack of understanding about cooperatives among farmers as well as to their passivity and laziness. Farmers themselves, in turn, complain that their fellow villagers (and sometimes they themselves too) have inherited an attitude of passivity and laziness; they see this attitude as part of a generalized "Kyrgyz mentality" that was exacerbated by their Soviet experience. According to my interlocutors, this inherited attitude makes people individualistic and reluctant to cooperate with others.

These insights reveal that the narrative of failed cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan not only produces unquestioned absolute dichotomies between service cooperatives and production cooperatives, as well as between the (Soviet) past and the (modern/Western) future; it also stigmatizes the local population as backward, as trapped in a "mentality" that makes them passive and lazy, and that results in the series of "lacks" (of knowledge, understanding, engagement) that are assumed to be the cause of the failure of cooperatives. This narrative generates a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness among villagers, who internalize the idea that they are inadequate for "modernity" and therefore incapable of achieving the status of being "developed". In the next section I turn to three items of scholarship that have revealed how similar narratives produce similar mechanisms in contexts as diverse as the deindustrializing Global North, development programs in the Global South, and reform programs in postsocialist countries (that some have called the Global East, Müller 2020). The reflections on these academic endeavors will allow us to understand where this narrative originates, as well as to start drawing up alternative representations.

Subjects of postdevelopment, postcapitalism and postsocialism

The production of polarized binaries is a typical process of the developmentalist discourse denounced by postdevelopment scholars as far back as the 1990s (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Pigg 1992). The developmentalist discourse presents development as a linear, predefined path towards a specific type of modernity – a modernity that corresponds to the ideal of Western market economies and liberal democracies – while dismissing local practices in the Global South as backward. Rooted in this teleology, development programs often reproduce the very categories of developed and undeveloped – and of the First World versus the Third World (Cima 2015). Development cannot exist without its Other; subjects in the Global South are thus discursively trapped in a negative position, defined by their lack of development.

Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham, writing under the joint pen name of Gibson-Graham, have built on the reflections of postdevelopment scholars and noted that the economic sphere is seen as the key for "development" in other spheres, for instance in the social or the political sphere (Gibson et al. 2010; Gibson-Graham 2005). Furthermore, the focus of development programs on the economic sphere usually concerns specific kinds of activities, namely formalized, productive and entrepreneurial activities (see Kim et al. 2018 for the case of Kyrgyzstan). More generally, Gibson-Graham (2006b:6) have argued that dominant representations of the economy are „capitalocentric": they are biased because „other forms of economy are […] understood primarily with reference to capitalism". Not only is the economic sphere usually valued more than other spheres, but also only specific kinds of economic activity are usually considered to be legitimate parts of the economy: formalized, monetized and mainly capitalist activities including wage labor, commodity transactions on markets and private enterprises. The countless other practices that people carry out in the pursuit of their livelihoods are too often defined in relation to capitalism, as capitalism's Other. One example is care work in the household, which is mostly unpaid and informal, and is commonly understood as pertaining to a "reproduction sphere" that is defined in opposition to a "production sphere".

Gibson-Graham (2006a) have further argued that these biased representations of the economy are problematic not only because they overlook entire dimensions of social life but also because they produce feelings of lack and inadequacy. Their observations emerged in the 1990s in the Global North, where entire towns, regions or countries and their populations were suffering the material and emotional consequences of deindustrialization: unemployment, insecure livelihoods, lack of prospects for the future. Because of the dominant capitalocentric representations, losing one's job meant not only facing the material difficulties linked to losing a source of revenue; it also meant losing the main signifier of one's identity, the main element through which one's identity is defined (Gibson-Graham 2006b). These mechanisms are characteristic of late capitalism to this day (see also Fisher 2009). As a way to counter them, and to nurture more positive representations, Gibson-Graham (2006a) suggest a postcapitalist perspective that strips capitalism of its privilege as the default model, and instead recognizes the plurality of the economic practices that make up an economic system and that can define multiple, sometimes more positive, identities.

I suggest that the processes described by postdevelopment and postcapitalist scholars are particularly relevant in postsocialist contexts. As recently observed by Müller (2019), even the adjective that is commonly used to refer to these contexts – "postsocialist" – reveals a fixation with the past, a backward-looking stance that „buttresses a continued exoticisation of the East as Other and backward, 'defining the present in terms of its past'" (Müller 2019:539, quoting Sakwa 1999:3). Indeed, the temporal prefix in the term "postsocialism" traps entire societies in the determinations of one specific past experience – an experience that has negative connotations in the dominant representation. These determinations produce specific subject positions (of individuals but also of entire groups and territories) that are defined in the negative, as lacking something, as no longer being socialist and not yet being modern/capitalist.

Like the subjects of development, defined by their lack of modernity, and the unemployed ex-workers in deindustrializing contexts, defined by their lack of wage labor, "postsocialist" subjects are defined in the negative by their lack of both socialism and capitalism/modernity. They are trapped until further notice in an interstitial space, in-between, unable to move and look forward (Müller 2020). Like the subjects of development and late capitalism, "postsocialist" subjects are filled with feelings of abandonment, frustration and failure. Moreover, their local experience, knowledge and epistemologies are devalued and neglected and, therefore, rarely inform the policies and programs that are designed to support the "development" of postsocialist regions (Müller 2021).

A hegemonic discourse on cooperatives, development and the economy

Several scholars, especially among anthropologists, have emphasized the importance of informal economic practices in postsocialist contexts (Ledeneva 1998; Morris, Polese 2013). Sabates-Wheeler (2004) has highlighted the fact that informal cooperation, for instance in the form of spontaneous groupings of farmers, is very widespread in rural Kyrgyzstan and that it is crucial for the agricultural sector (this is confirmed by Lerman 2013). Botoeva (2015) has meticulously described how Kyrgyzstani villagers base their livelihoods on systems of cooperation and exchange that are often informal, sometimes monetized and sometimes not. These observations suggest that the statements about a lack of cooperation in the country are at least partial and counter the argument, mentioned above, that social capital is generally absent in postsocialist contexts.

During my stays in rural Kyrgyzstan, I observed that villagers conduct several agricultural activities collectively, though not mainly in the framework of a formalized cooperative (see Cima 2020). For instance, some villagers cultivate the land of their relatives who have moved to the capital city, who in exchange receive fresh products from the village. Some help their relatives and friends for the most labor-intensive tasks and are then helped in turn with similar tasks (Fig. 2). Some join their plots for one agricultural season, sharing the field tasks. Some join others to buy agricultural inputs or to contact a merchant who will buy their produce. Some, sometimes, mobilize the framework of a formal cooperative to gain quick access to specific resources, such as loans or agricultural inputs. These activities are flexible and adaptive. Although they are mostly not formalized, they are regulated through well-established reciprocal expectations and obligations. Through these forms of cooperation, villagers are able to adapt their agricultural production through flexible asset pooling and, sometimes, to take advantage of economies of scale

in production, and of increased bargaining power on agricultural markets.

Fig. 2: Sharing labor-intensive tasks with relatives and friends
Source: Picture by the author.

The variable and flexible collective practices just described clearly do not correspond to the narrow definition of cooperatives as formalized service cooperatives. Moreover, since farmers often engage in some forms of collective production even when they are part of a formal service cooperative (Lerman 2013; Sabates-Wheeler 2007), few of the existing cooperatives can be accepted as "true" cooperatives according to the definition advanced by analysts and development actors. Hence comes the idea of failure. Furthermore, in their statements, analysts and development actors usually consider only cooperation practices happening within formal institutions (i.e. within registered cooperatives). They thus ignore the existing practices of informal cooperation here. What is more striking and more significant is that farmers themselves downplay the value of informal cooperation when they state that today they conduct all their agricultural activities individually – even if in their everyday lives they are deeply intertwined in reciprocity and solidarity networks with their relatives, friends and neighbors. [4]

The biases of the narrative are even deeper than this. Comparing it with the evidence of widespread cooperation practices in rural Kyrgyzstan from a postdevelopment and postcapitalist perspective reveals that this narrative is rooted in a hegemonic discourse about development and the economy. The idea that cooperatives have failed is constructed in relation to a limited definition of success, which in turn is defined in relation to a limited definition of development and of what actually constitutes the economy. First, the model of service cooperatives promoted by analysts and development agencies implicitly considers only a specific kind of economic activity as relevant: namely the production of cash crops for marketing. Service cooperatives are in fact supposed to support farmer-entrepreneurs to expand their private production and improve its marketing. This vision fails to take into account that an important part of agricultural production in Kyrgyzstani villages is used for private consumption within households or as exchange goods within relations of reciprocity (Light 2015).

Secondly, the reactions of disorientation by villagers and governmental actors to my questions reported above suggest that many of them really lack knowledge about the different cooperative models as defined by scholars. However, this represents only one specific type of knowledge among many others. Our misunderstanding suggests that the distinction between different types of formal cooperatives is a distinction that does not make much sense for local actors, in a context where the majority of agricultural activities – and of collective practices – are not formalized. Who and what activities are formally part of a cooperative seems less relevant for farmers than knowing who is involved in a specific activity and who is part of his/her personal networks. The dominant narrative in fact privileges a specific form of knowledge, while devaluing other local forms.

Finally, the model of the cooperative promoted by international agencies in Kyrgyzstan postulates a specific teleology that assumes a specific kind of modernity as the goal of "development" or "progress". As noted above for the developmentalist discourse, this modernity corresponds to the ideal of Western market economies and liberal democracies. Service cooperatives here represent a tool to support the establishment of private, market-oriented cash cropping, to foster the emergence of a new class of farmer-entrepreneurs within a liberalized market economy (for a similar argument on civil society promotion in Central Asia, see Babajanian et al. 2005). If the goal is this – and not

[4] It is important to note that the fact that farmers downplay the importance of informal cooperation in their interactions with the researcher does not necessarily imply that they do not value these practices. It does suggest, however, that farmers do not actively value them when confronted with a particular kind of interlocutor – in this case a European researcher who can be easily confused with a typical Western development worker (see discussion in Cima 2020:215–233).

broader notions of food security and livelihoods – then only service cooperatives are viable tools, but not other forms of cooperatives or cooperation.

The consequence of all these biases is not only that if measured against such a narrow definition of success, the assessment of failure of local cooperatives is almost inevitable; the narrative of failed cooperatives also has broader symbolic, affective and material consequences. It upholds a hierarchy of knowledge and experience: it values only one specific type of them while dismissing others as irrelevant, or even stigmatizes them as the source of psychological attitudes that are considered the cause of failure (Gardner, Lerman 2006). It therefore reinforces the binaries of the developmentalist discourse, defining "who knows" and "who doesn't", who is "developed" and who is "undeveloped".

These binaries are part of a process of othering that attributes to subjects either a positive fullness or a negative lack (Gibson-Graham 2003). Kyrgyzstani villagers cannot but identify with the negative element of these binaries, with the related sense of inadequacy and hopelessness. The idea of a "Soviet legacy" even reinforces this negative position: since a universal and generalized legacy is considered to be the cause of people's attitudes, these attitudes appear structural and almost impossible to change. Even villagers themselves blame their Soviet experience for their own laziness and passivity: in this way, agency is completely removed from local subjects, who cannot but feel powerless.[5]

Because the dominant narrative is blind in these regards, it fails to identify existing practices of cooperation and relations of reciprocity that already contribute to villagers' livelihoods and that could represent a potential starting point for expanding effective collective activities, regardless of whether these are formalized or not. At the same time, since such practices are rendered invisible, the power relations and the inequalities they constitute (such as the burden of reciprocity practices on women and their exclusion from decision-making within households) are difficult to identify and tackle. In the end, because of the widespread idea that cooperative initiatives are deemed to be failing in Kyrgyzstan, several donors have already withdrawn support from cooperatives in the country, leaving behind them a fragmented legislative landscape (Beishenaly, Namazova 2012) and vague governmental policies that can constitute an obstacle for the current activities of formalized cooperatives, and that fail to support existing collective activities that are essential to farmers' livelihoods and food security.

Conclusion: towards alternative representations of cooperatives and cooperation

In this paper, I deconstructed the narrative of failed cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. My analysis revealed that this narrative is based on the assumption that only formal service cooperatives are "true" cooperatives and that only the knowledge and experience linked to the establishment of service cooperatives in Western market economies are relevant. All the rest is dismissed as "improper", as unwanted remnants from the past that hampers the unwinding of a future that is normatively directed towards Western capitalist modernity as an ideal goal. The narrow and limited definition of success that is available within this discourse makes a judgement of failure almost inevitable.

Building on the reflections of postdevelopment and postcapitalist scholars, I showed that this narrative is inscribed in a broader hegemonic discourse on development and the economy that reproduces a polarization between developed and undeveloped, reinforcing negative feelings of failure and inadequacy and devaluing alternative local experience and knowledge. These mechanisms are even stronger in postsocialist countries, where the legacies of the socialist past are considered to be immutable structural elements that trap entire populations in powerlessness and hopelessness.

It is important to underline that my aim here is not to reject the model of service cooperatives in favor of the model of production cooperatives or other forms of cooperation. I rather want to emphasize the consequences of embracing one model exclusively while stigmatizing and dismissing other existing or possible models and practices. In order to avoid the negative effects of biased narratives, I suggest embracing a postcapitalist approach as proposed by Gibson-Graham (2006a). This would allow scholars to open our attention to the plurality of local practices, knowledge and experience, while radically refusing the generalizations and essentializations linked to the identification of fixed structural legacies and determined path-dependencies. I have briefly hinted in this paper at some of

[5] It is important to note that this does not mean that they *are* powerless. I observed several forms of creative contestation and resistance, even if not always intentional and explicit (see Cima 2020).

the practices and relations that are rendered invisible by the dominant narrative: these are in particular informal practices of cooperation among farmers, including relationships of reciprocity within networks of relatives and friends. Identifying and making visible such practices and relations is a first step towards more positive representations that can nurture hope and possibility, and inform policy measures that are more sensitive to and more supportive of local forms of cooperation.

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Stakeholder-based knowledge mapping for re-establishing agroforestry systems in Central Asia

Michael Spies, Martin Welp

The existing land use policies in Central Asia are not well prepared to tackle current and future risks related to climate change, soil degradation, and increasing global and domestic demand for food, fiber, and biomass. In post-socialist countries with rather short traditions of state-led democracy, it is particularly relevant to strengthen the role of civil society and to test and experiment with participatory methods to increase the fairness, acceptance and effectiveness of policies for sustainable land use. As part of a collaborative project on agroforestry for livelihood improvement in Central Asia, we have developed a participatory method to formalize local and external expert knowledge as a means to inform strategy development for the wider adoption and re-establishment of agroforestry systems. In a sequence of collecting, visualizing, processing and feeding results back to local experts, our approach aimed at co-creating a semi-quantitative systemic knowledge map. Inspired by the MARISCO-methodology, this map included different agroforestry practices, related ecosystem services, as well as factors contributing to or hindering the adoption of agroforestry practices. This paper outlines our systemic approach of formalizing knowledge from diverse stakeholders, provides a brief stepwise description of our developed methodology, and discusses its wider applicability.

Introduction

Rural areas in Central Asia are facing several environmental and socioeconomic problems. Climate change is impacting water availability; salinization and soil erosion threaten the basis of agriculture; and meagre rural livelihood opportunities are driving rural-urban migration and out-migration (Kienzler et al. 2012; Lioubimtseva, Henebry 2009; Sagynbekova 2017).

Empowering local people through participatory processes and bringing local concerns into the policy processes in relation to both environmental and social issues was a prime objective of the eAGROFORST project (*Ernährungssicherheit und Verbesserung der Existenzgrundlage durch Agroforstsysteme*; 2017–2019). The project was implemented by Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development (HNEE) in cooperation with World Agroforestry (ICRAF; previously known as World Agroforestry Centre) in Bishkek and several other Central Asian partners. As an outcome of the project, this paper describes a deliberative process to bring together and formalize local and scientific knowledge through qualitative modelling, focusing on the potentials and inhibiting factors to (re-)establish agroforestry systems suitable for the Central Asian context – especially the (formerly) widely applied system of tree shelterbelts.

The paper has two main objectives: (a) Proposing and describing a method of knowledge mapping that was developed through dialogues with diverse stakeholders; and (b) to discuss our experiences and how such methods can be used for strategy formulation and testing. We aim at outlining a holistic methodological framework to inform practical and policy decisions related to agroforestry implementation – a topic requiring interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral solutions. To our knowledge, participatory approaches combined with systemic decision support frameworks have rarely been applied in the context of environmental issues in Central Asia (see also Giffen et al. 2005). Despite the interest in public participation and stakeholder dialogues by many actors, such as NGOs or international donors (Jansky, Pachova 2006), deliberative dialogues with relevant stakeholders are not routinely applied in environmental and development planning and decision-making. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union the newly formed independent Central Asian republics established new governance systems and institutional frameworks: to some extent, bottom-up forms of natural resources management with more direct control by local resource users were also promoted, such as community management of grazing land (pasture committees) or local water user groups for irrigation (e.g. Crewett 2015; Sehring 2020). However, such institutional arrangements are often threatened by the persistence of top-down decision-making that some authors regard as part of the Soviet heritage (Barrett et al. 2017; Sehring 2020). Despite – or rather, because of – these challenges, there is a

need for participatory tools and methods which can confront or at least complement state-led decision-making. Moreover, bringing together different knowledge bases is important as many former knowledge systems have collapsed with the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Toleubayev et al. 2010). In the agricultural sector, decollectivization went along with a loss of technical expertise among newly created small farms. On the other hand, new knowledge systems have emerged: farmers innovate and constantly adapt their practices and exchange their experiences with each other, while also taking advantage of non-local sources of information (Hornidge et al. 2016). Their 'local' knowledge must therefore be regarded as 'expert' knowledge that needs to be taken seriously in policy making or strategy development. Thus, there is a need to facilitate deliberative processes that bring together local and non-local (e.g. scientific) knowledge and viewpoints without postulating that one perspective is more 'valid' than the other (see e.g. Roue, Nakashima 2018).

One challenge of deliberative processes is how to formalize knowledge and insights that are gained through dialogues with and between diverse stakeholders. There is a range of approaches from visualization of factors to quantitative modelling of complex systems. One such approach is MARISCO (adaptive MAnagement of vulnerability and RISk at COnservation sites; see Ibisch, Hobson 2014) developed at the Centre for Econics[1] and Ecosystem Management associated with the HNEE. MARISCO was developed as a participatory tool to assess threats and risks to ecosystems and human well-being under changing environmental and socio-cultural conditions and to develop suitable management strategies and systemic management plans. It has been applied in various cultural settings initially in protected areas, but later also in regional development planning. A more formal approach is the application of Bayesian Belief Networks, which is essentially a depiction of (probable) interactions between variables, based on probabilities estimated by (local or external) experts (Welp et al. 2006). This approach has been applied e.g. in the context of dust protection in the oasis cities of northwest China on the fringe of the Taklamakan desert involving local experts (Frank et al. 2014). In group model building, clients or stakeholders are closely involved in a system dynamics model-building process (Vennix 1999). This approach is well suited for depicting and collectively (with the help of a modeler or modelling team) making sense of complex human-nature interactions to solve a (possibly fuzzy and ill-defined) problem related e.g. to natural resource management. When guided by a skilled and experienced facilitator, these approaches can be used to bring together the knowledge bases of 'lay' people, decision-makers and local and external experts in various fields. Focusing on the topic of agroforestry in Central Asia, and drawing on selected tools from MARISCO, in the following we present our qualitative modelling approach to formalize the knowledge of a diversity of stakeholders – farmers, scientists, state representatives, and NGO workers – as an information basis for decision-making.

Agroforestry in Central Asia

Agroforestry in Central Asia typically takes the form of small plantations and shelterbelts. Agroforestry systems are mainly based on fast growing trees (e.g. poplar, mulberry) and are promoted by NGO and international actors such as World Agroforestry (ICRAF) as key to reduce water consumption of agricultural fields and to increase the production of domestic timber and fuel wood and thus reduce the pressure on forests. In the context of this paper, we use the term agroforestry for any kind of combination of growing trees and agricultural production. Typical for the agriculturally dominated plains of Central Asia are windbreaks or shelterbelts (see Fig. 1), small woodlots and small and medium sized plantations (see Fig. 2).

During Soviet times, shelterbelts were widely applied and managed by public bodies. In the 1990s a big share of these plantations was cut down for fuel wood, as there was a shortage in energy supply – oil, gas and coal were delivered less efficiently and reliably than in Soviet times (Thevs et al. 2017). Shelterbelts provide several ecosystem services which are valued differently by different actors. Local farmers put emphasis on provisioning services such as construction material and fuel wood (Ruppert et al. 2020), while from an environmental point of view larger-scale regulating services are more important. Among them, water related effects are essential in the

[1] The concept of econics refers to the inspiration from and "mimicking of ecological system dynamics and functioning" to improve ecosystem management and make socio-economic resource use systems more sustainable (see www.centreforeconics.org).

arid regions of Central Asia. Due to reduced wind speeds, water consumption of agricultural fields is lower than on fields without such protection (Thevs et al. 2019).

Fig. 1: Poplar shelterbelt in Bazar-Korgon District, southern Kyrgyzstan. Shelterbelts can provide valuable ecosystem services such as protection from erosion and reduced evapotranspiration on arable land. However, as highlighted by farmers during local workshops, key barriers for planting shelterbelts are the small field sizes and potential conflicts with neighboring landowners, as shading of trees negatively affects yields of adjacent crops.
Source: Photograph taken by Spies, March 2018.

Developing a systemic knowledge map for promoting agroforestry systems in Central Asia

As part of the eAGROFORST project, knowledge of different stakeholder groups was formalized in terms of a knowledge map – or 'decision support model' – that maps out the manifold factors relevant for the wider adoption and re-establishment of agroforestry systems. The stakeholders that were involved in different phases of the project included farmers, local opinion leaders (such as teachers or elder people), representatives of grazing committees, extension workers, researchers, local politicians and representatives of ministries.

The approach was strongly inspired by the above-mentioned MARISCO method, but also entailed some key differences. MARISCO has a wider scope and includes a systemic analysis of ecosystems, their stresses and threats, and uses this detailed analysis as the basis for developing strategies to deal with and prevent ecosystem stresses and threats. Our method, in turn, brings one type of 'strategy' for addressing social-ecological stresses or threats to the forefront of analysis: the implementation and expansion of agroforestry systems. Thus, while we frame the expansion of agroforestry systems as a target, our method aims to identify and evaluate the manifold challenges related to this goal and to identify more specific measures and leverage points. While our method is less complex and thus applicable with less effort than MARISCO, it can only be applied when the general means (in our case, the expansion of agroforestry systems) to address environmental or socio-ecological problems is already defined. Ideally, to make the process fully participatory (as in MARISCO), the stakeholders should already be involved in two preceding steps: (a) analyzing (environmental) problems, and (b) identifying and prioritizing the strategic solution(s) to be scrutinized further. In our case, the focus on agroforestry was already defined by the project, the underlying assumption being that agroforestry has positive social and ecological outcomes as supported by a large body of literature (Thevs et al. 2017; Thevs et al. 2019). However, a central part of our methodology (see Fig. 3, Steps 2 and 3) is the critical re-evaluation of this assumption by the stakeholders. Furthermore, we included an optional step (Fig. 3, Step 0) to contextualize the (possibly rather limited) role that agroforestry can play in addressing wider problems of current land use systems. Generally, it is important that all participating actors are clear about the degrees of freedom with regard to problem framing and objectives and that expectation management is taken seriously: the scope of the method and its possible outcomes need to be communicated and agreed upon at the beginning.

Our endeavor to develop a decision support model on agroforestry in Central Asia served two purposes: first, the creation of a more general model – or systemic knowledge map – to support the development of strategies for promoting agroforestry in the Central Asian context; and second, the development and testing of a participatory method of knowledge mapping and strategy development that can be applied in different regional contexts on various levels of scale. In this paper, we focus on the second aspect by providing a stepwise description of our methodology and discussing its wider applicability.

The methods and steps we followed to create the model can be described in three general phases: (1) local stakeholder workshops and additional data collection, (2) collection of additional expert

knowledge and drafting of a first conceptual model, and (3) a joint expert workshop to re-evaluate and modify the model and to apply a systematic rating of its various elements.

Fig. 2: Mixed fruit orchard with intercropping in Bazar-Korgon District, southern Kyrgyzstan. Combining fruit production with arable farming can provide significant economic benefits. However, local workshop participants report various barriers to implementing such practices, such as legal restrictions for planting trees and a lack of information on appropriate design and management techniques.
Source: Photograph taken by Spies, March 2018.

Phase 1

The first phase included a series of local workshops complemented by literature review and explorative field research over the course of the year 2018. A total of four one-day workshops were conducted with farmers, local agricultural extension workers, and members of local civil society groups in rural Kyrgyzstan (Bazar-Korgon and Moskva District) and Kazakhstan (Qurday and Enbekshikazakh District). The aim of the local workshops was to gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to agroforestry and of the potentials for expanding these systems from the perspectives of land users. The number of participants varied between 21 and 28 in Kyrgyzstan and between 8 and 20 in Kazakhstan (excluding workshop facilitators). The workshop in Qurday District had to be relocated on short notice and postponed by one day due to unforeseen bureaucratic barriers. As a result, only 8 of about 20 invited participants could attend. In Kazakhstan, the participants were selected with the help of two Kazakhstani research colleagues (from Kazakh National Agrarian University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University) with personal contacts in the villages. In Kyrgyzstan, colleagues from ICRAF and close collaborators from the communities, among others related to local governance bodies (*ayil okmotu*) helped selecting the participants. Most of the participants were farmers that held small or medium sized farms. In two of four workshops (Moskva and Enbekshikazakh District) a more or less equal number of men and women participated, the other two workshops (Bazar-Korgon and Qurday District) were strongly male-dominated. The workshop facilitators included the two authors of this paper, ICRAF staff, and in part also Master students from HNEE and researchers from partner Universities in Kazakhstan. As requested by our local collaborators and workshop participants, the workshop program included a presentation and discussion of agroforestry-related research conducted by the facilitators (mainly ICRAF).

