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**The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies**

*Edited by Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann*

# **The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies**

Edited by Michael Kemper and  
Stephan Conermann

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- 75 K.Kh. Tadzhiikova, "Osobennosti sufizma v srednevekovom Kazakhstane," *Izvestiia AN KazSSR, Serii obshchestvennykh nauk*, 2 (1978), 57–62.
- 76 K.Kh. Tadzhiikova, "Uchenie Khodzhi Akhmeda Iasavi i ego istoricheskie sud'by," *Izvestiia AN Respubliki Kazakhstan, Serii obshchestvennykh nauk*, 1 (1992), 13–18. Tadzhiikova continued to publish on Yasavi in post-Soviet times, still explaining his "teaching" exclusively on the basis of the *Divan-i hikmat*. See K.Kh. Tadzhiikova, "Sufizm Khodzhi Akhmeda Iassavi," in *Islam, obshchestvo i kul'tura (Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii 'Islamskaia tsivilizatsiia v preddverii XXI veka (K 600-letiiu islama v Sibiri)'* (Omsk: Assotsiatsiia tiurkskikh narodov Omskoi oblasti, 1994), 148–150; and K. Tazhikova and Sh. Shaghataeva, "Qozha Akhmet Yassavi," in *Qazaq*, ed. A. Qasimzhanov et al. (Almaty: Bilim, 1994), 143–148.
- 77 On these tendencies, see the discussions in Bruce G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), 7–19; and Allen J. Frank, *Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia: The Islamic World of Novouzensk District and the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1780–1910* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 274–277.
- 78 Natal'ia Ibraeva, "Pamiatniki Mangyshlaka," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, 8 (1980), 32–35 [33].
- 79 B.T. Tuiakbaeva, *Epigraficheskii dekor arkhitekturnogo kompleksa Akhmeda Iasavi* (Alma-Ata: Oner, 1989), 162; my emphasis.
- 80 Tuiakbaeva's work elsewhere advances the nonsensical notion that Sufism's adaptation in a Zoroastrian environment is evidenced in the common derivation, from the "Qazaq root" *zar*, of the words *khizr*, *azret*, *ziarat*, *mazar* and *Zaratushtra!* (Tuiakbaeva, *Epigraficheskii dekor*, 23). These claims may be exceeded in vacuity by those advanced in B.T. Tuiakbaeva and A.N. Proskurin, "K voprosu o vozniknovenii sufiiskoi khanaki v g. Turkestane," *Vestnik AN KazSSR*, 6 (1986) 62–70. Here we are reminded, for example, of stories about Yasavi's subterranean enclosure, which the authors refer to as a "cave" (*ghar*), with the latter term then proposed as an element in the earlier name of the town on or near the site of Yasi/Turkistan, "Shawghar." The first element of the latter name is then derived from the name of the Shafi'i juridical school, and the town's name is thus explained as "Shafigar," and as alluding to the underground cells in which the affiliates of the Shafi'i *madhhab* supposedly gathered. Not content with this argument, the authors then advise us that the "Arabic and Persian" word *ghar* is probably derived from the "Turkic" word *gor*, meaning "grave" (i.e., the Persian *gur*). The article also includes a still wider range of ridiculous claims and arguments.

## 16 Kyrgyz – Muslim – Central Asian?

### Recent approaches to the study of Kyrgyz culture in Kyrgyzstan

Till Mostowlansky<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In humanities, academic disciplines usually struggle for a clear-cut definition of their study object while the definition of their own societal role often remains blurred and seems to be a result of strategic considerations and personal preference. This is true not only for a "Western" environment but also for the academic landscape of the former republics of the Soviet Union. In Kyrgyzstan, where independent academic institutions have been under construction for almost twenty years, the scholarly discourse on the history and culture of the country and its people has been fragmented and remains inextricably linked to processes of nation-building and the creation of a national identity. In this regard, the crucial question is whether the Kyrgyz, "their" country and its many other citizens are part of a broader regional and religious context or constitute distinct unities along ethnic boundaries. This is reflected in various academic disciplines, such as history, ethnography, Oriental studies, anthropology and strategic studies.

We can heuristically assume that the academic discourses on Kyrgyz culture range from the position of completely integrating the Kyrgyz in a "Central Asian Muslim" environment to the attitude of defining all cultural features as ethnically distinct and specifically Kyrgyz. It then becomes obvious that these contemporary studies within Kyrgyzstan (and often also abroad) have to handle symbolic heritages from the colonial, Soviet and independent periods at the same time.