The workshops were structured into three parts: a presentation of the project and recent agroforestry-related research, an introductory mapping exercise on problems of current farming systems, and a moderated dialogue on opportunities and challenges related to agroforestry implementation. The stakeholder dialogues were organized using the World Café methodology (Steier et al. 2015) with smaller plenary and larger group sessions. Results were visualized by the participants with posters, moderation cards and colored stickers to highlight priorities. The participants identified a number of challenges and opportunities related to institutional, legal, social, and economic aspects. Among others, farmers highlighted the provision of additional timber and fruits as a benefit of agroforestry, as well as other ecosystem services such as clean air and an increase in vegetation and vegetation diversity. Identified challenges were manifold. Workshop participants in Kyrgyzstan mentioned legal restrictions to plant trees on arable land as an important obstacle, despite a recently amended law that allows for "protective afforestation" (Ruppert et al. 2020). In the workshops in Kazakhstan, no such problems were reported by farmers. A challenge commonly reported in all workshops was the lack of information on agroforestry practices, for instance regarding the appropriate design of and selection of trees for shelterbelts. Other commonly identified problems in both countries were free-grazing livestock that damage newly planted trees, as well as a general lack of governmental support in the form of advisory services, provision of tree sap-

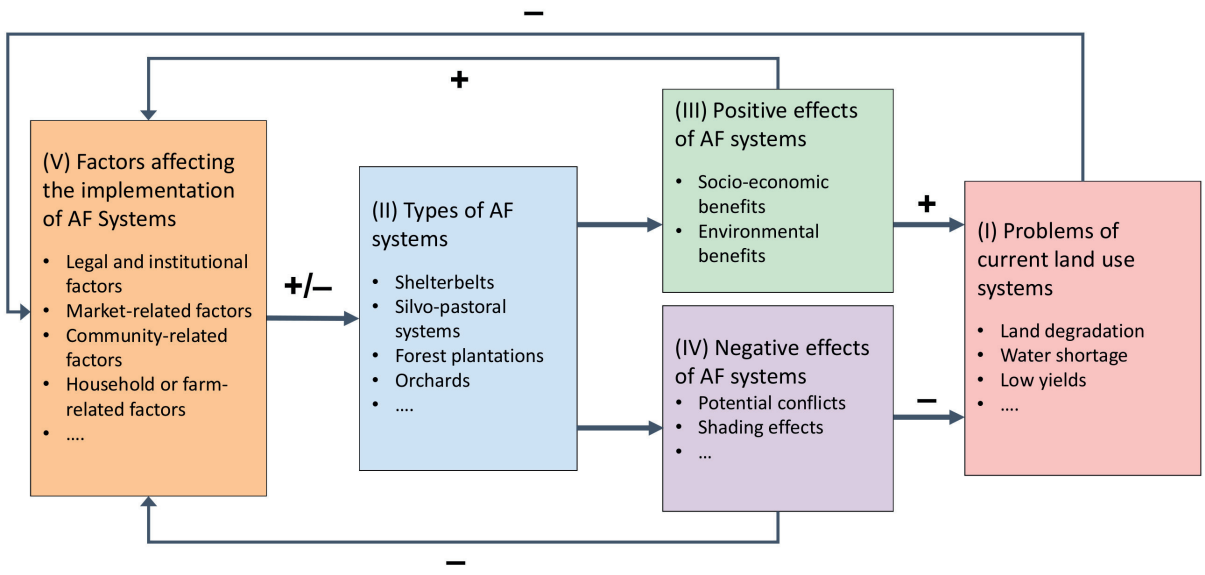

Fig. 3: General structure of the systemic knowledge map on agroforestry (AF) implementation in Central Asia. The steps indicated in brackets refer to the recommended order in which the different element types (illustrated with colored boxes) shall be mapped. Arrows indicate the main causal linkages, not the order of steps for mapping the different element types. To manage expectations and put into perspective the problem-solving capacity of agroforestry, we recommend a first optional Step 0 "problems of current land use systems" before beginning with the targeted knowledge mapping of agroforestry implementation. After this optional step, we find it most intuitive to start with mapping the types of agroforestry systems (Step 1), before mapping their effects (Steps 2 and 3) and the factors affecting their implementation (Step 4). Steps 5 and 6 (rating of individual elements and identification of causal links) are not shown in the figure.

Source: Authors' design.

lings, and access to credit (e.g. for protective fencing of trees). In Kyrgyzstan, participants also highlighted the small size of land holdings and potential conflicts with neighbors as important barriers, since crop yields on arable land are negatively affected by shading of trees.

In addition to these workshops, information was collected by the two authors through exploratory interviews with farmers and local experts during field trips in Kazakhstan (Qurday Region), Uzbekistan (Tashkent Region) and Kyrgyzstan (Jalal-Abad and Chuy Region). Moreover, literature review and the supervision of empirical research conducted by HNEE Master students in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan yielded additional insights.[2]

Phase 2

The next working phase was dedicated to categorizing and structuring the insights from the local workshops and additional data collection to develop a first draft of the conceptual model (see Fig 3). After outlining the general structure shown in Fig. 3, questions were sent by email to selected scientists, (NGO-) practitioners and policy makers in Central Asia who were invited for the 'expert' workshop to be conducted in Phase 3. The questions were directly related to four of the five element types shown in Fig. 3:

- What types of agroforestry systems exist in your country?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of these systems (for farmers, the environment, etc.)?

[2] In Uzbekistan: Dilfuza Yuldasheva (2019): The challenges and opportunities of agroforestry implementation in Uzbekistan from different stakeholders' perception; In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Maren Krütten (2019): Agroforestry in the Almaty region in Kazakhstan – The potential value of shelterbelt establishment for livelihood improvement and local farmers' perception of shelterbelt systems; Daniel Ruppert (2019): Farmers' perceptions of benefits and detriments of shelterbelts: The case of rural Kyrgyzstan – A comparable analysis of the regions Issyk Kul and Jalal Abad.

- What factors affect the implementation of agroforestry systems in your country (e.g. institutional, economic, social factors)?

Based on the answers we received and the knowledge collected in Phase 1, we prepared a first knowledge map outlining the types of agroforestry systems, their positive and negative effects on current land use systems, as well as the manifold factors influencing their implementation or adoption by farmers.

Phase 3

Finally, we conducted a workshop at HNEE in Eberswalde, Germany with selected agroforestry experts from Central Asia to evaluate and refine the prepared knowledge map and to conduct a detailed rating of its diverse elements. A total of ten experts from four Central Asian countries participated: Kyrgyzstan (2 scientists/NGO workers, 1 policy maker), Kazakhstan (3 scientists), Uzbekistan (1 scientist, 1 policy maker), and Tajikistan (1 NGO worker, 1 postgraduate student and experienced NGO worker). In this phase, no local land users were present, but their knowledge and opinions gathered in the local workshops in Phase 1 fed into the pre-structured knowledge map. The two policy makers were based in the agricultural ministries of their respective home countries. While Tajikistan was not originally included in the eAGROFORST project, we decided to still invite two experts from the country in order to broaden the scope of the decision support model to four of five (post-Soviet) Central Asian countries.

Fig. 3 shows the generic model outlining the different types of model elements and their positive and negative interrelations. The model is relatively straightforward and designed to be used as a generic structure or template to create a more detailed knowledge map. While we tested this model in the context of an expert workshop to bring together knowledge from four different Central Asian countries, the method is designed to be applicable in more local, participatory workshops with land users and other relevant stakeholders who contribute with their knowledge and expertise from diverse standpoints. Experiences with MARISCO have shown that significantly more complex knowledge mapping exercises are possible with local stakeholders regardless of their educational background, as long as they have sufficient knowledge of their environment and local resource use systems (see Schick et al. 2018).Inspired by MARISCO, the element types in Fig. 3 represent different consecutive steps in the knowledge mapping exercise, with each step involving a phase of brainstorming to identify elements and writing them on colored moderation cards, before posting and clustering the elements on a large wall display (see Fig. 4). While the steps can be followed in different orders, we found it most meaningful to apply them as indicated by the numbers in brackets in Fig. 3. As an optional, but highly recommended step, we propose to begin with a problem mapping of current farming systems (Step 0). This step makes sense in order to put into perspective the potential of agroforestry to alleviate existing problems. The next four steps are mandatory: a mapping of the types of agroforestry systems found in or relevant for the target region (Step 1), their positive and negative effects (Steps 2 and 3), and the various factors influencing their implementation (Step 4).

Fig. 4: Evaluation of the knowledge map on agroforestry in Central Asia during an expert workshop in Eberswalde, Germany.
Source: Photograph taken by Spies, March 2019.

This process of knowledge mapping can be very time-consuming, but may be shortened by preparing a first model draft based on information collected (preferably from the workshop participants) prior to the workshop. In our case, many of the moderation cards were already prepared before the workshop and pre-structured on the wall display. Half a day was sufficient for the participants to evaluate and restructure the conceptual model and to add and remove elements. The resultant knowledge map includes a total of 107 elements – 22 problems of farming systems, 18 different types of agroforestry systems, 22 posi-

Tab. 1: Detailed rating criteria for the element type 'factor'.

Trueness Правдивость	**Agree** Согласен	**Rather agree** Скорее согласен	**Rather disagree** Скорее не согласен	**Disagree** Не согласен
Criticality (for agroforestry implementation) Критичность (для агролесоводства)	**Absolutely essential** бсолютно необходимо	**Important** Важно	**Somewhat important** Частично важно	**Unimportant** Не важно
Manageability Управляемость	**The factor can be managed well with available resources** Фактор может хорошо управляться с доступными ресурсами	**The factor could be managed well, if more resources were available** Фактор может управляться хорошо, если были доступны больше ресурсов	**Even with more resources it would be difficult to manage** Даже с большим количеством ресурсов будет трудно управлять	**The factor is unmanageable** Фактор неуправляемый
Knowledge Знания	**We understand the factor very well** Мы очень хорошо понимаем фактор	**We understand the factor more or less** Мы понимаем фактор более или менее	**We do not understand the factor, but others probably know more** Мы не понимаем фактор, но другие, вероятно, знают больше	**The factor is barely understood by anyone** Фактор едва понятен

tive and 15 negative effects, as well as 30 factors influencing their implementation.[3]

After identifying, mapping and clustering the manifold elements, two more steps are necessary to complete the knowledge map (not represented in Fig. 3): the rating of elements (Step 5) and the identification of causal links (Step 6). Rating is a crucial step to identify priority issues for strategy development. Furthermore, the rating results can also indicate new research questions that need to be tackled by scientists. The rating is ideally done by the same participants who built the model, but can also be conducted in separate rounds by different groups of stakeholders to get a more diverse picture. We developed several rating criteria for each type of element, as is done in MARISCO. For selected element types, we asked the participants to rate each element only for their respective country. A rating scale from 1 to 4 was used for each criterion, represented by the colors dark green, light green, yellow, and red (see Tab. 1). The following rating criteria were defined:

- Problems of current farming systems: rating of (a) criticality[4] and (b) trend of change in criticality in the respective country;
- Types of agroforestry systems: rating of (a) prevalence and (b) potential for expansion in the respective country;
- Negative and positive effects of agroforestry systems: rating of (a) probability of and (b) knowledge on the respective effect (not country-specific);
- Factors: country-specific rating of (a) trueness[5], i.e. agreement with the validity of the argument, (b) criticality for agroforestry implementation, (c) manageability, and (d) knowledge.

[3] The first model draft, in turn, included 96 elements: 13 problems of farming systems, 13 types of agroforestry systems, 24 positive and 15 negative effects, and 31 factors.

[4] The term is adopted from MARISCO where it refers to the "perceived importance" of an element (a factor, a threat, a stress, etc.) "for the state of vulnerability of a biodiversity object" (Ibisch, Hobson 2014:100). In our case, criticality can be understood as (a) the perceived importance of a 'problem' for the state of vulnerability of current farming systems, and (b) the perceived importance of a 'factor' in affecting agroforestry implementation.

[5] 'Trueness' describes the perceived degree to which a factor is considered to be 'true'. Trueness can be evaluated in terms of probabilities (i.e. a factor is 80% likely to be true). In our case, a simple score of 1 to 4 ('agree', 'rather agree', 'rather disagree', 'disagree') is applied.

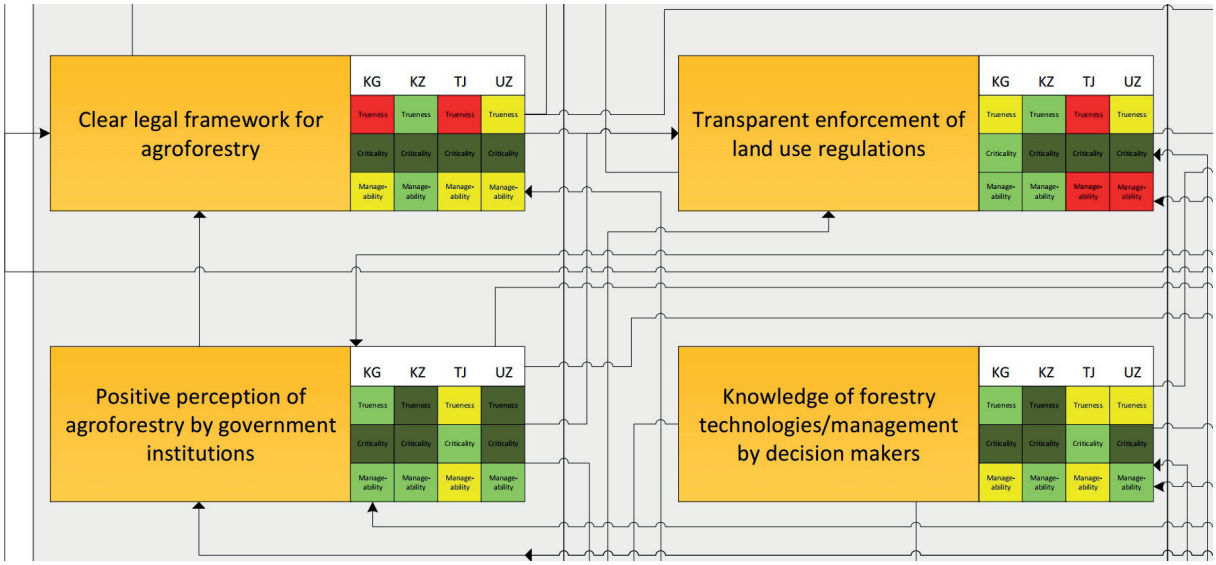

Fig. 5: Selected factors from the digitized knowledge map on agroforestry in Central Asia. Arrows connecting to other elements not shown in the snippet have been removed. Note that in order to ensure consistent rating results, factors must always be formulated in positive terms (e.g. 'transparent enforcement of land use regulations' rather than 'untransparent enforcement of land use regulations'). The colored square boxes indicate the rating results per country (in columns) – 'trueness' in row 1, 'criticality' in row 2, and 'manageability' in row 3. The rating results for 'knowledge' are not shown.

Source: Modified extract from unpublished model by authors.

For each element type, a rating table was prepared and printed on posters to guide the participants in their rating decisions (see Tab. 1 and Fig. 5). Due to time constraints, the rating of the element type 'problems of current farming systems' was skipped during the workshop.

After the rating of elements, the final step of building the knowledge map is the identification of the causal links between individual model elements. The main causal relations are already outlined in the model structure shown in Fig. 3, but to develop a more precise decision support model, refinements are necessary. For instance, certain factors (e.g. access to fruit and vegetable markets) may influence the adoption of only one type of agroforestry system (e.g. orchards with intercropping). This step can be done by the participants drawing arrows between element cards on the wall display, or at a later stage by individual experts or the workshop hosts based on educated guesses while digitizing the model with the appropriate visualization software. When the identification of causal connections is done by individual experts or the workshop hosts themselves, the resultant model should be shared with the workshop participants for review.

The knowledge map as decision support for strategy development

When the above-mentioned steps have been completed and the systemic knowledge map has been built, it can be used in a similar way as MARISCO for identifying leverage points and developing strategies for intervention. For this purpose, the rating of factors is crucial: if 'trueness' of a factor is rated low (yellow or red), and its criticality and manageability are rated high (dark or light green), the factor should be given high priority in the development of strategies – but only if causal connections to relevant agroforestry systems (those with potential for expansion) are given.[6]

During the expert workshop in Eberswalde, a number of intervention strategies were identified, ranging from establishing agroforestry demon-

[6] The MARISCO methodology provides a number of tools to prioritize factors and to develop, prioritize and evaluate intervention strategies that can be put into use in a similar way here (see Ibisch, Hobson 2014): a method of 'mapping' selected strategies into the model to the factors it addresses; the creation of 'results webs' to identify those elements (types of agroforestry systems, their positive and negative effects on current farming systems) it addresses and those it neglects; and a systematic rating of strategies according to criteria of effectiveness, outreach, and feasibility, among others.

stration plots to communizing a small percentage of farmland to establish publicly managed shelterbelts. However, the development and evaluation of strategies was not the prime objective of the workshop, since the geographical scope of the workshop – covering four countries with very different political systems and diverse agroclimatic zones – is too broad for formulating targeted practical and policy interventions. The aim was to test a structured methodology of formalizing knowledge of diverse stakeholders, with the intended side effect of sensitizing the invited experts and decision-makers to participatory and systemic approaches. While our method of creating a systemic knowledge map differs considerably from the steps of the MARISCO methodology, subsequent steps of strategy development and evaluation as outlined in detail in the MARISCO guidebook (Ibisch, Hobson 2014:126ff.) could be applied in a similar way here and need no further elaboration. Both methods emphasize (a) that strategies must be developed on the basis of a holistic, systematic mapping and evaluation of all relevant factors, and that (b) all relevant actors and stakeholders should be represented from the very beginning in order not to overlook important factors and to avoid unintended side effects.

Conclusion

The experiences from our exercise have shown that participatory knowledge maps that bring together insights from and perspectives of different stakeholders can serve as a useful qualitative modelling tool. This tool enables collaborative identification of crucial factors and leverage points to develop strategies and policies for sustainable land use. The method we developed can be applied on various geographical scales from the local to the international level – or, as in our case, on several nested levels (local, national and international) in a comparative situational analysis of four Central Asian countries with common geographical conditions and similarities related to historical path dependencies. The knowledge map developed during our final project workshop was digitized and shared with the participants as a tool for further analysis and for informing decision-making and policy formulation in their respective home countries. Immediate feedback on the method by the workshop participants was generally positive, only the relatively high amount of time required was criticized. However, in a more local workshop setting, the complexity of the model and thus the time requirement for the different steps would likely be reduced. The model jointly developed in Eberswalde was used by ICRAF in subsequent expert workshops on agroforestry in Kyrgyzstan to communicate our project results.

We developed this method of systemic knowledge mapping for the case of agroforestry implementation and expansion in Central Asia, but the method can well be applied in different regional contexts and other fields of sustainable land use practices such as conservation agriculture, permaculture, remediation of contaminated lands or forest and ecosystem restoration. In a Central Asian context, where the cumulative improvement of knowledge systems was partly interrupted both in academia and at the level of on-farm decision-making by the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent crises caused by neoliberal reforms, bringing together knowledge from different actors is particularly important. Moreover, agroforestry as a field of practice and scholarly discipline requires an interdisciplinary approach that involves experts from diverse fields including agriculture, forestry, hydrology, climate and energy. The tools developed at the Centre for Econics and Ecosystem Management are subject to further development (including a MARISCO software) and new fields of application are explored (such as urban environments). Further documentation on the deliberative processes outlined in this paper are to be made publicly available in form of text-based guidelines and videos.

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Common pool resources, collaborative action, and local knowledge in High Asia

Andrei Dörre

By means of a micro-level study conducted in the arid Western Pamirs of Tajikistan, it will be shown how self-organized management practices, collaborative action, and pragmatic technical solutions fed by local knowledge contribute to addressing the spatiotemporally uneven water supply for irrigation. The findings reveal that local-specific water management and irrigation arrangements prove to be essential not only for local agriculture and food production, but also a means of social organization and a central instrument for the equitable utilization of locally available natural resources, along with balancing interests within the community. The study also shows how collaborative resource use and management contribute to community cohesion and individual survival in a society that is struggling with manifold social and ecological challenges. The empirically based insights contribute to a better understanding of how social and ecological challenges related to societal transitions and global change can be tackled 'from below.'

Introduction

In the course of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, societal disruptions accompanied by socio-economic upheavals, such as the liquidation of numerous state enterprises, caused aggravated living conditions in the newly independent states of Central Asia. These were the same nations that were formerly among the poorest of the Soviet Republics, receiving substantial economic support from the political center. Many people lost their jobs and incomes during the transition from a command economy to a market economy, including in the agricultural sector. Simultaneously, the new states radically cut the provision of social services (Anderson, Pomfret 2003; Dudwick et al. 2003). In the countryside, manifold additional challenges such as limited market integration and monetary incomes lower than the national average exacerbated the already existing difficulties for making a living. The newly gained sovereignty was, therefore, perceived by many people as a 'burden of imposed independence' (Mangott 1996).

Against the background of the collapse of the Soviet economic system and the end of command structures strongly intervening in local affairs and new state institutions that were often incapable and unaccountable in terms of providing effective administrative services, reliable social support, and efficient resource management performances, the increased uncertainty raised the people's need to mobilize all resources and assets to ensure their own survival. Following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and the sustainable livelihoods approach of the British Department for International Development (DFID 1999), such assets can be categorized into different classes: human (e.g. knowledge, skills, and physical capability), social (e.g. social networks, relationships of trust, memberships, and affiliations), and material (e.g. natural resources such as land, water, and forests and infrastructure like irrigation canals and agricultural equipment), as well as financial (e.g. savings, income, and access to loans) capital.

This paper argues that human, cultural, and social capital purposefully mobilized and deployed at the local level are fundamental prerequisites for access to natural resources, as well as their management and utilization. Popularized by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983), the concept of local knowledge can be seen both as a specific kind of cultural or human capital and an inventory of spatial-historically bounded knowledge whose features are shaped by the socio-ecological conditions of the respective locality and the daily practices of its inhabitants. According to Mistry (2009), local knowledge is characterized, amongst other things, as follows: i) it cannot be transferred easily to another location because it is context specific; ii) it is generally transferred orally, as well as through demonstration, observation, and imitation; iii) instead of being static, local knowledge changes over time through adaptation to novel situations, experimentation, and learning; iv) local knowledge is widely shared and this enables long-term application and an intergenerational transfer of local knowledge; and, finally, v) local knowledge emerges from people's daily performances and interactions within different life spheres that intersect one other and, therefore, has to be seen as a holistic body of knowledge.

Environmental, cultural, and social local knowledge represents the most substantial part of customized approaches for the management and utilization of natural resources, as well as the operation of the related infrastructure. Common decision-making, instead, is the process of creating the institutional framework for such arrangements of collaborative action. Accordingly, these local-specific arrangements encompass the aspects of decision-making, shared local knowledge, infrastructural components, and practices executed by actors on the ground. They go beyond immediate resource-related issues and have the potential of being effective means of social organization and equitable instruments to balance interests within a community. Therefore, local knowledge became increasingly popular in the development discourse in the course of the Earth Summit 1992 and after the frequent failures of blueprint top-down development measures. Local knowledge-informed development strategies that take into consideration local interests, experiences, discourses, and practices were expected to produce more efficient and locality-specific responses to environmental and societal challenges on the ground and to simultaneously empower the respective community (Barnes 2009; Berger, Luckmann 1967; Briggs, Sharp 2004).

This paper centers its attention on the issue of local knowledge-based collaborative water management and irrigation approaches in rural Central Asia using an example from the arid Western Pamirs located in Tajikistan's eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO and Gorno-Badakhshan for short; see Fig. 1). Local knowledge-based management and operation of scarce water resources and irrigation infrastructure for agricultural food production are especially significant in

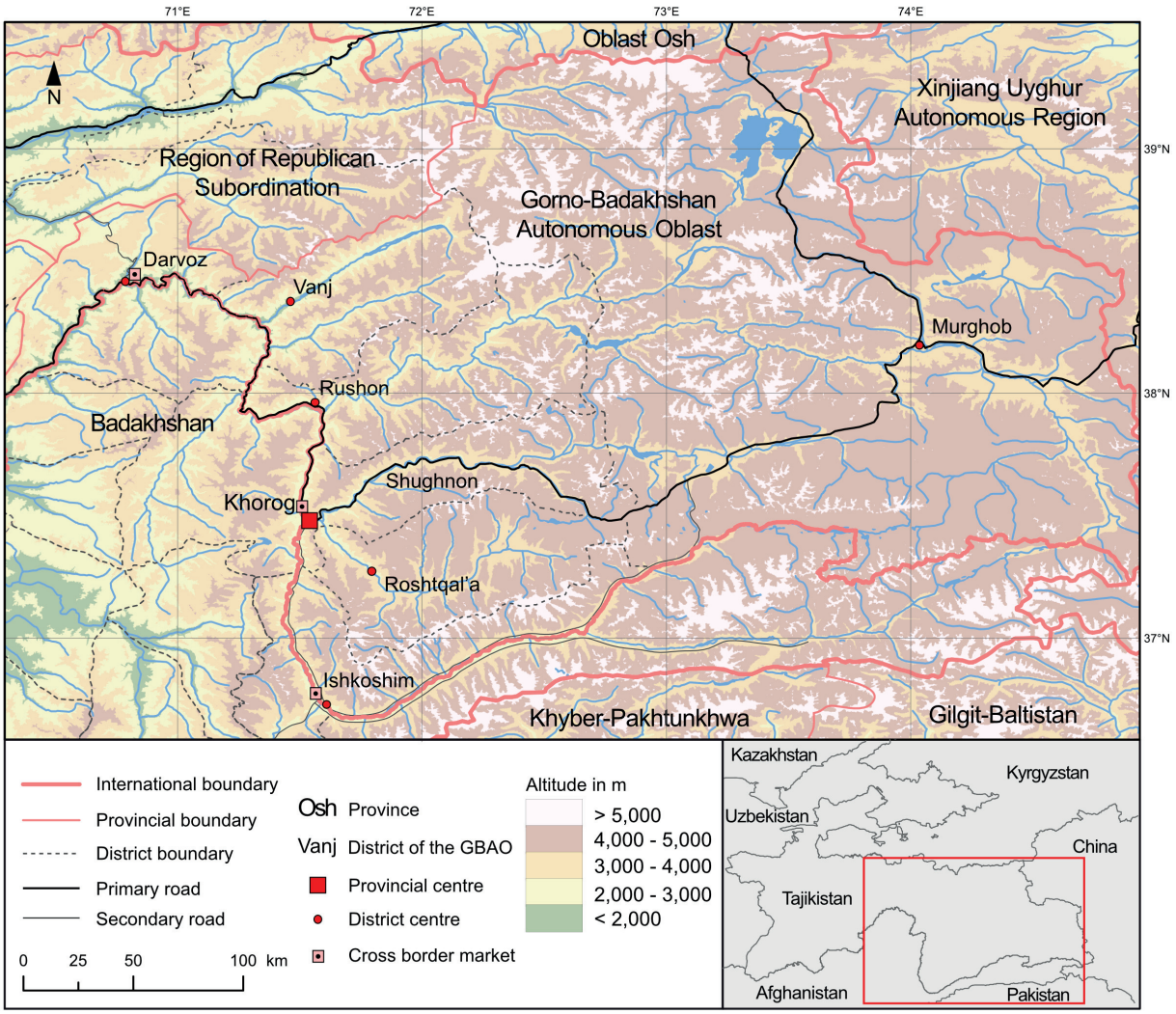

Fig. 1: The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of Tajikistan

Source: Dörre (2020) based on Jarvis et al. (2008).

this high mountain region due to the tense food supply situation caused by multiple societal and environmental factors. After outlining the food supply-related context of the research area, this paper introduces a local case study from the Wakhan Valley at the upper Panj River. I show how, against the absence of a superior body governing local water issues, sophisticated local knowledge-informed practices and pragmatic organizational solutions contribute to addressing the problem of uneven and irregular spatiotemporal water supply for irrigation purposes. After presenting the natural and infrastructural components of the water supply and irrigation system of Shirgin Village, I will introduce water management and irrigation-related local knowledge, as well as decision-making bodies and processes. These empirically based insights will contribute to a better understanding of how social and ecological problems related to societal transitions and global change can be tackled 'from below.'

Food supply in the Western Pamirs

The post-Soviet economic decline and societal disintegration described above were particularly prevalent in Tajikistan, where, in the course of a cruel civil war (1992–1997) accompanied by tremendous human and material losses, the socioeconomic vulnerability of many people increased remarkably (Gomart 2003; Lynch 2001). During the war, the reliable food supply came under threat in remote rural areas such as the Western Pamirs. The collapse of the national supply network, bad harvests, and a blockade by government forces in 1992–1993 led to a severe famine that struck the vast majority of the population. For years, nearly all inhabitants relied on humanitarian assistance offered by the Aga Khan Foundation's Pamir Relief and Development Program and other organizations, which delivered staple food products like flour, oil, and sugar (Bliss, Mamadsaidov 1998; Kreutzmann 1996; Sherbut et al. 2015).

Gorno-Badakhshan's food supply system structurally rests on two pillars: local agricultural production and food imports. Local agricultural production is limited by the terrain and altitude of the mountainous environment. This economic activity is predominantly pursued at the household level by local farmers. Due to the environmental constraints of the cold and arid high mountain desert, the mainly Sunni Kyrgyz population of the eastern plateau-like part of the GBAO, corresponding to the *nokhiya* (district) of Murghab, mainly practices mobile animal husbandry utilizing vast pasture areas. The Western Pamirs, including the districts of Darvoz, Vanj, Rushon, Shugnon, Roshtqal'a, and Ishkoshim, are predominantly inhabited by farmers belonging to the Isma'ili branch of Shi'a Islam. They pursue an approach called mixed or combined mountain agriculture. This strategy combines the use of small land plots for food and fodder cultivation, located mostly on plain debris cones and alluvial fans at the bottom of deep narrow valleys close to the farmers' residential centers, with animal husbandry that utilizes distant seasonal pastures located at higher elevations. Due to the annual precipitation being lower than the agro-ecological threshold of 250 mm, this kind of land cultivation is highly dependent on irrigation (Bobrinskii 1908; Kreutzmann 2012, 2015; Mukhiddinov 1975; Zarubin 1935). Land plots suitable for cultivation in terms of flatness, soil properties, water availability, and other characteristics are scarce due to the challenging conditions of the arid and steep mountainous environment. According to the Statistical Agency of Tajikistan in the GBAO (AO PJT VMKB 2016) only 12,245 ha of cultivated land existed in Gorno-Badakhshan in 2015 for approximately 216,900 inhabitants, almost all of which require irrigation. This corresponds to less than 0.06 ha per capita, 60 percent of the national average (AO PJT 2017).

Land scarcity is one of the factors for why local agricultural production covers Gorno-Badakhshan's food demand only partially. Until today, the provision of externally produced staple foods and groceries is essential (Baranov 1936; Bliss, Mamadsaidov 1998; Breu et al. 2003; Kreutzmann 1996, 2003; MSDSP 2004). These imports represent the second pillar of the food supply system of Gorno-Badakhshan. The challenging food supply situation in the GBAO is also the product of environmental factors. One is the difficult accessibility of the region. Natural hazards like rockfalls and other gravitational mass movements pose a continuous threat to the few existing roads connecting Gorno-Badakhshan with the main agricultural areas and economic centers of the country (Kayumov 2011; Muccione, Fiddes 2019; Fig. 2). As a result of global climate change effects with glacier retreat and the thawing of permafrost in the high mountains, an increase in such events in terms of frequency and magnitude is likely (Mannig et al. 2018). Additionally, clouds and quickly shifting weather conditions impede the maintenance of

Fig. 2: A truck with imported goods from China masters a difficult passage of the road connecting the GBAO with the Western parts of Tajikistan.
Source: Photograph taken by Dörre, March 2018.

regular flight operations between the country's capital of Dushanbe and Gorno-Badakhshan's main airstrip in Khorog, the administrative center of the GBAO. After Tajikistan's national airline suspended its flights between the two cities in October 2016 and went bankrupt in 2017, PACTEC International, a humanitarian non-governmental organization registered in Switzerland, has offered expensive and irregular flights connecting Dushanbe and Khorog. In June 2020, Tajik Air began to serve this connection according to Asia-Plus, a Tajikistan-based media group (ASIA-Plus 2020).

Since 2002, three markets located on the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, locally known as 'Afghan-Bazary,' have been built with support from international donor organizations in order to facilitate small-scale trade between the communities on both sides of the border (Fig. 3).

These duty-free markets are intended to provide individual producers, intermediaries, and, in particular, local customers with the opportunity to earn an income and access products that are cheaper or unavailable in their own country. The portfolio of traded goods includes agricultural products and unprocessed and processed foods, as well as consumption goods including non-food commodities such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, and construction materials. Even if these markets have a certain importance to the respective local transboundary economies, they cannot be counted as reliable institutions for securing the food supply for the region. This is because these markets are characterized by small trade turnover and are repeatedly closed for longer periods, officially, due to the politically insecure situation in Afghanistan's north-eastern Badakhshan Province (Barrat 2016; EU-BOMNAF 2015; Kreutzmann 2017; Levi-Sanchez 2017; Price, Hakimi 2019).

The de-facto closed border to Afghanistan, the poor quality and vulnerability of the road network, international trade directed mainly to the capital, and the lack of local opportunities to create direct revenues from the import of products delivered from the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China present serious obstacles for Gorno-Badakhshan's external exchange relations and its integration into both the national and international markets (Dörre 2018; Safarmamadova et al. 2020). These conditions culminate in a fragile and cost-intensive accessibility to the region. High transportation costs contribute to prices for food, fertilizer, fuel, and agricultural equipment, which are higher than in other regions of the country.

Fig. 3: Lively market activities at the cross-border market between Ishkoshim (Tajikistan) and Sultan Ishkashim (Afghanistan).
The placard at the Tem cross-border market on the outskirts of Khorog depicted in the upper right corner of this figure notes that the project was realized with German financial support and implemented by the Aga Khan Foundation, with support from the Governments of Tajikistan and Afghanistan.
Source: Photographs taken by Dörre, May 2015 and March 2018.

For more than 51 percent of the GBAO's population, monetary incomes lower than the national poverty line for monthly consumption (in 2015-2016, Tajik Somoni (TJS) 162 per capita, which corresponds to ca. USD 20) hamper access to these imported products (ADB 2016). At the end of 2019, the average national wholesale price per kilogram of wheat (the most important staple food in the region), potato, and milk was TJS 2.21 (USD 0.23), TJS 2.42 (USD 0.25), and TJS 2.97 (USD 0.30), respectively. The average wholesale prices in the GBAO, however, were TJS 3.33 (US$ 0.34), TJS 3.25 (USD

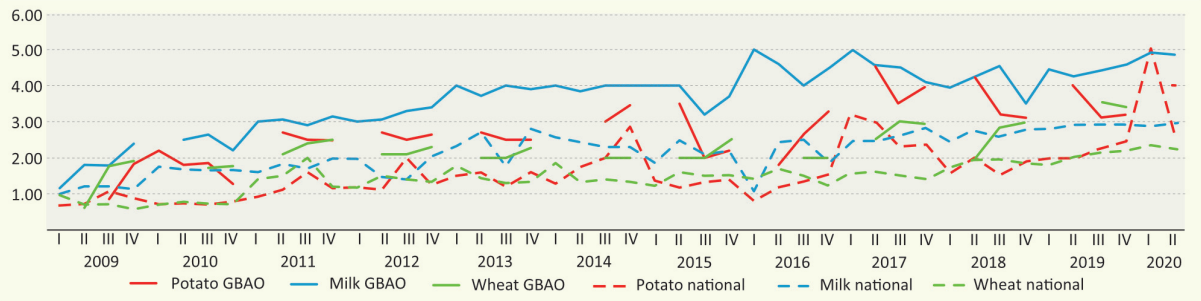

Fig. 4: Evolution of average wholesale prices in TJS for selected food products in Gorno-Badakhshan and the national level from the beginning of 2009 to the middle of the year 2020 (quarterly figures).

Due to a lack of data, there are gaps in the graph.

Draft: Dörre (2020) based on AS PRT (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019); SA PRT (2020)

0.33), and TJS 4.60 (USD 0.47), respectively (SA PRT 2020; Fig. 4).

Recent price increases seen during the Covid-19 pandemic underline the strong dependence of Gorno-Badakhshan's food system on external supply and conditions (WFP 2020). Against this background, the importance of local water management and irrigation agriculture for local food production cannot be overstated.

Local case study: Water management and irrigation in Shirgin Village

Nearly 50 years ago, the anthropologist Robert Netting pointed out that scarcely anybody beyond the respective villages knows anything about the collaborative irrigation arrangements of the village Törbel in the Swiss Alps (1974). I argue that even today, knowledge about concrete designs of common pool resource (CPR) management and usage arrangements is still weak. I apply Ostrom's (2008) understanding that CPRs are „sufficiently large [systems] that it is difficult, but not impossible, to define recognized users and exclude other users altogether. […] each person's use of such resources subtracts benefits that others might enjoy" (Ostrom 2008:11). The lack of knowledge about CPRs is lamentable since such arrangements have a great potential for dealing with the multiple crises related to social upheavals and global change the world is experiencing.

By means of a local case study from the western part of Gorno-Badakhshan, it will be shown how self-organized management practices, collaborative action, and pragmatic technical solutions fed by local knowledge have contributed to addressing the spatiotemporally uneven water supply for irrigation. The research shows that local-specific water management and irrigation arrangements prove to be not only an essential basis for local agriculture and food production, but also act as a means of social organization and are a central instrument for balancing interests within a community.

The inhabitants of the western Pamirs have long-standing experiences in cultivation based on proven water management skills and irrigation practices. Historically, thanks to local-specific resource-related knowledge, rules, and practices, a remarkable share of the food products consumed was produced locally. The valley of the upper Panj River is a demonstrative example. While the land parcels were irrigated by water coming from the main river and its tributaries, the related infrastructure was constructed and maintained by the communities (Andreev, Polovcev 1911; Bobrinskii 1908; Kreutzmann 2015; Mukhiddinov 1975; Olufsen 1904). During the Soviet era, the agricultural sector of Gorno-Badakhshan was radically restructured. The nomadic pastoralists in the eastern Pamirs were forced to settle and the individual farmsteads in the western Pamirs compulsory collectivized. Subsequentially, the means of production were nationalized and most collective farms were conjoined into state farms. Starting in the 1960s, the agricultural production in the western Pamirs was converted from subsistence farming to the production of fodder and livestock. Staple food and groceries were now imported from other parts of the country (Dörre 2020; Kreutzmann 2015). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the agricultural knowledge and experiences accumulated

over time proved to be highly valuable for adapting to the new era with all its challenges.

The data for the following case study was gathered by the author during field stays in Shirgin Village in the spring of 2015, the summer of 2016, and the summer of 2018, as well as by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov, local resident, Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Central Asia, and co-author of a paper published by Dörre and Goibnazarov (2018) in the summer of 2015. The village of Shirgin is situated on a hillside at an elevation of approximately 3,000 m in the Wakhan Valley on the right bank of the upper Panj River. In administrative terms, Shirgin belongs to the *jamoat* (municipality) of Vrang, being part of Ishkoshim *Nokhiya* (Fig. 5). With approximately 900 inhabitants living in around 100 households, Shirgin is of medium size compared to other settlements in the district (SA PRT 2016).

Information on environmental conditions, water management, and irrigation arrangements were collected from knowledgeable people involved in these issues and representatives of the local administration. Representatives of local households explained their daily activities around the issue of securing their food supply. Site inspections accompanied by local guides were combined with a mapping of the water supply and irrigation infrastructure, as well as observations of irrigation practices. Finally, following an oral history approach, local elders were interviewed about their experiences and memories regarding water supply and irrigation in the past and how this knowledge is currently applied. The names of interview partners have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Several reasons make this remote village an appropriate case for the study of local-specific water management and irrigation arrangements. First, the village is exposed to several economic challenges concerning the food supply. The road to Khorog is prone to avalanches and landslides (ASIA-Plus 2017). This poses a threat to the secure provision of external goods. Second, the prices of staple foods offered in the few shops of the village are higher than in Khorog. In August 2016, for instance, the retail price for a 50 kg bag of wheat flour

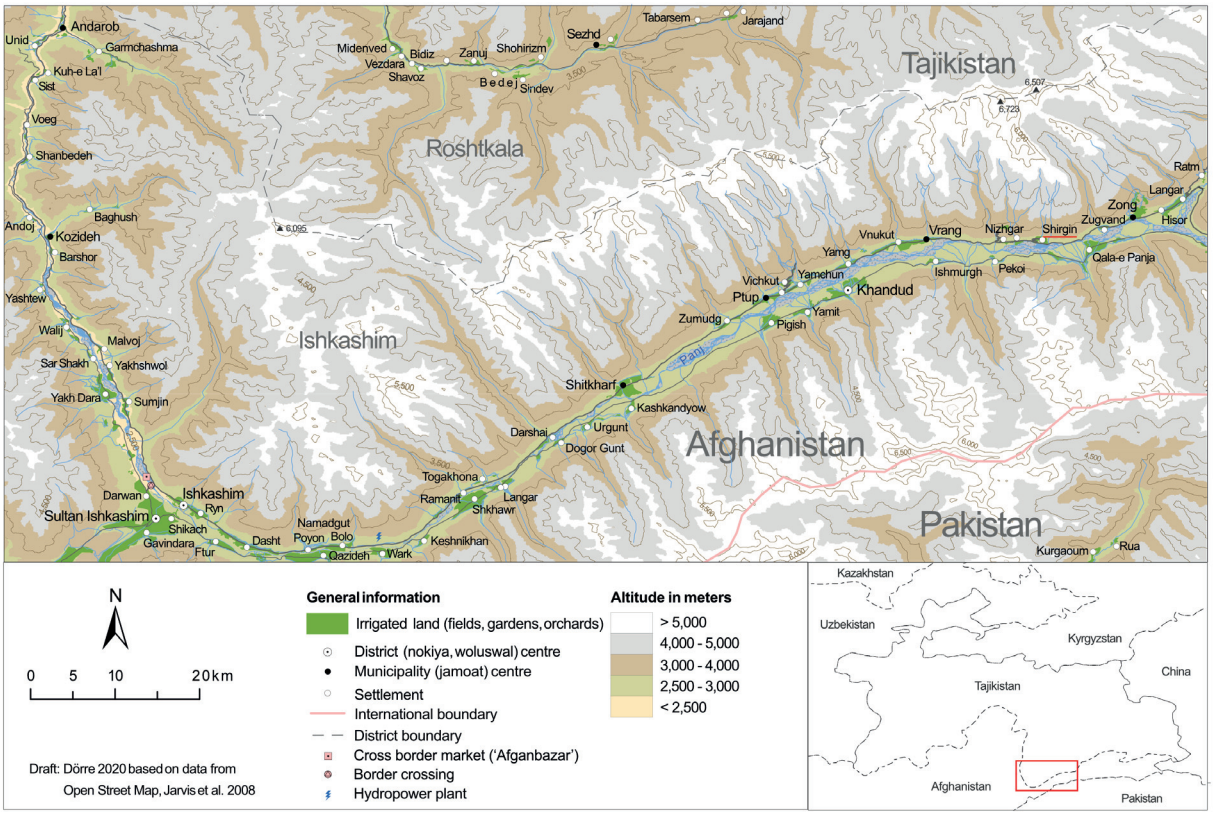

Fig. 5: Location of Shirgin Village (underlined in red) within the Ishkoshim Nokhiya.

The Panj River forms the Tajik-Afghan border, which, for the sake of clarity, has not been explicitly demarcated in the map.

Source: Dörre (2020) based on GUGK (1987); Jarvis et al. (2008); OSM (2017).

was TJS 170 (ca. USD 21.60) and pulses, an important protein source in the local cuisine, were available for TJS 8-10 (ca. USD 1.15) per kg. Third, the few existing jobs, limited to the school, a kindergarten, and a tiny clinic, are structurally underpaid. A teacher's monthly salary is around only TJS 450 (ca. USD 57). Fourth, there is a lack of water sources within the settlement limits and the inhabitants experience water scarcity during the vegetation period due to the arid climate (T1 2016; LTH 2016; SK 2016). Therefore, subsistence-oriented cultivation based on irrigation, supplemented by animal husbandry, is crucial for Shirgin's population. At the same time, cultivation is restricted by the small area of suitable land plots. With 111 ha of irrigated cropland and orchards covering 25 ha in total, only a bit more than one ha of arable land and less than 0.25 ha of orchards are, on average, at each household's disposal (ADC et al. 2013).

Shirgin's water supply and irrigation system

The lack of suitable water sources within the village limits, water scarcity during the vegetation period, the location on a comparatively steep slope, and the spatial extent of the village require an artificial water delivery and spatial distribution system consisting of canal heads tapping natural water sources, canals leading the water to the village, and locks to distribute the water as needed. Over time, Shirgin's population has developed proven local knowledge-informed technical solutions and sophisticated management practices to address the irrigation water supply problem. According to local respondents, the present irrigation infrastructure is based on historical construction executed by the local population in the 19th century under the guidance of the Isma'ili religious leader Said Abdurakhmon, with support from Russian border guards in the early 20th century, and, finally, under Soviet rule. In socialist times, the canal system was used mainly for the irrigation of lands belonging first to a collective farm, which was transformed into a state farm in 1977, as well as for privately used 'kitchen gardens' and orchards near the farmsteads (Kreutzmann 1996; Monogarova 1972). In that time, the infrastructure was maintained at the expense of the collective and state farm. The state farm was transferred in 1996 back into a collective farm, and, finally, to a so-called *khojagii dekhqoni* (Farmers association), assembling most of the farmsteads of the three villages of Shirgin, Nizhgar, and Drizh together (Fig. 6). Since then, the farmers have had to organize the supply and distribution of irrigation water by themselves, as well as taking responsibility for the maintenance of the irrigation infrastructure.

Water tapping and water supply infrastructure

Four main canals with different characteristics lead irrigation water from diverse natural sources to the agricultural lands used by Shirgin's inhabitants. These are, from west to east: Pushti Bakhor, Shgardwod, Pirwod, and Wodgash canals (Fig. 6).

The *Pirwod* ('canal of the Pir') is regarded as the oldest canal of Shirgin, stemming from the 19th century. According to local legend, an Ismai'li religious leader living in the *Qala* (castle or fortified farmstead) of Shirgin initiated and guided the construction of the approximately six-kilometer-long structure. The canal head taps a snow and glacier-fed creek at an elevation of approximately 4,000 m and channels the water via a flagstone-lined construction using the natural gradient a steep cliff located just north of the village. Here, the canal water creates an artificial waterfall. The steep fall enables comparatively flat canals to be used on the rest of the course and, thus, prevents erosion from the rapid inflow of water (WM 2015, 2016). After the waterfall, another canal structure leads the water into Shirgin's distribution system (Fig. 6). Due to the altitude of the source, *Pirwod* works only temporarily from June until September. The rest of the year the canal head is blocked by ice. If the weather turns cold, windy, and cloudy, the canal head can even freeze in summer. Such situations quickly lead to less irrigation water being available in the canal (LTH 2016; WM 2016).

Another historical canal is the shorter *Wodgash* ('canal's mouth'), which starts at a snow-fed natural pool located approximately two kilometers to the northeast of the village center at an elevation of 3,350 m. From late April to June, the *Wodgash* provides water to a couple of homesteads and land plots located in the eastern part of the village. In times of high discharge, a nearby subordinate canal takes on the water surplus and carries it to the consumers. This solution is important for two reasons: the farmers receive more water at the beginning of the cultivation period and it reduces the risk of mudflows initiated by the steep *Wodgash* by taking water out of this channel. When all the snow feeding the pool is melted, the water level of the pool sinks, and the pool cannot be tapped any more. In June, the *Wodgash* dries out. If the snow feeding the pool does not melt due to cold, cloudy, or windy

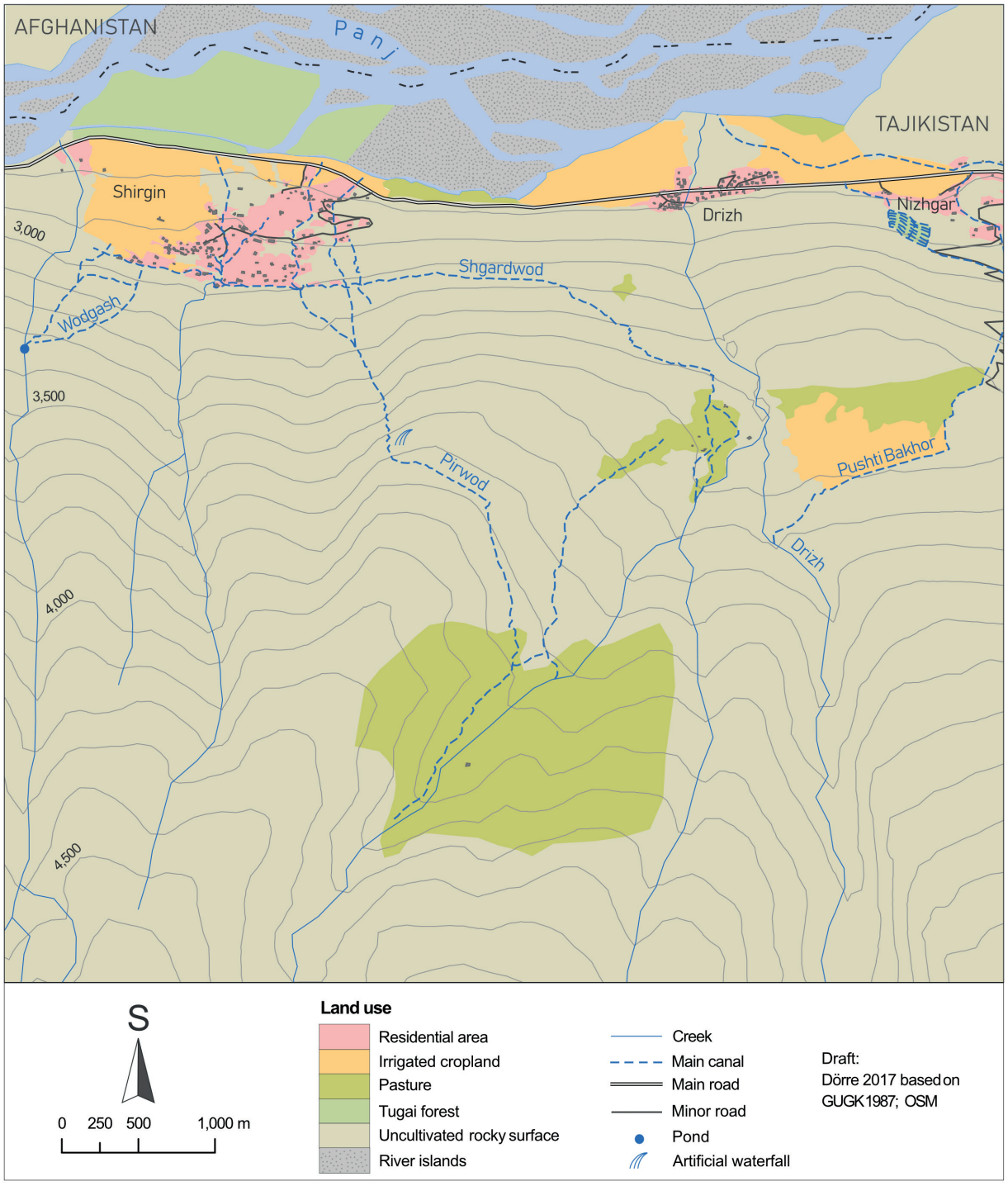

Fig. 6: Spatial overview of the water supply system of Shirgin Village

Source: Dörre (2018) based on Jarvis et al. (2008); OSM (2017).

weather, the canal can fall dry even in April or May (LG 2016; LKE 2015; T1 2016).

When the Russian Empire occupied the Pamirs at the end of the 19th century, the *Pirwod* and *Wodgash* canals were unable to provide enough water for Shirgin's growing population. In the course of the following years, a search for new water sources was undertaken and a tributary of the Drizh Creek, located approximately five kilometers to the west, was identified at an elevation of 3,400 m. The challenging task of digging the canal into the rocky surface was completed with support from the Russian border guards stationed at the nearby Langar Kikhn Post. In the early 20th century, the *Shgardwod* ('straight canal') project

characterized by several masoned and long concreted sections was finished. The canal works from April through October. The *Shgardwod* and *Pirwod* canals are today regarded as Shirgin's main water lines (LTH 2016; T1 2016; T2 2015; WM 2016).

Finally, the fields of *Pushti Bakhor* ('delayed spring'), located five kilometers outside of Shirgin to the west at 3,300 m elevation, were also developed in pre-Soviet times for the cultivation of fodder crops (Fig. 6). During this land acquisition project, a canal with the same name fed from the Drizh Creek and delivering the water to the fields of *Pushti Bakhor* was built, as well as a couple of sheep stables (FKS 2016; LTH 2016; Mirzo 2010). Today, local herders use the area as a summer pasture for sheep and goats, as well as for cattle (S1 2016).

Water distribution infrastructure

Within the limits of Shirgin, six secondary canals run through the neighborhoods to distribute the irrigation water. They are usually locked and can only be opened according to commonly defined schedules. Hundreds of tertiary canals branch off towards clusters of cultivated fields, garden plots, and orchards. The final stage of the irrigation system are tiny channels established in the fields, gardens, and orchards. These furrow-shaped water lines can be locked or blocked with small barrages made of stones, iron sheets, branches, wool, textiles, and animal hides that can be removed quickly and easily on demand.

Water management and irrigation practices

To gain a systematic understanding, the study of local-specific water management and irrigation arrangements can be differentiated by looking specifically at the three levels of decision-making, the involved actors, and the practices executed by them.

As a superior institution governing local water issues does not exist, Shirgin's central decision-making body is the village assembly that gathers every year briefly before or during the celebration of *Shogun* (also known as the Persian New Year, *Nawruz*), the vernal equinox on March 21. At this occasion, the assembly elects the *Mirāb* ('water master'). This, usually male, person is responsible for securing the water supply through supervising the three main canals. In case the *Mirāb* identifies damages or other problems with the infrastructure during his daily inspections, an *Ashar* ('collective work') is assembled. These collaborative activities are not only devoted to maintenance and repair work on irrigation infrastructures but also costly construction projects. The deliberate pooling of resources minimizes individual costs and enables each party involved to gain a greater advantage from the usage of commonly shared infrastructure than would being possible to maintain through individual efforts alone. Depending on the scope of work, each household of a neighborhood, or the entire village, sends a volunteer to participate in the work that usually takes between two and three days. As century-long experience has shown, most damage occurs in the winter, and must be repaired before the start of the irrigation period (T1 2016; WM 2015, 2016; Dörre 2020).

The maintenance regime for the *Shgardwod* canal is organized pragmatically. The community agrees that each household is responsible for a specific section of the canal and must conduct small cleaning, maintenance, and repair jobs to secure the functionality of the canal. Bigger damages require calling an *Ashar* (LG 2016; S2 2015; T1 2016). Another duty of the *Mirāb* is the creation of irrigation schedules adapted to different stages of the cultivation period and the amount of available water. These schedules must also be agreed to by the leaders of the community such as the head of the village and the representatives of the neighborhoods, as well as the village assembly. The schedules will be briefly delineated below.

For several years, the same experienced man has occupied the position of the water master (T1 2016; WM 2015, 2016). This circumstance shows that the community seems to be satisfied with his work and trusts the assessments of the *Mirāb*. It also indicates the importance of accumulated knowledge, experience, and mutual trust for the successful management and usage of Shirgin's common irrigation system.

According to the flow of the water, the so-called *Sardorkhoi-Dekhqonon* ('heads of farmers') are one management level below the *Mirāb*. They are responsible for the supervision and proper handling of the locks blocking the secondary canals, as well as for the condition of the canals themselves. Each canal has four heads that take turns and represent a different subgroup of up to ten farmers using the same canal. These subgroups are composed of farmers who cultivate neighboring fields irrigated from the same canal. Often, but not necessarily, they are immediate neighbors. The heads of farmers are elected by their group and are responsible for irrigation practices according to the agreed

schedules (T1 2016; WM 2015, 2016). Within these subgroups, the water division is organized by the members themselves. They continuously negotiate the time and duration of their irrigation slot, and open and close the locks in accordance with the established agreements. These arrangements are highly flexible, to quickly address shifting conditions. After the village assembly, the water master, the heads of farmers and the canal subgroups, individual farmers independently handling the water distribution on their *wundr* ('land plots') are the fifth and final tier of Shirgin's water management and irrigation arrangement (Dörre, Goibnazarov 2018).

Finally, the irrigation schedules are adapted to different scenarios, in terms of two different stages of the cultivation period and the amount of available water (T1 2016; WM 2016). One schedule is used during the beginning of the cultivation period from the middle of April until mid-May in years with a normal water supply. All households are divided into two main groups, each consisting of six subgroups of up to ten households. The six subgroups belonging to the first main group are entitled to irrigate their fields on even dates, the second main group on odd dates. The irrigation entitlement of a group comprises a day irrigation round lasting from 7am to 7pm, and a night irrigation round lasting from 7pm until 7am of the next morning. Accordingly, every subgroup has the right to irrigate their fields for around two hours during the day and two hours during the night. The water distribution within the subgroup is negotiated by its members. This schedule is publicly displayed to

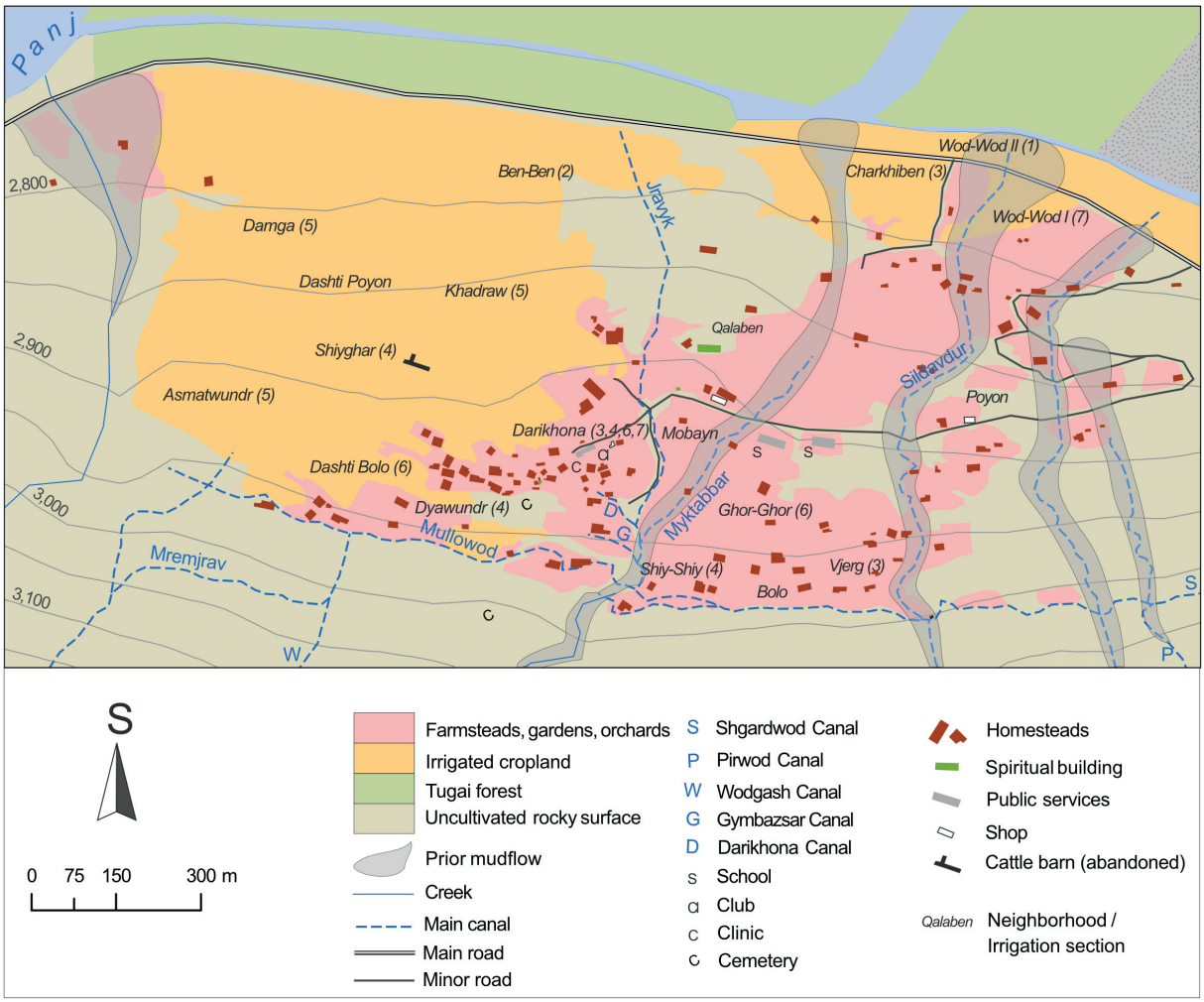

Fig. 1: Agricultural areas and neighborhoods of Shirgin Village.

The numbers in brackets behind the area/neighborhood names refer to the day of the week when the respective area / neighborhood receives irrigation water according to schedule 2 (1. Monday, 2. Tuesday, 3. Wednesday, etc.).

Source: Dörre (2020) based on Jarvis et al. (2008); OSM (2017).

create transparency and the possibility for people to check and control (Dörre, Goibnazarov 2018).

In years without water scarcity, a second schedule is used from the middle of May until the harvest of legumes in August. For organizational purposes, Shirgin is divided into several neighborhoods and agricultural areas. These neighborhoods and areas receive irrigation rights valid for one specific day of the week. Both the inhabitants of the respective neighborhoods and farmers of the respective areas organize the water distribution by themselves (Fig. 7).

In years with water scarcity, which is the common case, a third schedule is used for the same cultivation period, as in schedule 2. Instead of whole neighborhoods, canal-specific subgroups receive 24-hour long irrigation rights and have to negotiate the water distribution within their group. In case the water shortage is severe, the time slot for irrigation can be shortened. After the last field harvest has taken place in the middle or the end of August, a fourth irrigation regime is applied to irrigate remnant potato and vegetable beds and small legume sowings adjacent to farmsteads. At this time, the water demand is low and rules regulating the use of irrigation water are not necessary anymore. Every farmer can use as much water as needed and available.

Conclusion

The strength of the Shirgin community lies, in part, in the robust water management and irrigation-related local knowledge. This body of knowledge comprises a rich expertise on the environmental conditions of the surroundings of the village, its historical heritage, the detailed characteristics of the community and the place, as well as the long-term personal experiences of the responsible managers and individual farmers. Additionally, social assets like mutual dependency, neighborly help, and cooperation seem to be characteristics of the relations between the different tiers of Shirgin's water management and irrigation regimes. The arrangement has proven to be effective since the inhabitants collaborate with each other, share labor, time, and other costs and have managed to solve conflicts over irrigation water without involving external state actors. These assets promote a kind of micro-scale 'hydrosolidarity' (Falkenmark 1999:360) among the local farmers. Together, these features lead to a reduction in individual risks and living costs, as well as a decrease in free-riding, if not its full eradication, through social control. The presented case study exemplifies crucial aspects of community-based resource use and management including collaborative action, burden sharing, and the division of management responsibilities among many stakeholders. It also provides an example of human, cultural, and social assets becoming key factors for the equitable utilization of locally available natural resources, as well as individual survival in a society that is struggling with manifold challenges related to ongoing socio-ecological challenges. Even though it is primarily male farmers who are involved in Shirgin's irrigation water management arrangement, the term of equity seems to be appropriate to describe its characteristics, focusing on equity at the household level, since male farmers do not use water for themselves alone, but on behalf of their households. Thus, first, the male farmers represent entire households including persons of all genders and ages, and second, all households active in agriculture are involved in the irrigation arrangement. Finally, this research supports the assumption that local knowledge-based joint approaches for the management of common pool resources have the potential to be not only a basis for equitable resource utilization but can also be a central instrument for balancing interests within a community and a means of social organization. The presented and empirically based insights contribute to a better understanding of how social and ecological challenges related to societal transitions and global change can be tackled 'from below,' even if the presented case is specific and cannot be one-to-one transferred to other spatiotemporal contexts.

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Local Interlocutors

Acronym	Interlocutor and Date
FKS	Former kolkhoz shepherd, August 31, 2016
LG	Local guide and farmer, August 29 – September 2, 2016.
LKE	Local, knowledgeable elder person, June 15, 2015.
LTH	Local teacher and historian, June 16, 2015 & August 30, 2016.
S1	Shepherd 1, August 29, 2016.
S2	Shepherd 2, May 8, 2015.
SK	Shopkeeper, August 28, 2016.
T1	Teacher 1, August 28 – September 2, 2016.
T2	Teacher 2, personal communication, May 9, 2015.
WM	Water Master and former kolkhoz manager, June 16, 2015 & August 31, 2016.

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The second life of the Monotown: Questioning narratives of failed Soviet urban modernity in contemporary Kazakhstan

Tabea Rohner

Monotowns, urban settlements whose economies are dominated by a single enterprise or industry, were key elements of the Soviet Union's project of achieving socio-technological progress through industrialization and urbanization – and flagships of socialist modernity. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these towns have become known to an international public as problematic entities, characterized by crumbling infrastructures, socioeconomic precarity and environmental pollution. Monotowns' current challenges are commonly regarded in the media and academic studies as rooted in the Soviet past, with its legacy of urban and industrial misdevelopment. Accordingly, the solutions proposed to solve the 'monotown problem' aim at overcoming this legacy by subscribing to certain types of ('Western') models of urbanization and economic development. In this paper, I challenge the specific teleology implicated by these development models by drawing attention to alternative framings of monotowns' trajectories, particularly those arising from the lived experience of local residents. Using the case of the monotown Tekeli in Kazakhstan, where improvements in the social, economic and environmental spheres have recently been taking place, I question widespread narratives of failure and misfortune and, thus, aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of postindustrialization and urbanization processes in Central Asia.

Introduction

'Monotown' is the translation of the Russian *monogorod* and designates an urban settlement in the former Soviet space, the economy and social life of which are dominated by a single industry or enterprise – a so-called 'town-forming enterprise'. These towns were key elements of gigantic state-led modernization projects that were designed and implemented in response to a perceived lack of industrialization and urbanization in the Soviet Union (Collier 2011; Crawford 2018; Strange 2019). The first monotown prototypes began to emerge around the 1930s, typically in places where geologists had located valuable mineral deposits on extended expeditions sponsored by the Tsarist Empire in the 19th and early 20th century. In most cases, these were far-flung sites with little prior inhabitation, and, therefore, the towns were basically created from scratch. This entailed the creation of a complete set of amenities for the workers and their families, who were relocated there from more densely populated areas (Strange 2019). Many of the necessities of life – food, fuel, building materials – were transported sometimes thousands of kilometers from the nearest source to these remote outposts (Alexander, Buchli 2007).

The key actor in planning and construction activities was the state-owned town-forming enterprise, which was typically in charge of providing, for example, housing, social institutions, entertainment, food, road networks, sanitation infrastructure and central heating (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020; Strange 2019). Most mining towns in Soviet Kazakhstan experienced fast growth during the Second World War, when industries were relocated from the north to the south and the west to the east of the Soviet Union. After the war, industrial and city-building activities continued expanding and the young single-industry towns became flagships of socialist modernity – productive, wealthy, orderly and well-equipped with cultural facilities (see Fig.1 for an overview of Kazakhstan's monotowns). In addition to that, they benefitted from the centrally organized direct supply of consumer goods and labor resources from Moscow (Collier 2011; Junussova, Beimisheva 2020; Nasritdinov 2012).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the stop of subsidies from Moscow, many town-forming enterprises were closed, or down-sized, and countless workers lost their jobs and saw themselves forced to leave the towns (Nasritdinov 2012; Strange 2019; UNDP 2019). The key characteristics of the monotown model, namely their specific supply and distribution networks and the close intertwining of civic and cultural life with the economic logic of urban space, posed serious problems after the demise of the Soviet Union. As the town-forming enterprises typically funded, built and maintained all urban infrastructure, the economic problems of these enterprises quickly

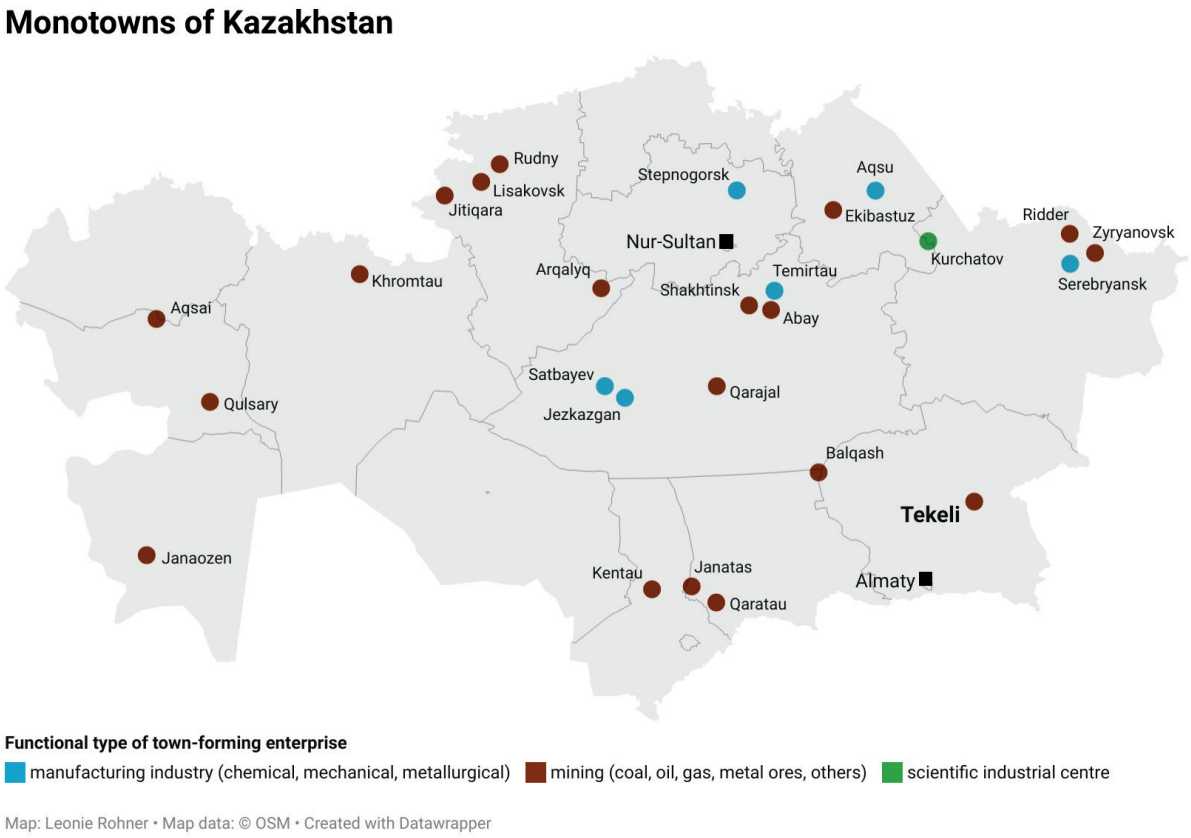

Fig. 1: Kazakhstan's monotowns including the functional type of their respective town-forming enterprises

Source: Figure compiled by Leonie Rohner and the author based on Maymurunova (2019).

spilled over to other spheres of urban life. The result was a decrease of the quality of housing and leisure, health and other amenities (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020; Kryukova et al. 2015). Many of these towns became „desolate monuments to Soviet engineering feats in establishing such outposts" (Alexander, Buchli 2007:10).

The phenomenon of the depressed post-Soviet monotown that struggles with crumbling urban infrastructures, high unemployment rates, environmental pollution and ageing communities has become known to a broad, international public through media coverage and scientific studies. The shift away from the concerns that monotowns embodied – the centrally planned construction of settlements around remotely located industrial enterprises – and their potential of social unrest growing out of precarious socioeconomic conditions, have turned monotowns into epitomes of failed Soviet urban modernity, according to common media and academic narratives.

I acquired first-hand knowledge of the considerable challenges that inhabitants of a monotown in contemporary capitalism are facing during my ethnographic fieldwork in the monotown Tekeli in Southeast Kazakhstan that lasted fourteen months between 2017 and 2019: High unemployment rates, precarious working conditions, poor conditions of roads, outmigration of young people, misallocation of government funds, poor drinking water quality, high levels of water, soil toxicity and decaying buildings inter alia (Fig.2 shows typical signs of decay). However, the interpretative framework within which they evaluated this lamentable situation differed from the common media and scientific framing. In most of my interlocutors' view, it is not the Soviet past, the inherited „nonmarket industrial structure" along with its „legacy of misdevelopment and mislocation for production and population" that is the major cause of contemporary problems (Gaddy, Ickes 2011:165). In contrast to many media and academic accounts, my interlocutors saw the legacy of Soviet urban modernity

as an asset rather than a disadvantage: Most Soviet-era multistory buildings are still habitable and many other elements of the built urban environment of that era, such as heating systems and power plants, are functional – although in need of maintenance. Instead, my interlocutors pointed out that current inadequacies of the municipal government are the major problem source, as well as the disadvantageous privatization of firms and communal services, their community's position within the global economy and a general climate of decline of moral standards.

Fig. 2: Decaying Soviet-era buildings at the entrance to the abandoned shafts of the lead-zinc mine in the Kazakhstani monotown Tekeli

Source: Picture by the author.

In this paper, I use the discrepancy between media and scientific accounts, on the one hand, and that by ordinary residents of the Kazakhstani monotown Tekeli, on the other, as a starting point to question dominant narratives about monotowns' trajectories as a story of the failure of Soviet urban modernity. I will do this in two steps. Firstly, I will lay bare by scrutinizing the underlying premises of the media and scientific narratives that these narratives position monotowns and their residents in a specific hierarchy of value and a teleological temporal framework. It is only within this specific framework, which sets urbanization patterns in the liberal 'West' as the desirable endpoint of monotowns' future trajectories, that the towns and their residents appear as problematic remnants of the past. Thus, the narrative of failed Soviet urban modernity turns out to be a situated and particular framing of the monotown issue with a strong ideological component rather than an objective analysis of facts from which obvious conclusions follow. Secondly, by drawing attention to recent improvements in the social, economic and environmental spheres in Tekeli, I question narratives of failure and decline on an empirical basis. However, these signs of recovery can hardly be regarded as manifestations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution[1] leading towards a postindustrial town, as envisioned by policy advisers and the Kazakhstani government. Instead, recovery happens in the form of small, incremental changes that, nevertheless, lead a decisive share of the monotown residents affected to imagine brighter futures in one of these alleged vestiges of the past.

The monotown: A narrative of failed Soviet urban modernity

Decaying urban infrastructure (Kaimuldinova et al. 2017; Kydyrbaeva et al. 2018), closure of town-forming enterprises (Bozhko 2017; Zakirov 2016), environmental pollution (Kaimuldinova et al. 2017; Musina, Neucheva 2018), high unemployment and self-employment rates (Kryukova et al. 2015; Nurzhan 2015), high levels of criminality and low quality of life (Nurzhan 2015), ageing communities (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020) and a variety of other forms of socioeconomic precarity are frequently mentioned problems of contemporary monotowns in the media and academic journals. When paying attention to the way in which these problems are evaluated and contextualized, it turns out that the Soviet legacy is very often, both in the media and scientific studies, said to be the source of the present problems. More specifically, according to a common narrative, it is urbanization patterns adopted in the Soviet Union beginning in the 1930s that left the contemporary societies with a system of physical and social infrastructure that is essentially and irrevocably misplaced.

I mention only a few of these of these instances: Leon Aron (2009) writes in an article in The New York Times titled "Darkness on the Edge of Monotown": „[P]roducts of Stalinist modernization, Russian company towns were built […] in the middle of nowhere and with complete disregard for long-

[1] The "Fourth Industrial Revolution" is commonly defined as the progressing blurring of the boundaries between the physical, digital and biological worlds through the use of technologies, such as the Internet of Things, virtual reality, robotics and artificial intelligence. Moving the country's economy towards Industry 4.0 is the declared aim of the Kazakhstani government (Alimkhan et al. 2019; Turkyilmaz et al. 2021).

term urban viability and economic geography, not to mention the needs and conveniences of workers and their families." Nowadays, according to Aron, the single-industry towns are problematic relics of this regrettable past, „frozen in the 1930s or '50s." In a similar vein, the World Bank (2010:24) has concluded that it „is likely that only a few of the enterprises can compete in international markets," since their „underlying problems are market unfriendly locations for enterprises which produce uncompetitive products." Articles concerned specifically with Kazakhstani monotowns, such as one by Chris Rickleton (2017) in the magazine NIKKEI Asia about the town Arqalyq, tell a similar story. The article, titled "Decaying Kazakh mining town struggles to shift focus. Government initiatives yield few benefits so far, as Soviet legacy endures", regards the "shadows of the past" – read: the town's Soviet legacy – as the source of current problems monotowns are facing, particularly their unsuitability for the global market economy.

Similar analyses are found in academic studies, for instance, in the following one by Clifford Gaddy and Barry Ickes dealing with the possible future of Russia's economy:

> „In the estimates of some, its greatest economic challenges stem from the fact that today's Russian Federation has yet to overcome the nonmarket industrial structure it inherited from the Soviet Union. […] [T]he structure of the Russian economy's industrial core, along with its legacy of misdevelopment and mislocation for production and population, remains intact" (Gaddy, Ickes 2011:165).

Even though contemporary problems in monotowns, such as inadequate financial resources, ineffective privatizations of firms, corruption, a lack of political continuity, inadequate budget systems and one-size-fits-all solutions for urban development are acknowledged as sources of monotowns' current hardship in many scientific and media articles, the underlining narrative remains one in which Soviet style industrialization and urbanization appears as the foundational cause of the problems and monotowns as a „failed relic of Soviet-era central planning" (World Bank 2018:27).

According to anthropologist Jeremy Morris, small monotowns have largely been written off as „hopeless relics of the Soviet urban planning that made no allowance for organic development or human habitability" (2016:29). The „worthless dowry" of Soviet industrial modernity, a metaphor coined by Elena Trubina (2013), is a powerful one that has been used to capture the little value that is attached to urban setups of monotowns in contemporary times.[2] Morris criticizes the idea of industrial Russia – the context where he conducted ethnographic research – as a „worthless dowry," as it „recalls the endlessly reinvented 'modernization' theories through which spaces, and ultimately people, are reconstructed in a hierarchy of value in Russia today" (2016:29). In view of the considerable similarities of urbanization and industrialization patterns in Russia and Kazakhstan, Morris' critique can be extended to Kazakhstani monotowns. Beyond that, I would add that the hierarchy of values are not only at play within the former Soviet countries themselves but also on a broader level. The hierarchy of values within which monotowns' urban dowries appear as "worthless" is embedded in powerful transnational discourses, which present progress as a predefined path towards a specific type of modernity – one that corresponds to the ideal of Western market economies (see also Cima in this volume). Within this vision of progress, the former Soviet countries are seen as a „square peg to be rammed into the round hole of the global economy" (Morris 2016:29). In the following section, I look closer into how this vision translates into concrete suggestions for improving monotowns' situation made in the media and scientific articles with an underlying narrative of failed Soviet urban modernity.

Hegemonic remedies and their limits

Even in the 1990s, monotowns were recognized as strategically important settlements in the newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union, particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan, because a significant part of the countries' urban populations and industrial production was concentrated in the

2 Trubina (2013) uses the metaphor following Kaika and Swyngedouw's (2000) work, according to which the imposing elements of the built environment (e.g. water towers, dams, pumping stations, power plants, gas stations) that accompany technological networks (e.g. water, gas, electricity, information) are the urban dowry.

Fig. 1: Development of Tekeli's population size from the dissolution of the Soviet Union until 2020

Source: figure compiled by Leonie Rohner and the author based on Bespyatov (2020) and the Committee on Statistics of Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2019).

single-industry towns. However, there was not yet a systematic approach to the development of monotowns, but the focus was on the support of core businesses, particularly the town-forming enterprises (Turgel et al. 2016). In order to prevent mass unemployment and social tension, Kazakhstan's government provided special loans and subsidies to selected local enterprises, among them the lead-zinc combine in Tekeli (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020). In the early 2000s, there was a short boom in monotowns; in some, population size started increasing compared to the 1990s, and, since 2011, there has been a steady increase in the population of several Kazakhstani monotowns including Tekeli (Bozhko 2017; Kryukova et al. 2015)(see Fig.3 for development of population size in Tekeli).

Nevertheless, mining companies could not operate at the same level of productivity or employ as many town residents as in the past; the government subsidies had a temporary effect and kept some enterprises alive for only a few years while a diversification of production did not occur on a significant scale (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020; Kryukova et al. 2015). The global economic crises in 2008/2009 again highlighted the vulnerability of monotowns to abrupt changes in the economic environment – the socioeconomic situation of many monotowns was aggravated during this time (Kryukova et al. 2015; Shastitko, Fatikhova 2015; Turgel et al. 2016). The Kazakhstani government reacted by means of implementing national industrialization and innovation programs, but unfortunately, the government subsidies did not reach all monotowns, and worsening living conditions led to increasing social tension (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020). In 2011, industrial workers in the Kazakhstani oil producing monotown Janaozen, who were not satisfied with their salaries and living conditions, went on strike, which evolved into a violent conflict with the town authorities leading to over a dozen deaths (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020).

The „specter of social unrest" (Crowley 2016:400) led the governments of the countries of the former Soviet Union to take further measures supporting monotowns' socioeconomic development. In 2012, one year after the Janaozen protest, the Kazakhstani government approved the Program for the Development of Monotowns 2012-2020, aiming at assisting a selection of 27 monotowns by increasing the efficiency of the main operating industry, supporting economic diversification and small and medium-sized enterprises, establishing free trade zones, attracting domestic and foreign investment, stimulating labor mobility, developing social and physical infrastructure, professional retraining of

the population, particularly training in investment and entrepreneurialism, environmental sanitation and creative approaches to the design of architectural space (Bozhko 2017; Kryukova et al. 2015; Permyakov, Krasnova 2018; Vetrova et al. 2014; Zakirov 2016).[3]

The experience of European countries, Canada, the US and Japan serves explicitly as a role model for the monotown's future trajectories in policy-oriented academic studies. Glasgow (UK), Kamaishi (Japan), Tumbler Ridge (Canada) and the Ruhr region (Germany) are listed as examples of successful postindustrial transformation of cities (Kryukova et al. 2015; Shastitko, Fatikhova 2015; Vetrova et al. 2014; Zakirov 2016). In most of these studies, striking a balance between state interventions, on the one hand, and entrepreneurial activities of private actors, such as companies or individuals, on the other, is regarded as the key for the successful transformation of monotowns in global capitalism. However, there is a clear hierarchy: Market methods and incentives are preferred over excessive state subsidizing in the form of a regular inflow of federal resources into monotowns, as the latter is suspected of preserving post-Soviet countries' inefficient industrial geography (Crowley 2016:397; Kryukova et al. 2015:264; Shastitko, Fatikhova 2015:5). The ultimate goal of the measures put forward by policy-oriented researchers and manifested in Kazakhstan's monotown development program is to turn the towns from "low-rated", "depressed" and "backward" areas into "active centers of economic growth" with a diversified economy, including technology-intensive industries and services (Kryukova et al. 2015:261; Vetrova et al. 2014:930). This ought to be done in line with the trend of increasing the proportion and the role of the tertiary sector in the global economy, the „economy of the future" (Zakirov 2016:172).

A preliminary assessment of the effectiveness of the Program for the Development of Monotowns after the first few years of its implementation and another evaluation towards the end of its completion showed limited success of the program. Even though examples have been reported where the program led to significant improvement (e.g. Stepnogorsk, where unemployment declined, industrial production and the number of small and medium-sized enterprises increased, and a stable population maintained (UNDP 2019)), „the positive aspects of certain monotowns have not been able to reverse the general negative situation, nor has it ensured that there will be a steady positive dynamics in their development" (Bozhko 2017:9–10). Junussova and Beimisheva (2020:238–239) come to similar conclusions, postulating that the current monotown policy in Kazakhstan is not effective for economic or social development because government interventions in the form of top-down distribution of subsidies to uncompetitive and unprofitable industries create even greater dependency of the monotown populations and economics on their local large enterprises.

Despite the limited success in turning "depressed" monotowns into "engines of economic growth", the overall development framework has remained largely unchallenged so far. The Kazakhstani state sticks with its ambitious transformation agenda for 2050 that aims to link diversified economic growth and modernization with urbanization moving towards Industry 4.0. The goal remains to ensure economic development based on the principles of profitability, return on investment and competitiveness, digitalization and to increase the country's urbanization rate from 56 to 70 per cent by using a few selected large cities as drivers of the national economy, based on the hope that these cities would „pull others along" (Junussova, Beimisheva 2020; UNDP 2019). Negative aspects of previous experiences with this model of urbanization are largely ignored, for instance, indications suggesting that it might lead to new geographies of centrality and marginality both between cities and within themselves (Crowley 2020; Sassen 2000). It is very likely that monotowns will have a hard time in this urbanization model, even though they should ideally benefit from cities of regional and national significance in their proximity, as is stated in some of the studies quoted above.

[3] This is an enumeration of the measures most frequently proposed in policy-oriented academic studies; there are variations on these measures, depending on a variety of factors, such as the development potential of the monotowns (high, medium or low), their degree of remoteness from economically strong urban centers and life cycle stage (Bozhko 2017; Maymurunova 2019; Junussova, Beimisheva 2020). In Russia, controlled shrinking – the relocation of whole populations from economically depressed and shrinking towns to more promising ones – has been a common policy (Crowley 2020). This has not been seriously considered by the Kazakhstani government; one reason for which might be that there are few monotowns in Kazakhstan that are still shrinking and those which are, are shrinking relatively slowly (UNDP 2019).

My aim in this section has not been to judge whether the measures proposed by the Kazakhstani government, scholars and policy advisers are suitable or not for supporting monotowns' socioeconomic development, but, much more modestly, I wished to highlight that the measures proposed to solve the "monotown problem" are part of a broader narrative framing of monotowns with a strong teleological component. According to this framework, postindustrial cities in the West, and urbanization patterns more generally, are regarded as desirable endpoints of monotowns' future trajectories. In the next section, I would like to give further nuances to this outlook by contrasting it with the experiences of ordinary residents of the monotown Tekeli and with accounts by scholars who have been exploring the limitations of the "economic plus urban growth" paradigm in finding a viable future for monotowns.

Alternative views on monotowns' trajectories

Posters bearing the lettering "*Promyshlennaya Revolyutsiya 4.0*" (Russian: "Industrial Revolution 4.0"), "*Ry'hani' Jan'g'yry*'" (Kazakh: "Modernization of Consciousness") and "Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy" were hung up all around Tekeli during my fieldwork in the small monotown from 2017 to 2019. When I asked local residents about their opinion of the slogans on the posters and the state-led projects and aspirations they advertise, it turned out that none of them had a clear idea about what the Fourth Industrialization Revolution, Modernization of Consciousness or the Kazakhstan 2050 strategy were all about. They explained to me that such posters were so ubiquitous and their content changed so often that they hardly paid any attention to them, or even completely stopped noticing them. Those interlocutors who did take a stance on the posters did so in a rather unenthusiastic manner: Regarding "*Ry'hani' Jan'g'yry*'", one interlocutor told me that some projects are being implemented in this context but, in general, a lot of it is empty promises and idle talk. Another interlocutor referred to the "Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy" as a strategy of the government to make Kazakhstan "big". When pronouncing the word "big", he made a gesture with both hands and noises showing a balloon being inflated – and mischievously added that they already changed the final date of the country's aspired rise from 2030 to 2050. In short, my research revealed that the government-promoted narratives of modernization, Industrial Revolution and economic growth were weakly connected to the ordinary residents' experience of ongoing developments in their hometown.

However, this does not mean that my interlocutors from Tekeli and residents of similar monotowns are satisfied with the status quo of their hometowns and do not desire any improvement – quite to the opposite. I interpret statements like the one comparing the Kazakhstan 2050 strategy to the inflation of a balloon more as a fundamental questioning of the kind of development that the government strives to make palatable to its citizens. Apart from questioning the desirability of turning Kazakhstan into one of the thirty most developed countries by 2050 and joining the global outlook of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, some interlocutors also questioned the very possibility of the endeavor. The reasons for their hesitation are manifold and include both the microlevel of ordinary residents' 'mentality' and the macrolevel of the global political economy – and everything in between. In brief, in the view of many residents of Tekeli, Kazakhstan occupies a relatively marginal position in global political and economic power relations and monotowns within Kazakhstan even more so, which, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have been undergoing processes of disconnection and marginalization within the country. This is reinforced by the fact that, in their opinion, local and higher-level politicians are not seriously committed to taking the country forward but rather to enriching themselves, and ordinary citizens lack the will and resources to be driving forces of the aspired "revolution".

However, in contrast to the proponents of narratives depicting monotowns as epitomes of failed Soviet modernity, the overwhelming majority of my interlocutors evaluate the Soviet modernization project overwhelmingly positively and do not see it as the fundamental cause of current socioeconomic problems of their town. Rather, it is the cessation of the Soviet "social wage" (Morris 2016) – canteens, childcare, transport, leisure facilities, etc., which used to be largely provided by the town-forming company – and current shortcomings of the government organs responsible – mismanagement, incompetency, corruption, etc. – that are seen as the major sources of their current hardship. In addition to that, Tekeli's typical monotown built environment, which in many architects and urban

planners' view would be characterized as „faceless", „featureless" and „identical" (Permyakov, Krasnova 2018:2) due to the salience of standardization and prefab technologies, is assessed differently by most of its inhabitants: The town is generally perceived as both beautiful and functional – the urban forms meet the demands of the residents. Soviet building quality is praised, and it is linked, for instance, to the facts that the Soviet-era hydropower plants are still functional, the thermal-power plant has been working uninterruptedly for many decades and most multistory housing blocks are habitable. If there are complaints about the built urban environment, they do not concern the general urban forms of the monotown but the quality of current maintenance works and newly built edifices.

When residents of Tekeli reflect on the quality of their present lives in a post-Soviet monotown, this often happens in a way aptly captured by Morris for the Russian context: „[…] [L]ocal people switch in an instant from a tale of woe to a grudging acknowledgement of the town's relative emergence from the turbulent 1990s; with some additional prodding the same individuals will then switch their tone and tack once again" (2016:7). In my experience with residents of Tekeli, the town's "relative emergence from the turbulent 1990s" is linked to small, incremental improvements in the town's condition, more specifically, in ameliorating migration developments, improvements of the built and biotic urban environment, and the revitalization of the town's economy. Since the early 2000s, the number of those who have moved to Tekeli has steadily been bigger than the number who moved away; in 2019, the town had more inhabitants than ever before in its history.[4] Over the course of my fieldwork, new houses were in the process of construction, the riverside promenade was beautified, a viewpoint platform was built and many courtyards were equipped with new playgrounds. Furthermore, the re-cultivation of the last remaining tailing pond started in the summer of 2020. Regarding the town's economy, small businesses, such as food stands, small grocery stores or game rooms, have been mushrooming over the last few years, the former town-forming enterprise was recommissioned based on a new economic orientation and the tourism sector has been expanding significantly (Fig.4 shows one of the businesses that recently opened). A slowly recovering economy was not only the subjective impression of my interlocutors but also supported by statistics published by the municipal government in the local newspaper Tekeli Tynysy, according to which the general level of economic activity increased in 2017, 2018 and 2019 both at the city-forming enterprises, in small and medium-sized businesses, and in other enterprises. Additionally, the first ten months of the 2020 were „characterized by a positive dynamism of the development of all branches of the economy" (Tekeli Tynysy 2020:4).

Fig. 4: Final workings before the brand-new department store in Tekeli's town center opens its doors.

Source: Picture by the author.

However, material incentives, such as the increase of the level of activity of the formal economy, are only one part of the story of why a significant share of Tekeli's inhabitants stay in the town and, thus, contribute to a future of the town possibly beyond shrinkage and decline. In line with an increasing number of studies transcending the mainstream view of monotowns as places of economic and moral decline and hopelessness, my data from Tekeli strongly suggests that people are engaging in diverse practices to make their hometown comfortable and habitable against abstract measures of human potential, such as the availability of amenities or opportunities of social mobility.[5] As noted by other authors as well (Bolotova, Stammler 2010;

[4] A large share of the population growth in Tekeli is owed to the settlement of Kazakh repatriates, so-called "*qandas*" (former "*oralman*"), in the town. It is likely that the presence of *qandas* did not only lead to an increase in the population number but also contributed to Tekeli's socioeconomic development, as many *qandas* started their own businesses.

[5] See Morris (2016) for an overview of these studies.

Crowley 2020; Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2016), many elderly inhabitants have strong emotional attachments to the urban environments which they built with their „own hands" (Bolotova, Stammler 2010:208) and do not see migration as an option, even if it would very likely raise their standard of living. Inquiring into the actual lived experience of monotown residents further reveals that younger generations who did not participate in the towns' construction can also develop strong feelings of attachment and rootedness (Laruelle, Hohmann 2017).

In the case of Tekeli, it is particularly through "nature practices" such as urban agriculture and foraging (for berries, mushroom, etc.), that many inhabitants make their hometown pleasant to live in. I hypothesize that the widespread engagement in urban nature practices among Tekeli's residents contributes importantly to the town's recent recovery and the urban community's resilience more generally. On the one hand, it does so by providing a significant share of the urbanites' sustenance and strengthening social ties through mutual help and food sharing. On the other hand, engaging with local nature, particularly the soil, enhances people's feelings of attachment to their hometown. The possibility of engaging in these practices on a daily basis makes many residents of Tekeli consider a small monotown in a far-flung place in the mountains a better place to live in than a big metropolis.

Conclusion: What kind of second life for monotowns?

Inhabitants of monotowns in the countries of the former Soviet Union are confronted with manifold social, economic and environmental challenges. I have highlighted in this paper that, in many instances in the media and academic studies, these challenges are regarded as rooted in the Soviet past with its legacy of urban and industrial misdevelopment. Mirroring the way in which the "monotown problem" is analyzed in these accounts, the remedies proposed to solve it aiming at overcoming Soviet legacies, subscribing to specific types of ('Western') urbanization and economic development models. I challenged the specific teleology implicated by this development model by drawing attention to alternative framings of monotowns' trajectories giving examples from my own ethnographic fieldwork in Tekeli and from other authors engaging with the lived experience of monotown populations. Without the intention of providing an alternative recipe on how to solve the "monotown problem," I would speak in favor of approaches to monotowns that focus on the plurality of (economic) practices already established locally, rather than predominantly on the towns' deficiencies.[6] What these towns' second life will look like in future is at stake: Becoming – most likely bad – replicas of Western postindustrial cities or embarking on alternative paths, which have not yet been determined but would ideally be based on the unique assets of monotowns. To name but a few, these assets are their relatively small size[7] and, thus, widespread absence of common problems of metropolises (e.g. traffic jams, smog, noise pollution, anonymity, spatialized social inequality), residents' strong attachment to place, and well-established and diverse economic practices transcending capitalist imperatives of economic and urban growth.

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[6] An example of this is "diverse economies" by J.K. Gibson-Graham and Kelly Dombroski (2020); also see Cima in this volume. Instead of focusing predominantly on formalized and monetized activities, such as wage labor, or market transactions and investment carried out by private enterprises, it would be worthwhile paying more attention to the uncountable other practices that people carry out in the pursuit of their livelihoods. In the case of Tekeli, sustenance farming, foraging and food sharing are prominent examples of this, but housework and care work, for example, equally belong to this category.

[7] Monotowns vary greatly in size and the assets named here do not apply to all of them. However, most single-industry towns in Kazakhstan are small cities with a population of up to 50,000 people, with the exception of four medium-sized cities with a population of over 100,000 people: Temirtau, Rudny, Janaozen and Ekibastuz (Maymurunova 2019).

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Towards a Central Asian public transport renaissance?

Wladimir Sgibnev

After the demise of the Soviet Union, economic decline, political upheaval and lack of funds led to a significant decrease in public transport provision in Central Asia. Entire systems were closed down, many more significantly curtailed. Marshrutka *minibuses became the predominant feature of public transport in the region – with decline and informality as the dominant analytical lenses. However, recent developments cast doubt on this paradigm. Significant investments have been made into metro systems in Tashkent and Almaty, or to Dushanbe's trolleybuses. Samarkand has seen the opening of a tramway system – a unique case in the entire former Soviet Union. How to make sense out of these seemingly counterintuitive developments? Based on media reports and rolling stock database analyses, the paper attempts to scrutinize current developments in the sphere of public transport in Central Asia, to challenge the post-independence decline paradigm of public transport provision, and to embed it in transborder knowledge flow circuits.*

Introduction

In mid-December 2020, a new three-kilometers-long trolleybus line has been brought into service in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe. Remarkably, this has been the first line extension in the city since the late 1980s – in a network that has mainly seen decline, closures, detours and empty promises ever since. In the course of thirty years after independence in 1991, six stations had been added to Tashkent's metro system. Only the last year has seen the opening of 15 more. Furthermore, Samarkand stands out as the only city in the entire former Soviet Union, where a new tramway system has been built from scratch, in 2017. How to make sense out of these developments? Does the expansion of local public transport signify an increased awareness towards socially relevant and environmentally friendly mobilities? A redefinition of state means and capacities, after decades of disinvestment and neglect? Consultants-driven tokenist ventures to greenwash and smartify otherwise overbearing mass motorization? Or gilded gimmicks in the style of the monorail in Ashgabat's "Olympic Village"? This paper is raising questions more than answering them, and should be seen as a first and rather descriptive step, to build upon for further inquiry. The ambition of this paper is, therefore, to draw attention to phenomena that re-equilibrate our perception of Central Asian urban public transport. Indeed, it has been depicted both in media (Stanradar 2019), scholarship (Grdzelishvili, Sathre 2011) and activism (Varlamov 2020) in terms of post-Soviet decline and deficiency: widespread line closures, decrepit vehicles, unreliable service, and a ubiquitous incursion of dominantly privately provided minibus services, locally known as *marshrutki* – themselves more often than not depicted in unfavorable and exoticizing terms.

The paper is largely based on an analysis of the Transphoto rolling stock database (Transphoto 2021), as of January 2021. This is an online bottom-up non-profit community of mostly Russian-speaking public transport enthusiasts. The website provides an unfathomable source of information on systems throughout the globe, yet with a particularly detailed outlook on the former Soviet Union. Almost every single post-Soviet tram and trolleybus vehicle in service may be found there. The database focuses on 'electric' public transport modes, and does not take buses, long-distance rail, etc. into consideration. This is reflected in the graphs and charts of this study. The Transphoto picture metadata provides information on series, manufacturers, provenience, transfers, state of repair and other details. Still, as every other crowdsourced resource, the information needs to be treated with the appropriate caution, e.g. with regard to data completeness or particular biases of the contributing population (Bittner et al. 2016).

The surprising 1990s: Overcoming decline narratives

Public transport provision in the five Central Asian republics is, as of now, as a tendency analyzed and assessed in the light of the Soviet past. With the exception of Tashkent's tramway, dating back to the Russian Empire, all urban public transport systems in the region have been part and parcel of the Soviet infrastructural society-engineering mega-project. In the Soviet Union, urban transport systems were the responsibility of different ministries of

the member republics – buses mostly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Automotive Transport and electric urban transport systems under the Ministry of Communal Services. Their high hierarchical position indicates the importance of public transport for Soviet urban administration. A system of cross-subsidies and annual debt write-offs enabled the financial survival of these systems (Akimov, Banister 2011).

Considering infrastructures as cornerstones of modernity, is by no means specific to the Soviet and post-Soviet realm. Soviet-era developmentalism, the gigantic scope of infrastructural projects with the plethora of implications on nature, human lives and livelihoods had their respective counterparts in other world regions. However, these high modernist ambitions of mastering and subduing nature, and the creation of the new, Socialist Man through infrastructures were declared state policy, and spelled out and celebrated accordingly. The investments into urban public transport – from the capital cities up to the farthest peripheries of the Union – are therefore one little element of this infrastructural paradigm.

These past infrastructures literally build future because of their decade-long period of existence. The common infrastructural heritage justifies, for the purpose of the paper, the specific regional containerization of Central Asia. Large technological systems are still reminiscent of Soviet-era connectedness – in terms of physical infrastructures such as the formerly common electric grid, pipelines, railway gauges – materialities, as well as related memories, practices, institutions and normativities.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought forth widespread failures in transport, water, heating, electricity, or healthcare provision, and marked the disruption of infrastructures built in assumption of a political – and thus technological – unity. Alongside old industrial regions, particularly the peripheries of the former Soviet Union experienced cutbacks, not only because of economic downturns but also due to out-migration of experts, and regional conflicts, with borders cutting through elaborate railway, pipeline or electricity grids. Yet, perhaps most significantly, the shift from a centralized infrastructural regime to individualized, fragmented and ailing systems affected relations between citizens and the state. Unstable provision was coupled with steadily rising costs, which, in many cases was the most important single factor for a still prevailing nostalgia for the Soviet Union as a caretaker state.

Economic decline and the political turmoil of the 1990s, however, led to a substantial abatement of publicly run transport. Responsibility for providing public transport services was transferred from central ministries to the municipalities, without any appropriate transfer of funding (Gwilliam 2001). The ageing rolling stock was decaying and no resources were available for the purchase of new vehicles or even spare parts, or the maintenance of overhead lines. Running vehicles were taken out of service to cannibalize on the spare parts. Municipalities throughout Central Asia attempted to privatize bus fleets and created legislative frameworks for line tendering in the course of the 1990s – with various degrees of success (Akimov, Banister 2011; Finn 2007; Gwilliam 2001). In contrast to the bus systems, tram and trolleybus systems did not lend themselves to privatization due to high initial investment costs and they continued to place a severe financial burden on urban budgets (Muktarbek uulu 2008). Therefore, the municipalities either had to keep up high levels of subsidies (up to 70 per cent of the running costs according to Akimov and Banister 2011; up to 98 per cent according to Gwilliam 2000), or decide to close down the systems. In the case of Uzbekistan, apart from failing public budgets, market protection interests played an important role in closing down trolleybus systems, as this provided a large market for the locally produced *GM Uzbekistan* minibuses – '*Damas*' – and *Isuzu Uzbekistan* midi-buses. These were the heydays of the massive replacement of the public 'large-volume' tram or bus lines with *marshrutki* (Rekhviashvili, Sgibnev 2018).

Out of the more than 30 electric public transport systems that were built in Central Asia in Soviet times, two thirds were closed down after the demise of the Soviet Union (Tab. 1). Almost all fixed-track systems in Uzbekistan were closed down, with the notable exception of the interurban trolleybus line between Khiva and Urganch. Most systems in Kazakhstan are not running any longer, and the remaining ones have experienced severe cutbacks. Turkmenistan's only trolleybus network in Ashgabat was cut down to one line out of eight in the early 2000s and closed entirely in January 2012 – with the vague promise of a metro line to be built in some distant future.

Tab. 1: Opening and closing dates of Central Asian electric public transport systems, as of April 2021.

Country	City	Opened in	Closed in	Mode
Kazakhstan	Aktobe	1982	2013	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Almaty	2011		Metro
Uzbekistan	Almalyk	1967	2009	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Almaty	1937	2015	Tramway
Kazakhstan	Almaty	1944		Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Andijon	1970	2002	Trolleybus
Turkmenistan	Ashgabat	1964	2012	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Atyrau	1996	1999	Trolleybus
Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	1951		Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Bukhoro	1987	2005	Trolleybus
Tajikistan	Dushanbe	1955		Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Fargona	1971	2003	Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Jizzakh	1990	2010	Trolleybus
Tajikistan	Khujand	1970	2012	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	N. Bukhtarma	1979	1981	Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Namangan	1973	2010	Trolleybus
Kyrgyzstan	Naryn	1994		Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Nukus	1991	2007	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Nur-Sultan	1983	2008	Trolleybus
Kyrgyzstan	Osh	1977		Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Oskemen	1959		Tramway
Kazakhstan	Pavlodar	1965		Tramway
Kazakhstan	Petropavlovsk	1971	2014	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Qaraghandy	1950	1997	Tramway
Kazakhstan	Qaraghandy	1967	2010	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Qostanay	1989	2005	Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Samarkand	1947	1973	Tramway
Uzbekistan	Samarkand	2017		Tramway
Uzbekistan	Samarkand	1957	2005	Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Shymkent	1968	2005	Trolleybus

Kazakhstan	Taras	1979	2013	Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Tashkent	1936	2016	Tramway
Uzbekistan	Tashkent	1947	2010	Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Tashkent	1977		Metro
Kazakhstan	Temirtau	1959		Tramway
Uzbekistan	Urgench	1997		Trolleybus

Source: Author's calculations based on Transphoto data.

Note: Tashkent data reflects the broad-gauge tramway system (1936-2016). Prior to that, the city also had a horse tramway (1897-1912) and a narrow-gauge tramway system (1912-1968).

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the picture looks somewhat different: although these two countries were hit worst by the dissolution of the USSR, local trolleybus systems are almost all in place and have received substantial public funding over the last few years. The fleets in both capitals – Bishkek and Dushanbe – are being renewed, not to mention the small system in Naryn in the Tien-Shan mountains that opened in 1994 in the midst of economic turmoil after independence. A second line is being built for the trolleybus system in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh. Only Khujand in northern Tajikistan has closed down its trolleybus network in 2012, after many years of agony, yet rumors of a potential re-opening surface every now and then (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Trolleybuses standing idle at the Khujand depot after a substation failure, shortly before the final decision to close down the system

Source: Photo taken by Sgibnev 2010.

Large-scale investments in Soviet times, a rapid decline thereafter, massive rise of *marshrutki*, and then, some sporadic and unsustainable investments here and there – this is the classical story of public transport trajectories, along the lines of many other accounts of post-Soviet infrastructure provision. This account is not only present in scholarship, but has also been firmly internalized by many local actors, caught in a self-orientalized suspense between the loss of a Soviet-era modernity project, and a prospectively unattainable bright sustainable mobility future. Yet it is worth delving into the details, in order to decipher some intriguing developments that run counter this narrative.

Looking at the total number of active electric public transport systems in the region, two trends are worth noting: First, also the Soviet era saw the shutdown of a tramway system – the one in Samarkand – which happened to be re-built 44 years later in time. Second, the peak for active trolleybus systems occurred, with a total of 24, in the year 2000, almost ten years after independence (Fig. 2). Counterintuitively, line extensions and system openings took place well after the end of the Soviet Union. In Khujand, for instance, the interurban trolleybus line to Chkalovsk and Ghafurov opened in stages from 1995 to 1999, in spite of the ongoing Tajik civil war. Taking aside the much later openings of the Almaty metro and the Samarkand tramway, the 'wild' and austere 1990s saw a linear continuation of Soviet-era trolleybus system openings in the region (Tab. 2). Surely, most of these systems were already on the drawing board well before independence. Worth noting is the institutional and societal inertia that kept those projects running, and brought them, eventually, to fruition – in spite of a dire economic situation and a general lack of funding. Yet back then, the Soviet-era knowledge networks, supply chains, and institutional practices seemingly still worked well enough in order to make these projects feasible and affordable.

An even more revealing exercise consists in adding those systems to the picture that have demonstrably been under construction, yet have been mothballed before opening (Tab. 3). The timeline spreads through the entire 1990s. The list includes second-order cities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. For the latter, it would have brought electric public transport to almost every province capital. Transphoto forum members speculated about the existence of a state-wide investment program for mid-sized cities in Uzbekistan in the mid-1990s, which might have been at the roots of this development. The suspicion is that symbolic capital equally played a role: as every capital city deserves a true metro, each regional capital surely deserves an own trolleybus network – or at least dis-

played the ambition to receive one. This might also have played out at the local level where trolleybus construction served as a local prestige project – as in Qorako'l with its 17,000 inhabitants and a doubtful prerequisite for a trolleybus system installation, to say the least.

Fueled by national or local ambitions, either way, the investment programs did not prove successful or sustainable. Most construction projects never saw completion. Out of the five which were actually brought into service, only two survived until the current day. Most probably, construction investments from the 'center' were not matched by local operating and maintenance funds. Unstable electricity provision, rising motorization rates, and waning political support brought these latecomer trolleybus systems to an untimely end.

Nevertheless, the sheer presence of latecomer systems and construction sites in the 1990s shows that the demise of the Soviet Union did not put an

Tab. 3: Trolleybus systems under construction, which, however, never opened.

Country	City	Mode	Construction stage
Uzbekistan	Qarshi	Trolleybus	1989-1990
Kyrgyzstan	Jalal-Abad	Trolleybus	1990-1991
Kyrgyzstan	Balykchy	Trolleybus	1992-1994
Uzbekistan	Qorako'l	Trolleybus	1994-1997
Uzbekistan	Navoiy	Trolleybus	1996-1998
Uzbekistan	Qarshi	Trolleybus	1989-1990
Kazakhstan	Turkistan	Trolleybus	1999-2000

Source: Author's calculations based on Transphoto data

Tab. 2: Public transport system openings after 1990

Country	City	Opened in	Closed in	Mode
Uzbekistan	Jizzakh	1990	2010	Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Nukus	1991	2007	Trolleybus
Kyrgyzstan	Naryn	1994		Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Atyrau	1996	1999	Trolleybus
Uzbekistan	Urgench	1997		Trolleybus
Kazakhstan	Almaty	2011		Metro
Uzbekistan	Samarkand	2017		Tramway

Source: Author's calculations based on Transphoto data

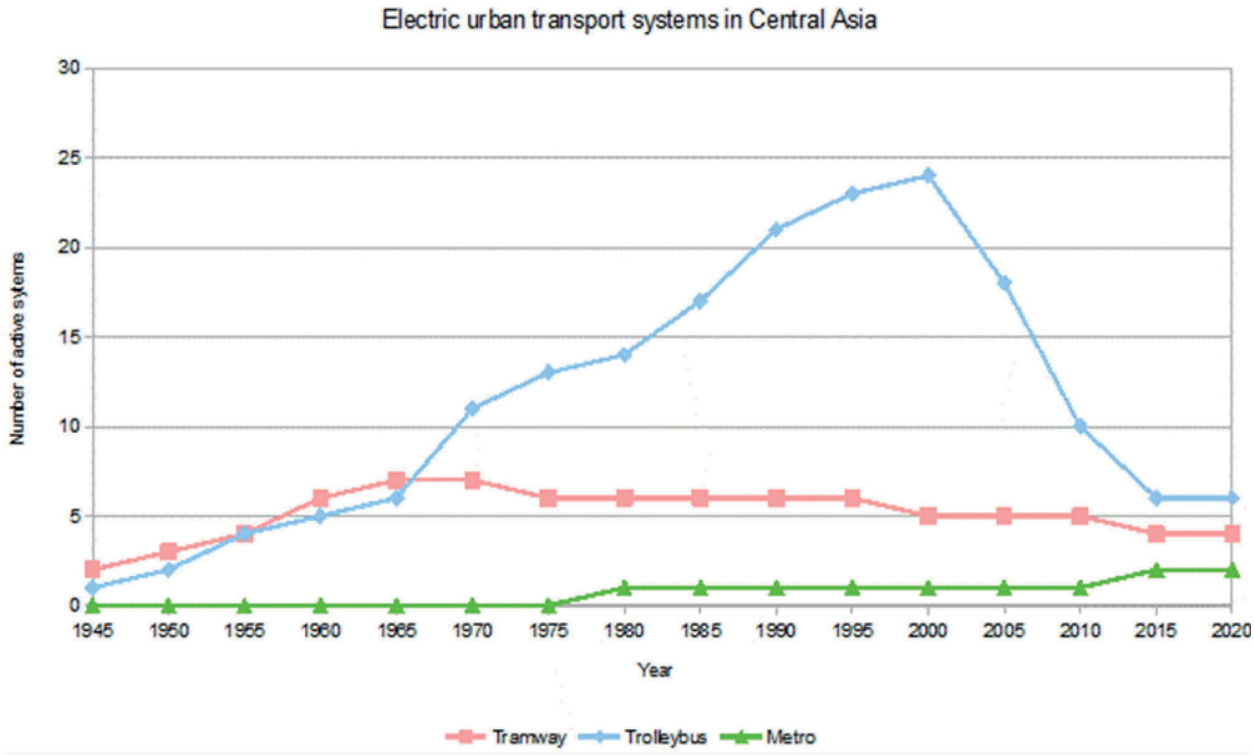

Fig. 2: Number of active electric public transport systems in Central Asia
Source: Author's calculations based on Transphoto data.

immediate end to Soviet-era transport planning trajectories. Interestingly, this kind of trajectory is not to be found in other parts of the former Soviet Union, neither in the conflict-ridden South Caucasus, nor in the Russian Federation or the Baltics, where mass motorization was faster to unfold. The catch-up modernization project stuck more firmly at the formerly Soviet periphery than elsewhere, and with it, the infrastructural appeal of trolleybuses. The successful cases of Urganch and Naryn are, in this regard, worth further scrutiny, as potential sites of a localized translation of Soviet-era public transport plans and ambitions to new societal, political and economic conditions, as testing grounds of some sort of regional, Central Asian, public transport knowledge paradigm which builds on legacy infrastructures and re-develops them in the light of novel conditions.

White elephants amid decline: 2000-2015

Roughly, the years from 2000 and 2015 may be seen as the darkest ones for electric transport in the region. For two decades, trolleybus systems were able to survive on virtually no investment, instead relying on makeshift maintenance, the ingenuity of staff, and captive riders (Sgibnev 2019). Yet at some point, the 1980s rolling stock came to an end of its life cycle. Decreased rolling stock availability led to ever-increasing service intervals. Lacking maintenance led to continuous breakdowns, and therefore utterly unreliable service levels. Voluntarily deferred maintenance coupled with rising motorization led to an increased number of road space conflicts and accidents. Trolleybus switches are illustrative in this regard: these may be located a couple of meters in front of an intersection. Dated or malfunctioning switches force trolleybuses to come almost to a halt in order to allow the traction poles to change from one wire to another. For drivers, trolleybuses braking at – from a driver's perspective – unexpected locations, became an accident-prone nuisance. Eventually, public transport passengers turned to *marshrutki*, leaving either the elderly – still entitled to free travel – or the poor waiting on the stops for trolleybuses that may never come (Vozyanov 2014). Thus, municipal public transport got stuck in a vicious circle of disinvestment, loss of farebox revenue, dwindling municipal backing, and dire public imagery (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Municipal bus, trolleybus and marshrutka minibus at the Sadbarg intersection in the Tajik capital Dushanbe.

Source: Photo taken by Sgibnev 2010.

With public transport planning – in line with many other planning decisions throughout the globe that are prone to elite projections on the added values of policies – municipalities grew reluctant to invest in 'social' services. Instead, they pushed for *marshrutki*, accepting 'social' fares, often with no or limited effect, yet still coupled with disinvestments into municipal public transport offers. In Khujand, the trolleybus system allegedly closed down after the municipality refused to invest some 10,000 € in the repair of an electric substation. Other systems closed due to real estate projects vying for depot premises. Widening roads at the expense of track alignments in the populist assumption that this would help alleviate traffic jams, or removing tracks and wires from central squares and thoroughfares for representational purposes were further sources of public transport's decline in these years. All in all, the end of most electric transport systems in the region was neither planned nor spectacular, yet substantial and comprehensive.

Nevertheless, some few cities did not exhibit this rapid decline. In the course of the 2000s, maintaining a status quo can already be seen as a particular phenomenon. This concerned such systems as the Oskemen tramway and the Tashkent metro, since rail-based vehicles have longer life spans than (trolley)buses. In the case of Tashkent, huge passenger flows, and national representativity ambitions equally contributed to maintaining a state of good repair. Furthermore, large-scale investments were injected into trolleybus systems in Dushanbe and Bishkek. In Tajikistan the investments were terrific indeed, considering the country's otherwise dire budget: roughly US$ 15 million were spent on trolleybuses from 2005 to 2010. State money was directly allocated to the town of Dushanbe for trolleybus purchases, reflecting in no way the financial capacities of the city-owned transit company Dushanbepassgortrans (Sgibnev 2014).

In Dushanbe, 45 trolleybuses built in the 1970s-1980s had survived the 1990s – sufficient to provide a basic service on a rudimentary network. In 2001, four vehicles were purchased from the Russian TROLZA factory – the first investment in the electric transit system since independence. 2004-2006, one hundred more were delivered to Dushanbe. A follow-up contract in December 2008 ensured another delivery of 60 trolleybuses in February 2009. In Bishkek, the administration proved its commitment to the trolleybus system as well, even if on a smaller scale: 35 TROLZA vehicles joined the rolling stock from 2001 onwards, and 21 units from the Minsk-based Belkommunmash plant in 2009 (Sgibnev 2014).

The older TROLZA engines were immediately scrapped after the 2005 delivery, although they were still in running state. Even the four vehicles delivered in 2001 were put out of service. Out of 160 engines available, barely 90 were in daily service, as of 2012. A total of 70 vehicles stood still – considerably more than necessary for an emergency reserve. One reason for this was the lack of staff: drivers found good employment opportunities in Russia's trolleybus systems and were therefore prone to labor migration. Furthermore, the large funding aimed at renewing the capital's trolleybus fleet had no financial follow-up at all to provide for maintenance of the new vehicles – or the overhead wire system. As no financing for spare parts exists, drivers either had to shoulder these costs themselves, or brand-new trolleybuses were cannibalized for spare parts to keep the rest of the fleet running. At least 20 machines from the latest deliveries have already been scrapped for lack of maintenance and spare parts. The decision to renew the vehicle fleet seems therefore to be excessive and unsustainable, driven to a large extent by the desire for symbolic activity.

Although state authorities had, by then, cut back almost all Soviet-era welfare benefits and public services, they were being upheld in the mobilities sector by means of a subsidized trolleybus system. With regard to the limited role of trolleybuses in fulfilling mobility needs, they are all the more important for the representative dimension of politics: in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, trolleybuses convey more than their capacity to transport people.

Looking at the rampant power shortages of those days, functioning trolleybuses of the 2000s were running examples that the authorities are able to address this vital issue on a large-scale. Where social benefits are cut back to a minimum, for a pensioner a free ride in a trolleybus maintains the illusion of a functioning welfare system. Finally, in countries with limited resources, trolleybuses allow futuristic vehicles to run on streets, promising modernity for a relatively low price, whereas Almaty, Astana/Nur-Sultan and Tashkent engaged in metro investments for the same reason.

Thinking big: recent public transport investments

In recent years, the region's public transport is exhibiting a number of interesting trends. What we can state for sure, is that, at least for the respective capital cities, public transport is once again on the agenda, attracting national funding and municipal attention. The Almaty and Nur-Sultan metros have received some recent attention – the latter before all with regard to respective scandals, cost overruns, re-planning, shelving and resurfacing, change of contractors and political pressure coupled with repeated fundamental criticisms and mode changes. The project clearly had a turbulent history, and a yet uncertain future: from monorail to heavy metro, to BRT, to light rail, back to BRT, and light rail once again, until the bankruptcy of the Chinese light rail contractor put the project on hold by 2019. However, also other major cities of the region feature massive and surprising public transport investment programs.

Looking at construction and procurement rhythms of the Tashkent metro is enlightening in this regard (Fig. 4). The Soviet era saw both a steady inflow of metro wagons, as well as a regularly paced construction program, expanding the network station by station. The very early 1990s still profited from previous preliminary work and delivery contracts – and from there on the metro system basically lived on a status quo. It took until 2001 that the Yunusobod line – in construction from 1988 – opened for revenue service. This opening was coupled with a purchase of 20 metro sets from the Russian Metrovagonmash factory – the same manufacturer as for previous deliveries from the 1980s onwards.

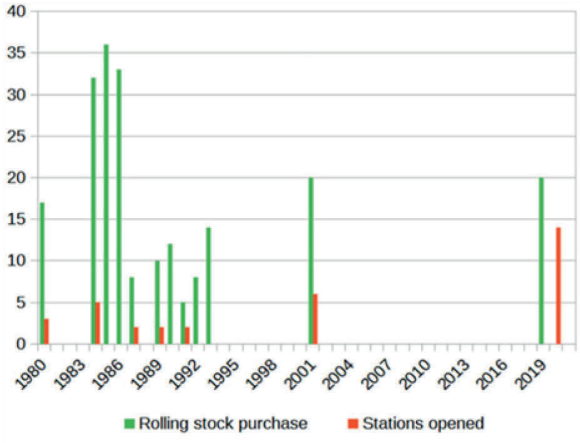

Fig. 4: Tashkent metro rolling stock purchase and station openings

Source: Author's calculations based on Transphoto data.

This current expansion is part of a wider investment program: more stations are under construction, and even more on the drawing board, part of a wide modernization agenda – arguably coupled with the ascension of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to presidency in 2016. Indeed, the tremendous price tag of metro construction presupposes a strong engagement of the central state, and thus its heavy influence on transport policies in the capital. The structural precondition for these investments were set up in late 2016, when Tashkent metro assets have been transferred from the municipal operator "Toshshahartranshizmat" to the state-owned Uzbek Railways (Gazeta.uz 2016a). This structure also allows to tap into the technical and project management capacities of the railway company, which has proven effective in introducing high-speed rail services between Tashkent and Samarkand, and has equally eagerly expanded the network throughout the country.

Fascinatingly, the Uzbek Railways have also been at the core of re-establishing the aforementioned tramway system in Samarkand – a prime example how a voluntarist and unsubstantiated decision in one place turned into a pragmatic and seemingly beneficial process in another location. The tramway system in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent saw a series of line closures in the course of the 2000s, authorities citing low passenger flows, insufficient track quality, and the need to widen road surfaces to accommodate rising automobile flows (Gazeta.uz 2016b). Tashkent's last tram line was shut down by May 2016. However, only four years prior to the closure, Tashkent received twenty new low-floor Vario.LF tramway vehicles ordered from the Czech Pragoimex factory. All while receiving

state funds for overpriced vehicle procurement (almost a million US$ per vehicle![1]), the municipal company was unable to pay its electricity bills, which contributed to line closure decisions in 2015/2016. This is revealing of the haphazard and unsustainable funding flows and policy directions. After the final closure of the tramway system, the municipality attempted to sell the remaining vehicles for more than the procurement price, unsurprisingly with little success.

In the meantime, Islom Karimov, the long-standing president of Uzbekistan died in September 2016, while Shavkat Mirziyoyev rose to power and developed a surprising vigor with regard to public transport projects. Two weeks after being appointed acting president, he announced the relaunch of Tashkent metro expansion plans. On 1 October, combined bus+metro tickets became available for the first time in history. On 5 October, Mirziyoyev announced the construction of a tramway system in Samarkand. This was enabled by a transfer of Tashkent's second-hand vehicles, as well as all wirings, substations and equipment that could be salvaged from the capital. On 28 October, the aforementioned transfer of metro assets to the state railway company came into force.

The opening of the tramway system was announced for the 2017 Navruz celebrations, in late March – alongside with Independence Day, the fixed date for festive openings of all sorts. With limited tram construction knowledge capacities within the country, again, the State Railways were charged with laying the tracks. These were built to heavy rail curvature and load parameters, on crushed stone ballast, running side-discharging mineral wagons on tramway tracks through the city to deliver construction materials. In spite of the frenzied construction activity, the Navruz opening date was missed by one month. This was met with disdain by the trainspotters' community, which also eagerly commented on the line's 'un-urban' construction parameters, and seemingly low-cost and low-quality construction. Yet this does not diminish Samarkand's exclusive role of the one and only tramway system in the entire former Soviet Union, which opened after its demise. Construction activities went on, with a second line opening in due time for Navruz 2018, and two more lines in planning stage.

One further empirical example for the recent public transport investment boom is the trolleybus network in the Tajik capital Dushanbe. Following the aforementioned disproportionate rolling stock procurements of the early 2000s, another wave was launched recently, shortly following the arrival of Rustam Emomali – the current president's eldest son – in the capital's mayoral office in 2017. In late 2018, an order for one hundred trolleybus vehicles was placed with the Minsk-based Belkommunmash plant. The last batch arrived – again in time for the upcoming Navruz celebrations – in early April 2021. Shortly before, a three-kilometers-extension to a housing district on the Western edge of the capital marked the first significant line opening since the Soviet days. Furthermore, the Turkish bus producer Akia teamed up with a Tajik investor for opening a vehicle plant in Dushanbe. Apart from 'big' urban buses, a trolleybus production line has equally been put in place, with first deliveries expected in the course of 2021.

Contrary to previous procurement waves, attempts were made to attract and qualify drivers (Asia-Plus 2016, 2019), as well as to couple rolling stock deliveries with maintenance and the retrofitting of electric substations. All measures received funding from the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, and were planned and implemented with active involvement of (mostly Baltic) consultancy companies. Yet, once again, the scope and ambition of the modernization drive seems to prove unsustainable. A large part of the fleet does not leave the depot: as of January 2021, out of the 176 active vehicles, 57 were not in revenue service – far more than usual precautionary vehicle planning would presume. Dushanbe's entire TROLZA fleet (built in 2009/2017) has been relegated to the backyard, in spite of its still working state.

Today, the Dushanbe trolleybus system has the lowest average vehicle age throughout Central Asia (Fig. 5). When looking at the active rolling stock, an average age of 2.8 years is exceptional even by global standards. While it is a good sign for a system to receive investments in the first place, this low average age may hide low survival rates of vehicles due to insufficient maintenance, excessive procurement volumes due to an unaccountable availability of international donor funding, and unorthodox, to say the least, reserve vehicle management.

[1] As discussed in the Transphoto forum; see here: https://transphoto.org/photo/912501/

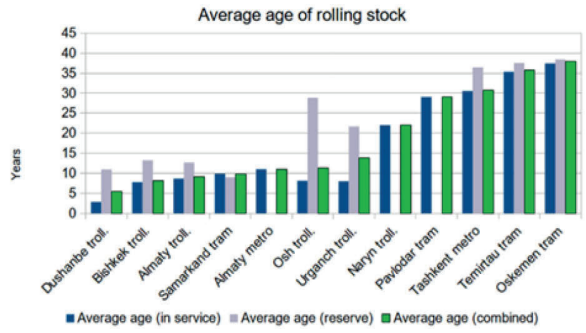

Fig. 5: Average age of rolling stock of Central Asian electric public transport systems
Source: Author's calculations based on Transphoto data.

This rolling stock age distribution also shows a polarization between two types of systems: on the one hand, those that still live off Soviet-era heritage – Naryn trolleybus, Pavlodar, Temirtau and Oskemen trams – and are therefore significantly threatened by further decline. On the other hand – the trolleybus systems in Dushanbe, Bishkek and Almaty that have profited from repeated injections of new rolling stock, but remain heavily dependent on central government interventions and international donor funding.

The 'production' of public transport between pasts and futures

In this paper, I have shown that public transport in Central Asia does not necessarily adhere to the widespread decline and deficiency narratives that cling to the region's infrastructure provision. The surprising continuity of Soviet-era public transport priorities throughout the 1990s, the glimpses of (unsustainable) investment in the early 2000s, the massive capital-focused investment programs of the late 2010 and early 2020s are all together telling of the changing and conflictual mobility narratives and normativities as well as of national and local state capacities and ambitions. The sharp GDP decline of the 1990s is not necessarily connected to a dismissal of public transport, while the economic recovery of the 2000s did by no means entail its recovery. The availability of supply chains and knowledge networks plays a role, yet changing ideologies, political agendas and mobility paradigms and mobility cultures (Hoor 2020) equally play a role. Metros, trams and trolleybuses appear here, once more, as more than simply a means to move around town. The symbolic value of preserving and expanding these costly systems has played a role in political decisions surrounding them – as also witnessed by a conspicuous simultaneity of leadership changes and public transport investments in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan alike.

Public transport investments reflect the Soviet legacy of exercising state authority via unsustainable 'great projects': although the political systems have nominally changed since independence and diverge across five Central Asian countries, the means to exercise power often seem to have not. Also out of these motivations, authorities are willing to shoulder excessive investments – yet without proper rolling stock maintenance and upkeep of overhead lines, these investments still risk remaining 'white elephants'. These tendencies are connected to post-Soviet inferiority discourses that meet effectively failing infrastructure provision, a concurrent neglect of Soviet-era infrastructures and experiences, and a still prevailing nostalgia for Soviet-era mobility provision in terms of pricing, modes and design. The memory of a lost Soviet-era public transport modernity is being contrasted with the all-*marshrutki* 1990s. These, in turn, are being demonized from two sides: consultants and development agencies, with own green and sustainable public transport agendas on the drawing board; and political leaders vying for shiny infrastructures marking their ambitions to be part of a global modernity project – one, which is not on the agenda for most citizens, all the more in peripheral regions. A 'domestic' public transport knowledge production, one which is neither driven by self-orientalization and deficiency discourses, nor by greenwashed smart city agendas, remains out of reach, exacerbated by the tremendous role of international development banks and related consultancies.

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Returnees, blood relatives or backwards? Foreign politics, stigma and coloniality in the debate on how to call ethnic Kazakh immigrants to Kazakhstan

Zarina Mukanova, Rune Steenberg

The focus of this paper is the 2020 government rebranding of the formal category of Kazakh ethnic returnees from "oralman" (returnees) to "kandas" (blood relatives). Over the thirty years of Kazakhstani independence, the term oralman – meant to be only a temporary legal designation prior to the obtainment of Kazakhstani citizenship – has become a stigmatizing social category. It was this stigma that the government sought to remove by changing the designation to something with a more positive connotation. This paper traces local Kazakh discourses on the topic on social media, in established media and in quotidian discourse. It discusses a number of arguments for and against the change and concludes that the positions in the debate highly depend on the speakers' identity and place in society and is mired in continuing and little reflected colonial narratives and value hierarchies tied to notions of modernity vs. backwardness and Russian vs. Kazakh.

Introduction

On 17 September 2019, Kazakhstan's president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev tweeted out his intention to change the official term for ethnic Kazakhs moving to Kazakhstan from abroad. Instead of *oralman* (returnee) they should in future be known as *kandas* (blood relative) (Umirbekov 2019). The idea was welcomed by many. Since its introduction as a legal category in the early 1990s, the term *oralman* has taken on a pejorative meaning in social discourse and carries a degree of stigma. Originally, it was created as a way to support immigrants to Kazakhstan who could prove their Kazakh ethnicity through lineage or family history within the legal system. They were assigned the term of "returnee" to mark them as returning "lost sons and daughters," who through this legal category were guaranteed certain privileges and preferential treatment within the Kazakhstani system. When a given *oralman* received citizenship some years later, the category no longer officially applied as they were now given the same legal status as other Kazakhstani citizens. Yet, in the course of the 1990s, integration difficulties, local envy and cultural conflict gave the term a negative connotation and created a social category that did not disappear when the legal categorization was lifted. It marked the differentiation between immigrant and non-immigrant Kazakhs detached from its original legal meaning.

This negative connotation and the conflict it symbolized were now to be removed through the coining of a new term: *kandas*. The term connotes kinship and historical belonging – major integrating factors in Kazakh society where both kinship and ethnicity are imagined through strong patrilineages (Esenova 1998; Schatz 2000). While many agreed with the need for a new term, not all welcomed the one suggested by the president. In the Kazakhstani under-house of the parliament, the *Mejlis*, deputies Nurlan Dulatbekov and Kualish Sultanov, suggested the term *bauyrlas* (brother) which entails the metaphor "liver" instead of "blood" and connotes a similar kinship relation. It is often used to denote direct siblings or close lineage kin and to some connote a closer relation than *kandas*. Yet, according to Kazakh ethnographer Zhambyl Artykbayev, *bauyrlas* is being used for Uzbeks and thus does not qualify for Kazakhs. Similar to the term *kandas*, it can be used to connote all ethnic Kazakhs but also in some uses all other Turkic peoples depending on the context. Both terms by creating a distinct category imply that those referred to by them constitute a distinct group. They may be closely related to Kazakhs born and raised in Kazakhstan, but they are not the same, not part of an "us." As Marilyn Strathern (1985) has argued in relation to the concept of "constitution" when used in anthropological writing, the definition of a relationship between two categories also establishes them as distinct no matter how close this relation is described. Both *bauyrlas* and *kandas* thus still preserve the distinctiveness of ethnic Kazakh immigrants to Kazakhstan from the native Kazakh population. Why then, many *oralman* ask, make this distinction at all in the first place.

A temporary or permanent distinction

The idea behind the original term of *oralman* was not to create a social category nor for it to become permanent. The term was intended only as a temporary distinction, denoting only a special legal

status in the Kazakhstani bureaucracy: immigrants on a fast-track to citizenship because of their Kazakh ethnicity. This status would be lifted as soon as they became citizens, and it is actually lifted in a legal sense. One of the problems with the term *oralman* is exactly that it did not disappear with the legal status but lingered on in quotidian use. A bureaucratic concept was transformed and taken over into a popular social one and while the bureaucratic status as *oralman* could be easily removed, the social concept of *oralman* could not. Over the years, it even developed into a social stigma. In a Facebook post from 19 September 2019, Kazakh journalist Saken Sybanbay argues that introducing the term *kandas* in place of *oralman* would solidify this stigma. According to him, this terminological shift would create a social category distinct from 'native Kazakhs' even more difficult to shed as the inclusive logic of the term *kandas* almost per design makes it permanent. As he put it: They would not stop being blood relatives when they become citizens. The same would apply to the alternative term *bauyrlas*. Instead he encouraged substituting with an unambivalently temporary category. If people no longer liked the term *oralman*, he argued, then why not return to the original descriptive legal category that Kazakh law shares with many others: the "repatriate" (РЕПАТРИАНТ), which retains the connotation necessary to Sybanbay of someone "returning to the ancestral homelands," which the two other suggestions also fail to do. According to his line of reasoning, the category of "repatriate" automatically stops being relevant when the person in question receives citizenship. Similarly, two Kazakh Philologists, Batyrbolat Kabosh and Anar Fazylzhan both expressed support for keeping the designation *oralman* which they saw as linguistically correct and "a good word". Unlike the other words such as *kandas* and *bauyrlas* but also *tuystas* (relative by blood), *agayin* (brothers of the same patrilineage), and *otandas* (compatriot, of the same motherland) all of which had been suggested as alternative terms, *oralman* defines a category that is distinct from the rest of the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. Semantically, the other terms all include many more people than the legal category is meant to designate and this would be confusing and imprecise, they argued (Akhmetuli 2019).

Within a year, the debate was decided by the politicians that had started it. Kazakhstan's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had already spoken of the issue during his election campaign in 2019, when after taking over office from resigning Nursultan Nazarbaev, he was aiming to become legitimately confirmed by the people's vote. He began the official parliamentary hearings on the topic in March 2020 and by 7 September 2020, the matter was signed into law. The law went into effect on 1 January 2021. The counterarguments and warnings of journalists and philologers were to no avail in the legal debate, but they still give important clues as to the larger social issues and the structural violence at work within the social debates surrounding the topic. The contributors' positionality, their social identity and place in Kazakh society is clearly reflected in the views they take on the issue of how to call the ethnic Kazakh immigrants. The debates therefore provide insights into the sociology, power-relations and colonial legacy of contemporary Kazakhstan. In order to appreciate the positionality of the contributors to the debate, it is needed to briefly recapture the history of the *oralman*.

Historical background

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Kazakhstan, along with the other Central Asian republics, was left with a number of structural problems. One was the massive emigration of ethnic Russians from its territory to Russia, which constituted both a brain drain and a loss of labor power. A large number of Russians had arrived with the colonization of Central Asia in the nineteenth century and during the Soviet Union, but many chose to leave the country when it became independent and the power relations and opportunities shifted (Kosmarskaya 2014; Oka 2007:6). During the Soviet period a number of Kazakhs had left the then Autonomous Soviet Republic[1] for Mongolia, Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, fleeing forced collectivization, famine and Stalinist purges on the Kazakh steppes in the 1920s and 1930s (Cameron 2018; Kindler 2018; Pianciola 2004; Svanberg 1999; Zardykhan 2004:64). It is estimated that possibly significantly more than 200,000 Kazakhs left the Soviet Union for China, Mongolia, India and Afghanistan, while

[1] First administered as a distinct part from the rest of Central Asia during Czarist times, the area became known as the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) Autonomous Soviet Republic in 1920 and was renamed the Kazakh Soviet Republic in 1925. In February 1936, it was renamed to Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Republic as a part of RSFSR and in December of the same year became Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic gaining the status of a full union republic.

these countries and Turkey also had substantial populations of Kazakhs (Ablazhey 2014:8; Benson, Svanberg 1988, 1998; Finke 2018; Mukanova 2014:41; Syroyezhkin 1994:8). Some of those who had fled to Xinjiang, returned in 1958-1962 during Mao's catastrophic Great Leap Forward just before souring relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China closed the border between Xinjiang and the Central Asian Soviet Republics (Ablazhey 2014:73–129, 2016). The border was to remain closed well into the 1980s with relatives being divided for more than 20 years. In addition to these migratory movements, the borders established between the Qing Dynasty and the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century did not neatly align with the living spaces of local populations. The concept of ethnicity was not popularized before the 1920s and Kazakhs were mainly nomadic herders organized into local lineages more or less loosely related in tribal congregations who migrated seasonally between summer and winter pastures (Bacon 1958; Benson, Svanberg 1998; Khazanov 1994; Sneath 2009). Some of them had been living outside the areas that were to become Kazakhstan for centuries. Yet, during the Soviet rule, ethnicity had been introduced as both a state bureaucratic category and a social concept arriving to the area within the ideologies of historical materialism and nationalism and with the establishment of a modern state bureaucracy. It was the bureaucratic utilization of ethnic categories such as Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uyghur and Uzbek that established and popularized them as identity markers. In the course of the decades of Soviet rule, they took hold in people's imaginaries and became a natural part of their self-conceptions. By the time, Kazakhstan became an independent republic in 1991, nationalist rhetoric was an integral and very popular part of the state's nation building efforts. Therefore, as Russian emigration left a void that saw the country's population decline, it seemed natural to attempt to fill it by bringing in ethnic Kazakhs from the surrounding countries, where up to five million were estimated to reside (Cetin 2018:9; Diener 2005; Finke 2018). Finke (2013:176) and Zardykhan (2004, 2016) have argued that this can also have been part of a conscious strategy on the side of the government to secure northern Kazakhstan against Russian nationalist claims.

The history of *oralman*

From the outset of Kazakhstan's history, in 1991, first president Nursultan Nazarbaev invited Kazakhs living in other countries to Kazakhstan, regardless of how long they had lived there, if they were diaspora (whose parents, grandparents or older ancestors had left the lands now part of Kazakhstan) or if they were irridents (living in their historical homelands that had become part of other states). They were promised a fast track to citizenship, land, free secondary education for their children and in some cases economic support (Bonnenfant 2012; Kalysh, Kassymova 2015:20). From 1993 on, the state fixed quotas of how many families a year would be accepted for repatriation and agreements were made with the neighboring countries from which they were going to move to Kazakhstan. Thousands, sometimes ten-thousands arrived each year and little by little they received citizenship (Alff 2012; Barcus, Werner 2010:210; Diener 2009). In the past thirty years, more than one million people have been repatriated as *oralman* and many more have arrived. According to Sadovskaya (2015) some repatriates from China preferred to keep their Chinese passports in order to more easily conduct trade across the border. Regardless of their places of origin and their family history, Kazakh immigrants from abroad were called *oralman* (returnees). This was constructed as a legal category meant to be temporary, used only until citizenship had been achieved; a process expected to last 2-3 years at most.[2] After this, legally speaking, they would no longer count as *oralman* but simply be Kazakhs (ethnically) and Kazakhstani (in terms of citizenship). In quotidian discourse, though, the term stuck. It no longer had any legal significance, but it acquired a social one. According to informants from within *oralman* communities, in the initial years, the term did not hold any bad connotation. Yet, as conflicts began to appear between local Kazakhs and *oralman*, the value of the term changed. The conflicts partly hinged on local dissatisfaction with the state benefits given to the repatriates combined with these finding conditions to be much more difficult and less welcoming than they had expected. The first batches of *oralman* in the 1990s had been dominated by Kazakhs from Mongolia who came as migrant laborers to work in the still functioning *kolkhoz* (state run collective farms) up until 1994 (Baltabayeva et al. 2015:250). Like those arriving from Uzbekistan

[2] https://egov.kz/cms/ru/articles/kandas_rk

and other post-Soviet states in the late 1990s (Baltabayeva et al. 2015:285) and early 2000s who had also grown up in the Soviet system and ideology, they were fairly well accustomed to Soviet-style management and bureaucracy. This was less the case for the Kazakhs moving across the Chinese border from Xinjiang in the early 2000s (Sadovskaya 2015). They arrived in larger numbers, and the differences in culture and expectation seemed more pronounced than those of their predecessors from Mongolia and Uzbekistan (Baltabayeva et al. 2015:297). The Xinjiang Kazakhs often saw themselves as moving for patriotic reasons and in order to be part of a country that they saw as their own in an ethnic sense, instead of being second rank citizens in China (Baltabayeva et al. 2015:298; Kalysh, Kassymova 2015). Local Kazakhs viewed them with suspicion, as economic migrants and competitors for scarce state resources (Sancak 2007:90).

Through this immigration program, the Kazakhstani state hoped to recruit new labor power, receive populations to fill the void left by Russian emigration, claim the land in the north of the country and to make the population more Kazakh (Baltabayeva et al. 2015:232). During Soviet times, the percentage of Kazakhs within the population of the Kazakh Soviet Republic had dropped from almost 60 to less than 40 per cent and was now in the process of recovering (Kozina 2007:76). Also, the Russification of Kazakh culture and language during the Soviet Union made many of the incoming *oralman* "more authentically Kazakh" in the eyes of elites employing a nationalist, folkloristic perspective to pursue an ethnically focused nation building. Yet, along with this ethnic authenticity came a similar connotation to that attributed to the Kazakhs by the Russians in the Soviet Union: a notion of being less developed, more rural, less educated, less civilized and more backward. Also, the *oralman* did not follow the plans laid out by the government and elites, but settled in large numbers in the south of the country around Almaty and along the borders to China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

A growing stigma

During the 2000s, the term *oralman* began to take on pejorative connotations. Tilek Yrysbek, a Kazakh poet, writer and translator, originally from Mongolküre in Xinjiang, moved to Kazakhstan in 2005 when he was 11 years of age. He said that he was bullied in school for being an *oralman*. His classmates called him a traitor, because they had heard that *oralman* were the descendants of rich Kazakhs who had fled the homelands in the 1930s when life here became difficult. This is a modern nationalistic narrative that condemns "those who left when their people needed them the most," but it also draws on Soviet demonization of the local elites (often called *kulaks*) fleeing collectivization and expropriation. Exactly why life became so difficult in the 1930s is rarely elaborated on in detail, as the Kazakh history of colonial abuse at the hand of the Russians threatens to damage crucial relations to Putin's Russia. Another denigrating narrative about the *oralman* met by Yrysbek and others holds that they are unhygienic and uncivilized, rural and badly educated. A major reason for them to be viewed as backward and uneducated is their lack of command of the Russian language. During Soviet times, Russian was construed as the language of development, modernization and high culture superior to Kazakh and other Central Asian languages. This colonial imaginary found expression in the Russian term "*mambet*", which was used about Kazakhs to brand them as rural, backward and ignorant (Lakhanuli 2017).[3] These value hierarchies and their institutional shapes in the educational system saw large parts of the Kazakh elites adopt the Russian language as their own above the Kazakh language. One of the big ethno-national projects of the nascent Republic of Kazakhstan in the 1990s was to reinvigorate the Kazakh language and Kazakh culture (Baltabayeva et al. 2015:234; Bonnenfant 2012). For this the *oralman* were actually seen as models and important contributors, admired to have retained the Kazakh culture and language more thoroughly than those in Kazakhstan. Yet, at the same time, the colonial stigma of backwardness and lack of development brought about by the Russians throughout the century before also came to be attributed to the *oralman*. As they came to be seen as bearers of traditional Kazakhness,

[3] An article of the news portal Azattyk quotes an official note by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation to Russian citizens who are travelling to Kazakhstan. The note warns them against using offensive words like *mambet*, *myrk* and *kalbit*. Professor of philology Guldarkhan Smagulova, is then cited to explain the history and connotations of these words, all of which are denigrating terms for being undeveloped or "backward". She also points out that these words are hardly used in younger generations (Lakhanuli 2017).

they also inherited this colonial stigma. Editor-in-chief of the magazine Exclusive, Rasul Zhumaly, in 2011 said that the lack of Russian skills led to *oralman* being treated as second class citizens both by fellow citizens and the state (Akuli 2011). Many settlements of *oralmans* reportedly were not provided with running water, sanitation and crucial infrastructure. Tilek Yrysbek pointed out that just like the Russians had treated Kazakhs as second class citizens in the Soviet institutions, now the *oralman* were treated as second class citizens by the local Kazakhs[4]. In his words, the *oralman* have become the new *mambet*. Only this time the stigma was placed by the very people who had been victims of the same type of stereotypification few decades earlier.

Conflicts mainly arose between local Kazakhs and the *oralman* who had arrived from Xinjiang and centered around Almaty province. In conversations led by one of the authors, local Kazakhs in Almaty province expressed that they only considered the arrivals from China *oralman* while those from Mongolia had been living among them for so long and were "just like us." The Kazakh immigrants from China were also regularly called Chinese[5]. This was even reported by families who had arrived from Xinjiang as far back as in the 1960s[6]. They expressed their frustration at never fully being recognized as Kazakhs by their neighbors. Many *oralman* feel that they are being permanently excluded from the community of Kazakhs, the joining of which was often their motivation to come in the first place. In spite of widespread narratives of the *oralman* having come as economic refugees and beggars in order to take advantage of state resources, many of them insist that they were living materially good and wealthy lives in Xinjiang and chose to resettle out of patriotic and political reasons. Tilek Yrysbek does not think that he and other Kazakhs from Xinjiang have been given a fair chance to properly integrate into Kazakh society and he sees the term *oralman* as having become both a symbol of this and a tool in the continuous division upheld by the local Kazakhs.

A debate published on the US-sponsored news platform Azattyk in 2011 gives voice to some of these tensions around what it terms *oralmanophobia*. The discussion took place in the wake of verbal attacks on the *oralman* community by officials and public figures[7] accusing them of stirring protests and organizing oil worker strikes as well as calling them illiterate and further insulting them in public. In addition, the repatriation schemes for the *oralman* were not working efficiently. *Oralman* reported facing constant bureaucratic hassles and discrimination and they were further disadvantaged by being included into the new law "On migration" along with other migrants and refugees and through administrative restructurings when the Ministry of Migration was closed and its powers transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Akuli 2011). One of the difficulties *oralman* reportedly faced in the bureaucracy in 2011, was that they did not speak Russian and the clerks processing their papers and requests tellingly could not speak Kazakh. In Azattyk's debate, the *oralman* were praised for retaining Kazakh cultural elements that had been lost during Soviet times, for their piety, for being united and standing up for their rights and for contributing to making Kazakhs once more the majority in the country. Their plight was lamented and mainly attributed to failures in migration policy and integration efforts by the state, and – by some readers in the comments section – to the "Russian-speaking environments" and "the Russian language press."[8]

Changing the name

The change of term from *oralman* to *kandas* in all officials went into effect on 1 January 2021. A website providing information and support to repatriates was renamed "qandastar.kz" and in many of its articles (but not all) the term *oralman* seems to have been changed to *kandas*.[9] The change was seen by many as a chance of erasing the shame, stigma and negative narratives associated with the term *oralman* and giving the category of repatriates a more positive connotation. Three Kazakh repatriates from China and Mongolia expressed their

[4] From personal conversations with Tilek Yrysbek in Almaty, Kazakhstan in March 2021.

[5] This data has been gained from numerous interviews with oralman from China during the fieldwork in 2016-2018 in Almaty province (ZM)"

[6] See the comment of the Tileukayl Suleimenuli https://web.facebook.com/ssyb-anbay/posts/2294452257350003?_rdc=1&_rdr

[7] Figures such as Chairman of the Board of the Samruk-Kazyna State Fund Timur Kulibayev, former chairman of the migration agency, Khabylsayat Abishev and Talgat Mamashev, First Deputy Chairman of the World Community of Kazakhs

[8] see readers comment nr. 2 called Haknazar in Akuli 2011

[9] https://qandastar.kz/?cat=12

support for the new term on Azattyk (Lakhanuli 2019), explaining that the old term, *oralman*, has not succeeded in shortening the distance between people, that it differs and divides and that its ending *-man* carries connotations of being lower class. Meanwhile, in their view, the new term, *kandas*, expresses closeness, unites the people and "warms the soul." Expressing a similar attitude, local Kazakh professor in pedagogy at Nazarbayev University, Gultas Kurmanbay, declared that she does not accept the term *oralman*, because the repatriates are her relatives (*kandas*, *bauirlas*, *agayindilar*) (Akhmetuli 2019).

A few web users express frustration with all this effort being put into changing the name without addressing the actual, material and structural issues that lead to conflict and dissatisfaction. To them problems seem to have been rebranded rather than solved. This view is expressed off record or on social media rather than in the more official public media. Here we also find speculation that the rebranding could be used to deny the now-*kandas* their right to land by deemphasizing their lineal connection to the national territory and categorizing them along with other foreigners prior to their acquirement of citizenship, which for some takes many years of arduous bureaucratic work. Tilek Yrysbek stressed that it had taken him five years and a letter to the president in order to avoid exorbitant bribes before his family was granted the citizenship that had originally been promised to them within a year. Recently in April 2021, an unpopular moratorium on land use from 2016, allowing foreigners to buy and lease agricultural land in Kazakhstan, was reversed with the explicit addition that *kandas* would be treated in the same category as other foreigners (KapitalKZ 2021). The new name may also be catering to the Chinese narrative of the Kazakhs in China being an integral and constant part of the "Great Chinese Family of Peoples" (中华民族) though blood-related (*kandas*) to the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan rather than being seen as "returnees" (*oralman*) that left Kazakhstan for China on a temporary basis. Some even see a subtle potential claim to the Kazakh homelands in Xinjiang in this new term and its allowing for the fact that Kazakhs are not new to these areas but have been living there for centuries, or a refusal of potential Chinese claims to all of Kazakhstan, as they may – according to some more worried voices – try to argue that the Kazakhs were always a part of the Great Chinese Family of Nations and thus their territory rightfully belongs under Chinese rule. This is an argument the Chinese have used in regard to the territory of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region).

The current relations between Kazakhstan and China are economically close but also tense and ambivalent. This is in no small part due to the situation of the ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang during the last five years. Substantial evidence has mounted that thousands to ten-thousands of Kazakhs along with Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang have been extralegally detained under horrific circumstances, interrogated and sometimes tortured in detention centers, indoctrinated and put under immense psychological pressure in reeducation facilities and often subsequently sentenced to long prison terms for acts like having WhatsApp on their phone, sending money to relatives in Kazakhstan, sending their children abroad to study or applying for a passport (Bunin 2019).[10] The testimonies of several Kazakhs from Xinjiang including a number of repatriated Kazakh citizens have angered many in Kazakhstan while the government which holds close economic and growing political ties to China has made efforts to lessen the tension and put a lid on popular protest against China and a rising Sinophobia in the population, which escalated in attacks on Dungans (local Chinese Muslims) in February 2020 (AFP 2020; Varshalomidze 2020). In 2018 Sayraygül Sayutbay, a Kazakh kindergarten principal from Mongolküre in Xinjiang, fled across the border into Kazakhstan reporting that she had been held captive and forced to indoctrinate Kazakhs in one of the Chinese reeducation camps (DW Deutsche Welle 2020). Her trial for illegal border crossing lasted a full year in which the Chinese government demanded her extradition while rights groups lobbied for Kazakhstan to grant her asylum. This dilemma was solved when Sweden agreed to accept her and her family as political refugees (Putz 2020). Similarly, Serikhzhan Bilash, the most prominent and effective *oralman/kandas* activist documenting the mass incarceration of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and effecting the release of scores of detained Kazakhs form the camps, was arrested by the Kazakhstani authorities, sentenced for inciting ethnic hatred, released upon popular protest against the promise not to work politically for the next six years and finally forced to leave the

[10] See testimonies and stories on the website shahit.biz.

country for Turkey and then the US in 2020. Others voicing critique of China's policies have likewise faced hostility and sanctions from the Kazakhstani government, such as the Russian-Kazakhstani Sinologist Konstantin Syroyezhkin, who was arrested on charges of treason, convicted to ten years in prison and had his Kazakhstani citizenship revoked after voicing strong criticism of China (Fergana Agency 2020, 2021; Toguzbayev 2019). Russian-American scholar and activist Gene Bunin who like Serikhzhan was essential in documenting the incarceration and abuses taking place in Xinjiang did not get his visa extended and was likewise forced out of the country. A Kazakh Facebook user by the name of Nurgisa Toremuratov posted that he hoped that changing the name of *oralman* to *kandas* could be one of the ways to stop Chinese influence in Kazakhstan, citing popular protests against the planned construction of 55 Chinese factories near the city of Zhanaozen (AsiaNews 2019). He connects the new term with standing up to the Chinese, as it expresses closeness to the Kazakhs in Xinjiang and thereby solidarity with them. At the same time, *kandas*, which can also be used for brother nations like Uzbeks or Kyrgyz, also allows a reading where it remains within the Chinese discourse by not stressing that Kazakh immigrants from Xinjiang are returning and at the same time giving them a distinct category rather than calling them simply Kazakhs. These two parallel interpretations may not have been entirely unintended by the government, as they seem very similar to its ongoing double policy of appeasing both the nationalist sentiments of the population and the political pressure from China.

Positionality and colonial narratives

Unlike the term *oralman*, that of *kandas* potentially removes the categorical difference between local Kazakhs and repatriates. As one commentator noted on Facebook: All Kazakhs are *kandas* to each other.[11] Ideally therefore, as long as it functions as a bureaucratic category, it ties the repatriates closer to the Kazakh people than other immigrants and the moment they become citizens there should be no difference any longer, because the bureaucratic category no longer applies and any social category that derives from it should not linguistically mark a distinction from other Kazakhs. Yet, precisely here several intellectual local Kazakhs from the elite see a problem. Ethnographer Zhambyl Artykbayev and journalist Saken Sybanbay both point out that the new alternative terms do not distinguish the repatriates clearly from either other Kazakhs or other brother nations (Akhmetuli 2019). Similarly, the two Kazakh Philologists, Batyrbolat Kabosh and Anar Fazylzhan argue for sticking to the term *oralman* because it is unambiguous and clearly demarcates this group from all others. They support the term exactly because it draws linguistically and logically correct distinctions (Akhmetuli 2019). Yet, as identity studies theory has taught long ago: linguistically correct categories can be constructed along a myriad of different criteria, most of which remain irrelevant and unexpressed. It is the political employment of it that makes them socially relevant (Finke 2018). Not surprisingly, neither of these intellectuals holding on to the category of *oralman* are themselves repatriates. They insist on a logically and linguistically correct term, but they do not reflect why or through which mechanisms *oralman* received its stigma or that this stigma is perpetuated through the linguistic distinction. This is most certainly due to their privileged positions. In contrast to their experience, people who are themselves affected by discrimination are forced to face these questions. Journalist Aidos Zhukanuli, himself a Kazakh from Mongolia, opposes both terms and questions the need for having a term at all. Why would it be so difficult to just call us Kazakhs, he asks. To reformulate the question in historical terms: How did a temporary bureaucratic term become a permanent, stigmatizing social category? Similarly to other pejorative and discriminating terms throughout history, the most well-known of which carry profoundly racist meanings,[12] this is unlikely to have been created by the term itself. Instead, one may be able to find some answer for it in the very positionality of the speakers in the debate outlined in this article, i.e. in the differences in their structural positions in Kazakh society. According to Tilek Yrysbek, the Kazakh poet and translator from Xinjiang, the change of the term has not changed anything in the positions or practice of

11 https://web.facebook.com/ssybanbay/posts/2294452257350003?_rdc=1&_rdr

12 On the label of "Hispanics" and its suggested change to "Latino" in the USA, Martha Gimenez argues that "any standardized terminology is unavoidably flawed and conducive to the development of racist or, at best, trivial stereotypical analysis of the data thus produced." She recommends that "the label should be abandoned" (Gimenez 1989). See also Bonilla-Silva (2006), Burgest (1973) and Mignolo (2007).

discrimination. Particularly Kazakhs from Xinjiang are being targeted – in his eyes because they are more traditional and lack skills in the Russian language, which is why he feels that *oralman* are treated as *neo-mambet* in the sense of being branded as uneducated and backward (Lakhanuli 2017). The structural positions in Kazakh society that allow this branding, are the legacy of colonial structures and logics. Whereas before 1991, the higher positions were occupied by Russians and the lower by Kazakhs generally, today the higher is taken by local Kazakhs and the lower by *oralman/kandas*. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clearer why some speakers in the debate insist on the linguistic distinction while others wish to dissolve it altogether. The distinction is drafted along the lines of Kazakhstan's modernist, colonial heritage. It develops "essentialized representations of inferiority that are reproduced in both global imaginings of the region and in its own subjectivities and positionings" (Kušić et al. 2019:7). The dichotomy between "developed" and "backward" and its related stereotypes such as the *mambet* are products of what Madina Tlostanova calls "mind-colonization," forged over centuries of colonial practice "firmly linking imperialism and capitalism" as a type of "racial, economic, social, existential, gender and epistemic bondage" (2012:133) tied to bureaucratic practices and categories that at the same time enhance and uphold it (Mignolo 2011). It is an expression of "the colonial wound inflicted by five hundred years of the historical foundation [of] modernity as a weapon of imperial/colonial global expansion" (Mignolo 2007:165). This is a wound and a colonial heritage that few in Kazakhstan have been willing to address or even name as such in order not to disturb the relationship with Russia, but also because the elites are still benefiting from the structures it established. This may be changing slowly in the new generations.[13] Whatever the intention of the renaming may have been and whatever its effect on foreign policy and relations to China and Russia, it seems a hesitant step towards addressing such wounds of colonialism and violent modernization. Wounds that did not stop being inflicted after 1991, but merely changed in shape and participating actors. Current inequalities and colonial structures are reflected in the distinction between local Kazakhs and *oralman/kandas*. The fact that the issue is addressed and debated on the highest levels and that the discourse has changed since the Azattyk event of 2011 indicates that a shift is possible, yet the result and success of this shift will most likely hinge on whether it can be connected to and maybe even help catalyze a more general critical and decolonizing (cf. Kušić et al. 2019; Mignolo 2011) self-reflection on Kazakhstan's history, society, economy and future path.

Conclusion

The exact motivation to change the term for repatriate Kazakhs migrating to Kazakhstan from abroad from *oralman* to *kandas* remains opaque. Election strategies, foreign policy signaling and window dressing of conflicts to avoid addressing real social discrepancies may all have played a role. Many well-meaning non-repatriate Kazakhs like the new term because it sounds warmer and seems to connect the repatriates closer to the rest of the population, while others argue that it confuses categories and may end up further alienating the immigrants. Repatriates themselves often do not feel comfortable with either term but do see the change and the debates around it as a way of addressing their grievances and recognizing the problem of discrimination and stigmatization. The stigma manifests as a temporary legal category is turned into a permanent social one. This is tied to the term, but also as much to the structural position within Kazakh society that the term expresses and that other terms may likewise come to express. These different structural positions become particularly clear in the respective arguments phrased online, in the media and during personal conversations. They hold deep roots in perpetual and historical colonial narratives of modern vs. backwards populations as it is locally reflected in the distinction between Russian and Kazakh language and culture. The change of the name has probably not solved any of the deeper lying problems, but to an extent, it has made them more visible and brought them to the fore in public conversations.

[13] When in 2020 an international scholar presented his research on the 1930s famine in the newly established Kazakh Soviet Republic caused by forced collectivization and overzealous, miscalculated political and economic reforms in Almaty, he was approaching a topic that Kazakh historians have largely avoided. Yet, his presentation was welcomed and praised and behind the scenes, people expressed satisfaction that the crimes of the Soviet regime (and thus Russians) against Kazakhs were being discussed and examined.

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Hijabs in Kyrgyzstan: alternative modernity, (dis)integration and individualization

Gulzat Baialieva

The veiling practice in Kyrgyzstan sparked hot controversial debates in the early 2000s. Today the discussions are more moderate. The issue of women's donning hijabs has emerged as a promising avenue of research to explore both features of Islamic revival and tensions between different social groups in a post-Soviet context. The polarized views and misunderstandings arising from these debates define the spaces of dressing and acting both for Muslims who veil and those who don't. Based on an ethnographic case study of the Islamic veiling movement, this paper examines hijab practices in Kyrgyzstan from 2012 to 2020 and looks at the individualization of veiling. The research presents the dynamics of veiling which can here be an act of religious devotion, modesty, piety and a marker of belonging to a "new" global Muslim identity. The paper looks at the ways in which some veiled women navigate their adopted religious markers in constructing their new (religious) identities within the context of tensions between traditionalism, the Soviet past of women emancipation, conceptions of modernity, and the influence of wider political Islamic communities. The findings show how veiling does not represent a singular response to globalized Islam, but can result from the interaction of quite different structural factors – on the one hand, female empowerment, modernity and on the other, patriarchal domination.

Introduction

> "How can you simply look at those covered women (*orongon*), we need to explain things to them and make them take off their strange headcloth. If they really want to be modest and observe Islam, they can do it without wrapping themselves. I also read the Quran, I also love Allah but I wear just *jooluk*[1] which covers my head and hair. I don't like it when our young silly Kyrgyz women prefer this different type of *jooluk* and see themselves like Arab women" [Ajar, personal interview, 2012, Kyzyl-Jar village].

> "Most of my classmates started wearing these headscarves. It is funny, they look like wrapped babies. By hiding their beauty, they display their ugliness. Can you imagine yourself or myself wrapping the face like a newborn? It is terrible and they are wrong" [Nazira, personal interview, 2013 Shamaldy-Sai town].

About two decades ago, the word *hijab* was not used in Kyrgyzstan. Nowadays, in 2020, the word is widely accepted and celebrated on the International Headscarves Day on the 1st of February. Religious organizations and communities such as Mutakallim[2] and some well-known Islamic clothing designers and activists, such as Aijamal Akylbekova, organize celebrations with hijab fashion shows. On this day, other well-known bloggers also show the varieties of headscarves, how to tie them and how to combine them with national clothing. In addition to the celebration of Islamic headscarves, there are competitions and festivals held mainly in Bishkek such as the Muslim Fashion Show and the Muslim Fashion Festival.

A new type of women's headwear was prospering two decades ago but the local population back in the early 2000s would rather circumscribe the new veiling practice[3] than using the word "hijab" itself (McBrien 2017). It was often described by gesturing on the face and neck mimicking how the head scarves were worn or other phrases like "covering", "wrapping" (*jamynyp aldy*, *oronup aldy*) were used to connote the veiling practice. These action verbs in the context of hijabs were used two decades ago and still are used mainly by unveiled women and imply negative connotations of the veiling being backward and a form of sub-

[1] *Jooluk* is a Kyrgyz women's traditional headscarf worn like a bandana with the neck open

[2] http://mutakallim.kg/category/религиозное-просвещение/

[3] By using the terms veiling, Islamic headscarf, hijab and veil, I refer to the practice of some Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan to cover their hair and neck. The modern Islamic garments vary in many ways: manner of wearing headscarves, choice for color and textile and combination with the rest of clothing (whether a full cloak or slim/baggy blouse with long skirt or loose/tight pants).

ordination. However, almost twenty years have passed since the first arrivals of new Islamic influences on clothing and today the representations are much less homogenous. The word hijab is widely used, you can see them in stock in many retail places, do custom tailoring and order online through social media (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Hijabs sold through an Instagram web shop in Kyrgyzstan

Source: image courtesy @jooluktar_duynosu, https://www.instagram.com/jooluktar_duynosu/.

Islam, gender and hijabs in Kyrgyzstan

After independence, religious practice increased in importance and has been transforming from more local, traditional forms into more charismatic expressions of religiosity. By the 2000s a number of Islamic movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Nurcular, Tablighi Jamaat etc. had been localized in post-Soviet Central Asia (Balci 2003; Toktogulova 2014). The issue of women's veiling thus emerged as a promising avenue to explore both features of Islamic revival and tensions between different social groups in a post-Soviet context. Faced with frequent, varied criticism of the hijab, veiled women in Kyrgyzstan compete for their rights in the urban space and challenge claims on the city (Nasritdinov, Esenamanova 2018). This paper demonstrates how different discourses about the meaning of veiling have emerged based on gender, social group and identity politics, and utilizes Olivier Roy's conceptual framework of 'Holy Ignorance' for approaching modernity and political Islam (Roy 2010). Beyond discourse however, the paper also attempts to demonstrate how veiling does not represent a singular response to modernity (or globalization/globalized Islam), but can result from the interaction of quite different structural factors.

Academic publications released on contemporary hijab issues tend to deconstruct previously accepted views on Muslim women as victims. Commonly perceived public interpretations of the hijab range from ideas about Muslim women's moral imprisonment, subjugation, modesty, devotion to God, or conflicting emotions to "fashion" (Tarlo, Moors 2013). Still what many fail to realize is that quite a number of veiled women are embracing their religion as a means through which they can express gender identity, power and creativity (Laruelle 2018). There are various approaches in this regard including the so-called "Islamic feminists" (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1987). If Islamic feminism relates veiling to oppressive practices and patriarchal interpretations of Quran, "liberal feminists" argue that women's new veiling is a form of protest and symbolism that emerges from tense subcultural dilemmas, involving elements of resistance and acquiescence (MacLeod 1992). Ethnographic studies of women's veiling in the Middle East reveal concepts of women's subjectivity, agency and resistance as connected to the decision to veil (Abu-Lughod 2016; Mahmood 2012). European intolerance, political debates and court cases around the respective "headscarf affairs" have also been discussed (Joppke 2012; Roy 2004). A good corpus of literature exists regarding the veiling trends and signifiers mainly researched in the Middle East and Europe. However, their insights cannot be fully transferred to the veiling processes in Central Asia. Despite the seventy years of Soviet atheist agenda – with official restrictions on religious beliefs and practice – Central Asians' identity as Muslims was not eradicated (Hann, Pelkmans 2009; Louw 2007; Privratsky 2001). Massell (1974) argued that Central Asian women constituted a "surrogate proletariat". Soviet policies saw women as the "keystone of a closed family system" and were motivated to liberate women to advance their agenda (Roy 2000:79). Yet, the double project of emancipating Central Asians from patriarchy and religion was experienced differently across the region.

After the former USSR's disintegration, the Central Asian Muslims experienced a relatively free space for open conversation about faith and religious practice (McBrien 2017). General interpretations of Islam, which emphasized regular prayer, covered forms of dress, and mosque attendance, ex-

panded within the community and interacted with interpretations in the wider Islamic world (Khalid 2007). Yet, the newly independent national governments continued to restrict the influence of Islam in the public sphere. Scandalous contestation of images of women, religion and tradition in Kyrgyzstan occurred in the public space in July 2016. Figure 2 presents a billboard portraying Kyrgyz women in different types of clothing. These appeared on the central streets of the capital city Bishkek and some other big cities. This billboard in three images depicts the alleged transition of women's clothing in Kyrgyz society. The billboard asks "*Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz?*" ("Poor people, where are we going?"). The left-sided first section on the banner contains an image of smiling, happy women wearing a Kyrgyz traditional head-dress (*Elechek*), the middle image depicted a group of women looking submissive with faces half-covered by hijabs. The last part is a monotonous dark image of women in black Islamic clothing and niqabs. The banners were promoted by the private educational sector and financed by the administration of the president of Kyrgyzstan. Almazbek Atambayev, who was the president back in 2016, commented that these billboards warn people which way not to go and that Kyrgyz people do not need foreign culture and religion (Azattyk 2016).

The number of veiled women has grown rapidly in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan since the 2000s. The new veiling process in Kyrgyzstan is a departure from traditional *jooluk* and/or "Western" or Soviet styles of clothing and signifies a self-conscious personal and social change. In the Kyrgyz context, this change is often expressed by visual religious markers. They include men growing a long beard and wearing long dress-looking shirts and women wearing religious headscarves and covering up. Like in many European states, the religious veiling in the Muslim Central Asian region engendered hostile reactions and legal bans by the local national governments (Bayram 2018; Grigorenko 2018; Najibullah 2019). However, there are varying degrees of headscarf-restrictions across the region. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have seen the hijab banned in secular educational institutions, while in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, despite the hijab remaining legal, there have been attempts to prohibit them in public schools and workplaces.

Description of the setting

This paper presents an ethnographic study of cases from the town Shamaldy-Sai in the northern part of the Ferghana Valley (at the Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan border) in Jalal-Abad oblast. It includes neighboring villages Yntymak, Dostuk, Bazyl-Ata, Kyzyl-Jar villages and Shamaldy-Sai town. Shamaldy-Sai is a town located along the Naryn river in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Along with Soviet infrastructural projects such as the construction of dams and hydropower stations on the flowing rivers of Central Asia, many new "industrial" settlements were created. One of these is Shamaldy-Sai with its surrounding villages. The population of the township comprises of around 15.000 people. Shamaldy-Sai, as many other surrounding local communities, has witnessed religious movements ranging from Christian organizations like Jehovah Witnesses and Baptists to Islamic groups like Wahabi, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat and so on. Officers of the regional department on Actions Against Extremism, Conflicts and Migration reported that Shamaldy-Sai and Yntymak settlements accommodate fundamentalists of the prohibited religious group Hizb ut-Tahrir spreading its ideas through mass media (leaflets, newspapers, discs). During my fieldwork in these areas, I have observed such activities by local women who belonged to the Tablighi Jamaat and Hizb ut-Tahrir religious movements.

Theoretical overview

This paper applies Olivier Roy's theoretical concept of 'Holy Ignorance' in order to explain the phenomenon of religious veiling and gender identity in Central Asia. I define the concept of 'Holy Ignorance' as a process of deculturation when individuals undergo 'conversion' within the same religion and enter a new social/religious space which in general rejects and disrupts connections with local traditional cultures and traditional forms of religiosity which are treated by the 're-formatted believers' – as 'neo-paganism' (Roy 2010). I consider 'new converts' or 'reformatted believers' those who abandon popular and traditional forms of Islamic religiosity and adopt what they consider as 'pure Islam'. The so-called re-formatted believers culturally abandon traditional cultural communities and radically change their views about modernity, traditions, and religious practices. They create a new autonomous space and "reconstruct themselves in a space that is no

Fig. 2: The billboard "Poor people, where are we going?" appeared in cities of Kyrgyzstan in 2016
Source: Azattyk (2016).

longer territorial and is therefore no longer subject to politics" (Roy 2010:2). The donning of the headscarf signifies an act of conversion within the same religion, the cultural norms are ignored to "salvage the purity of faith" and "religion turns inwards toward identity" using religious markers (Roy 2010:142). Donning Islamic headscarves, newly veiled women contribute to the visibility of Islam and play an important role in creating a sense of religious community. The largest proportion of newly veiled women in Kyrgyzstan comes from either the middle-class well-educated urban sector or from rural low-class fractions with stronger patriarchal subjugation.

As noted earlier, there are different paths to religious conversion and the choice of veiling. As Olivier Roy (2010:190) argues: "Formatting then can occur as part of various strategies, both top-down and bottom up […]. It can take place within a 'liberal' or conversely a 'fundamentalist' perspective, since […] fundamentalism can also be the expression of modernity through deculturation". Choosing the path to deculturation and joining the veiling movement is mostly initiated by women on a voluntary basis. Kyrgyz veiled women are active in the management of the religious community. For example, the Muslim Women NGO Mutakallim managed to prevent the adoption of a new law on veil prohibitions through regular meetings, picketing and protests. Muslim women activists organize educational circles, there is even a new phenomenon of women *daw'at-chis* of Tablighi Jamaat in Kyrgyzstan proselytizing and preaching Islam. In the context of information technologies, there are also a range of popular social media groups, an Islamic Fitness App[4] and other trendy Islamic developments on the internet. Another important inspiration for the newly veiling women are local Kyrgyz celebrities and bloggers who promote the hijab and the Islamic fashion industry.

Methodology

The phenomenon of Kyrgyz women's veiling in the context of religious revival has been causing hot debates in the Kyrgyz community including polarized views and misunderstandings, which have prevented fruitful dialogue between opponents and supporters. I have therefore generally preferred conversations to interviews and had them at various social events that I was invited to through social connections already established. I could get information during casual chats and dinnertime conversations but also arranged conversations such as in-depth interviews about headscarves.

My informants included newly veiling women ages 18-50 of Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnicity and

[4] Fitja is a fitness application for Muslim women - https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.spalmalo.fitjab&hl=gsw&gl=US

different socio-educational backgrounds. My main sites for recruiting contacts were women Muslim circles (*Taalim*) and other associations which bring these women together. The conversations and interviews were facilitated by the fact that I already have extensive contacts in these circles. I was able to establish strong connections with several Muslim women activists as well as professors, experts, and journalists. Through them, I expanded my network.

I spent 20 months of fieldwork in 2012 and 2016-2019 in the riverine communities Yntymak, Kyzyl-Jar and Shamaldy-Sai. In total, I interviewed 25 women from different Islamic groups (Tablighi Jamaat, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Wahabi). All of them were veiled and had different experiences with the headwear, four of them later stopped wearing hijab due to disapproval from family and school. In addition I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven women who acknowledge Islam but do not follow any revivalist group. Besides attending weekly Muslim gatherings (*Taalim*) required by the Tablighi rules, I was able to go to their houses and interact with them in their everyday lives. I was able to participate in their social lives such as shopping, visiting their relatives and other regular routines.

Disintegration of hijabs at schools

There is no decree by the Ministry of Education that prohibits hijabs but local school principals put forth their own regulations. Some schools do not intervene into the individual choice of clothes but they are few. The majority of secondary schools in both rural and urban areas in Kyrgyzstan ban Islamic headscarves. School principals justify the ban arguing that the school regulations (*shkolnyi ustav*) do not allow them. When I talked with the female directors of three schools, they said that girls should dress properly and follow the school's requirement on dress:

> "I know that there is no law banning the hijabs but I fight for the school regulations. According to our school regulations, which are fixed by the Regional Justice Department, the school uniform is clearly described. For boys, the school uniform is a light top/shirt and dark pants/trousers, for girls it is the same, light blouse, dark skirt and the white bows on the hair. There is nothing about headscarves, hijabs. That's why I do not dare to allow schoolgirls to cover themselves. They have to study and not pray. I do not care about their dress outside the school walls. What I require is to follow the school regulations on the uniform. That's all!" (Amina, 57-year-old school director)

During my fieldwork in May 2012[5], I witnessed cases where parents and the school principal argued over the dress regulations and their interpretation. Three girls were not admitted to the school because they were wearing hijabs. One of them was 14 years old and the two others were 15. The school director made an ultimatum to only allow them to continue studying if they give up their headscarves. They stopped attending the schools but later their parents and relatives decided to clear up the situation. In some rural area in Kyrgyzstan before going to court, in case of civil conflicts, the local informal organizations such as Informal Court of Elders (*Aksakaldar Sotu*), the district police (*uchastkovyi*) and Women's Council (*Jensovet*) are involved to try to solve the issue. The municipal local administration usually provides a space for such "hearings'' where the heads of these informal institutions and the conflicting parties meet. The "hearing" of the case with the 14-years-old girl did not last long, the director was justifying her actions saying she cannot break the school regulation and allow the girls in hijabs. Given the fact that the parents of the girls were not experienced in speaking out, they were sitting silent and looked like they were feeling guilty. Representatives of the *Aksakaldar Sotu*, *Jensovet* and a district police had the same opinion as the schoolmaster regarding the proper school uniform. The girls' parents were almost silent and did not express their views well but disagreed with the committee's ideas of what it meant for girls to be dressed "properly". It was obvious that no compromise would be achieved because the "officials'' sounded dominant and the opposite side was not participating in the debate. In the beginning, they tried to refer to religion, to morality, to their own choice for dress but they could not stand against the oratory skills of the committee. In the end, the parents came up with an idea that it is up to girls to decide. Two girls agreed that they would take off their headscarves inside the school and put them back on once outside, another girl resisted. She said that she preferred to stay home and never take off her hijab.

[5] The situation on the hijabs at schools remains relatively the same after almost a decade.

Veiling: *jooluk* vs. hijab

The Soviet atheist campaigns in Central Asia were extreme cases of categorical secularization of society. Within these, Muslim identity became intrinsically tied up with national identity and politics where clothing came to "speak volumes" (Khalid 2007; Roy 2000; Suyarkulova 2016). There is the anecdotal evidence of some Central Asians defining themselves as atheist Muslim – a definition of Muslimness which excluded central Islamic observances and labelled them as fanatical and backward. Contemporary Central Asian governments have conducted repressive measures against political Islam and attempted to remove religious symbols from the public sphere. For ardent secularists and most state officials, the hijab is an imported thing. They see it as belonging to a "foreign culture". Even the presidents of each of the five Central Asian republics have explicitly expressed their opposition to hijabs (HRW 2020).

Re-interpretation of Islam and awareness of "true" religious practices is being proselytized through social media, internet, leaflets, translated minibooks, mp3 and other material in the Kyrgyz and Russian languages. It is also promoted through regular gatherings held by local religious leaders, regular Islamic talks and circles, door-to-door preaching practice (*davaat*), Tablighi women's religious gatherings (*Taalim*, *Masturat*) and many other on- and off-line means.

The traditional moral code requires all married or elderly Kyrgyz women to cover their heads with a traditional head cloth – *jooluk* which is part of Kyrgyz traditional clothing. It is a head cloth worn tied at the back of the neck and still remains a feature of women's outfits outside the major urban centers. Most frequently worn by older women, the scarf is widely interpreted as traditional and Central Asian. Despite the fact that these traditional headscarves could also close around the head, hair and neck if tied up properly, the "new Muslim women" who veil mostly prefer an "imported" cloth in the form of the hijab over the traditionally worn Kyrgyz *bandana* (a *jooluk* worn to realize the spiritual aims and appear modest). They refer to the Islamic textual foundations. Young women were the first to adopt the hijab in Kyrgyzstan. There is a clear generational divide in the experience of the post-Soviet reformatting of religion. They see the elder generation as ruined and destroyed by the Soviet-era value system that has led to the current economic and spiritual aimlessness. To them, restoring spiritual sustenance and dedication to religious values presents a hope for a better future. Given that traditional modest headwear is available which can serve to "protect" women, the choice made by wearers of the new Islamic headscarves in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan must be seen as a search for a new religious identity free from the long-established negative associations of backwardness. For many veiled women the adoption of modest behavioral codes and a devout lifestyle gives a new sense of mastery over themselves, their lives and their future.

Hijabs as alternative modernity

In the case of some Kyrgyz women who made the individual decision to wear hijabs, veiling signifies their autonomy and is a sign of an erasure of dimensions of the local past and Soviet identities. Meanwhile, other women are expected by their community to wear hijab and cannot resist their conservative values and communal control. In their cases, veiling indicates a decision made for the woman – by parents or even a mother-in-law concerned with the family's reputation, or by a husband controlling his wife's dressing. Still, in both cases the decision is to a degree internalized by the woman herself. I now turn to some concrete examples of women's attitudes towards veiling in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan to better understand the meaning this has for them and how it connects with their religious and cultural identity and relations with their traditional environment.

Individualization of hijabs

Zuloiha is a young married 17-year-old girl. I met her some months into her marriage. Her husband is a 25-year-old devoted Muslim attending mosque and going on Tablighi Jamaat's *dawaah* trips. She was unhappy with her marriage. When I saw her first, she looked sad and I could feel her regret with her destiny. She was a young, inexperienced, shy girl with the free spirit of a teenager. At times she sounded obedient to the traditional rules of marriage and the husband's role, at other times she expressed resistance against these ideals and a couple of times she said that attempted to flee her new home. She lived with her in-laws and told me that her husband forced her to cover herself and wear a hijab.

Contrarily, Hadicha was wearing a hijab of her own account. She said that no one expected it

from her and no one pressured her. It was her own choice to come to the true path and live a good "Muslim life". Although it took her years to stay firm on her decision to wear the Islamic headscarf, she found the strength and step by step decided to wear a hijab in public. She said that she worried about her parents, siblings and neighbors, about what they would say, how they would react and how she would behave in her new garment. She did not change her clothes radically. First, she started wearing longer skirts and no pants and jeans anymore, then she added long-sleeved blouses and tops. Later she combined both. She said people around her were interested and asked whether she was getting "devoted to religion" (*dinge berilip kettinbi*). She said she did not hide her changed attitudes toward Islam or that she had started regular prayers and learned passages from the Quran. She said on the first day when she wore a hijab, she didn't feel as constrained as she had expected:

"I think people have gotten used to hijabs already. Years before it had been negatively perceived and I myself hadn't encouraged wearing it. But when I went out of my home in a hijab (*hijabchan*) I was ready to ignore the glances people could give me and possible teasing comments. Luckily, I didn't get these and I felt very good about myself (*ozumdu jakshy sezdim*). Only some of my friends, relatives and younger neighbors were joking about my new attire. They found it ironic that I now had become a decent girl. I joked that I also take responsibility for their sins and am on a mission to be a role model. Through jokes I tried to convince them that they should also make a firm decision and cover their naked parts."

The motives and practice of wearing hijabs, as we can see, are not homogenized and have individual characteristics. The normalization and integration of Muslim headscarves in the Kyrgyz public space is presenting favorable conditions for the wearing of hijabs. As was mentioned earlier, only decades ago, there were no production and even no name for the hijab, which was referred to by the descriptive words "wrapped","covered" bearing negative connotations (*jamyngan*, *orongon*, *chumkongon*). Today, translocal Islamic views, Kyrgyz traditional elements and constructive polemics are woven together making hijabs less confrontational. Active proponents like Nurgul are emerging. Nurgul, is a local Muslim activist and online influencer. She owns a beauty salon and a small store in the local bazaar. She has been wearing hijab for the last three years and has a popular Instagram account where she motivates others and welcomes them to hijab fashion.

Conclusion

There are different paths to religious conversion and veiling in the region. Young women rather than their parents were the first adopters of hijab in Kyrgyzstan. Wider communal control in regard to Islam is weak, and the new Islam-oriented moral authority in the Kyrgyz youth is observed to come not from their parents or neighborhood communities but rather from sources that are personally, culturally and geographically remote (social media, religious books, local mosque gathering, *daw'at-chis*, global community of Muslims). Younger generations feel their parents do not properly understand the commandments of Islam because they lived under the Soviet rule and their lives were hopeless and ruined by communism. The Islamic style of clothing effects and signifies a transformation of the "self". This is seen in the dynamics of hijab practices in Kyrgyzstan. New headscarves in the region, therefore, can be said to represent an individualization of veiling. This transformative process contributes to a larger assemblage of social change and represents a new historical consciousness and a process of changing subjectivities.

In the Kyrgyz context, the veiling movement acts as a contributor to new social identities, which often contradict and counteract traditional hierarchical relations and also mark different standards of morality between the generations. Given that traditional modest headwear is available to "protect" women's shame, wearers of the hijab in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan can be said to search for a new identity free from established negative associations of backwardness. For them the hijab is a symbol of a new spiritual and moral order untarnished by the failed Communism and uncertain present. New Islamic clothing promotes self-discipline and self-consciousness for veiled women; it serves as a bodily reminder to the wearer of her commitment to be a dutiful, modern Muslim woman. Hijabs signal new religious identity, which they navigate to distance from the autochthonous, colonial past and postcolonial uncertain present in order to provide the foundations for a new promising Muslim society.

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GEOGRAPHICA AUGUSTANA

Beyond Post-Soviet:

Layered Legacies and Transformations in Central Asia

Thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics are still often granted the epithet "post-Soviet." While this is technically true, the region has been shaped and differentiated not only by seven decades of Soviet rule, but also by a pre-Soviet feudal and colonial history as well as various more recent phenomena and developments. Thus, each social phenomenon observed in Central Asia today has its own unique combination of elements from the past deriving from "layered legacies" – legacies of different phases that reinforce, interact with or contradict each other in complex ways and can have very different consequences in different local contexts.

This volume examines some of the region's layered legacies by eclectically zooming in on topics, such as urban planning, water management, agricultural production, communal cooperation, migration patterns, ethnicity, Islam and gender. The overarching question explored across these different examples pertains to the relative relevance and dynamic interaction of these layers of legacies. Are Soviet structures still relevant today? How much was disrupted by the transformation efforts in the 1990s and to what degree are the Central Asian republics today affected by current global socio-economic and political dynamics?

These questions were addressed in two workshops in 2020 and 2021 in Augsburg and Eberswalde that brought together Central Asia researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds to present and discuss their ongoing research on the region. These two events also served as the first annual meetings of the Central Asian Studies Network in Germany (CASNiG), an open network of Central Asia researchers and experts set up to exchange ideas, concepts and findings, and to promote collaboration, mutual support and solidarity. This volume presents selected papers based on contributions from the two workshops, addressing contemporary issues and layered legacies in Central Asia from various angles.

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