In this regard, the question of how one ought to define the terms "Kyrgyz," "Muslim" and "Central Asian" is perhaps far less dependent on geographical orientation than on specific world views and, in the case of the Soviet Union, explicit political decision-making. Since the nineteenth century Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz people have been perceived as being torn between "Muslim" and "non-Muslim" features. While this perception is the effect of an "Orientalist" discourse in the sense of Edward Said,<sup>2</sup> it is also hard to neglect the enormous influence these categories had on a national self-perception. As a highly Russified and multi-ethnic Soviet republic, Kyrgyzstan had not been considered a subject of Oriental studies<sup>3</sup> for a long time, neither in the Soviet Union nor in the West. One could mention several reasons for this neglect. One is the concentration on textual traditions within Oriental studies and the handover of oral traditions to another

discipline – ethnography. The relatively small corpus of historical writings on Kyrgyz people and the territory they inhabit (e.g. in comparison to Uzbekistan, with its written sources and centers of learning) made philological research in Kyrgyzstan unattractive and insignificant for the process of Soviet-Kyrgyz nation-building.

These factors notwithstanding, the academic landscape in Kyrgyzstan has dramatically changed in recent years. While ethno-centric approaches are still widely accepted, more internationalized tendencies in the study of the Muslim community in the regional contexts are being applied in research and practice. In this paper, I would like to focus on recent trends in the study of Kyrgyz culture within the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and their historical foundations that sometimes show how influential the Soviet interpretation still is when it comes to the analysis of culture. On the other hand, I would also like to emphasize the fact that the present is far from just being either a consequence of Soviet influence or of the “pre-Soviet” past. Contemporary Kyrgyz culture is by no means oral and nomadic and the scriptural sources that Orientalists usually work with are now produced on a daily basis and in a self-fulfilling manner. Publishing on various cultural topics flourishes in Kyrgyzstan, and the authors who write on religion, history and ethnography range from graduates of al-Azhar and academic scholars to “village intellectuals.”

### The situation before the Soviet Union

There is little information about local research on Kyrgyz territory before the turn of the twentieth century. While major research activities in the field of ethnography and archeology were carried out by colonial institutions of the Russian Empire that were usually located in today’s Almaty and Tashkent, there are also some references to local scholars of that time. In the district town (*uezdnyi gorod*) of Pishpek, now the Kyrgyzstani capital Bishkek, “self-appointed” scholars like A.M. Fetisov began research on archeological and ethnographic topics in the region. However, the descriptions of travels and expeditions and their outcomes were usually published in the *Turkestarskie vedomosti*, a journal based in Tashkent until 1917.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Kyrgyz scholars who had received their education in *madrasas* on Kyrgyz territory or in prestigious Bukhara tried to contribute to an increasingly national self-understanding of the Kyrgyz. One of the scholars we know by name is Osmonaaly Sydyk uulu (d. 1942), who lived and worked in central Kyrgyzstan shortly before the advent of the Soviet Union. His main works,<sup>5</sup> the *Mukhtasar tarikh-i qirghiziyya* and *Tarikh-i Qirghiz-i shadmaniyya*, deal with the history and genealogy of the Kyrgyz; they belong to the early attempts of Kyrgyz historiography outside of the epic tradition, and are mostly classified today as belonging to Jadidist literature.<sup>6</sup> Sydyk uulu received his education in Bukhara and traveled extensively through Central Asia; his works, however, were published in the city of Ufa.<sup>7</sup>

Neither Fetisov in Pishpek nor Sydyk uulu in the Central Asian centers of Islamic learning was a member of an institutionalized movement researching

Kyrgyz culture. Such institutions were established only from the early years of the Soviet Union onwards. But while the work of Sydyk uulu was of little interest for Kyrgyz scholars until the independence of Kyrgyzstan in 1991, Pishpek-style local studies (*kraevedenie*) comprised an important Soviet tool for the improvement of national concepts.

As Ingeborg Baldauf states in her publication “*Kraevedenie*” and *Uzbek National Consciousness*, local studies were enforced in Uzbekistan in the 1920s as an alternative concept for research.<sup>8</sup> While pointing at the scientific as well as political aspects of *kraevedenie*, Baldauf argues that it “in fact reinforced the ties between researchers and their own cultural traditions and was able to stimulate national feelings. That is why, in turn, it could be instrumentalized by culture planners in order to support their national concepts.”<sup>9</sup>

Research on the situation in Kyrgyzstan during the early Soviet period is still marginal. However, it is more than likely that local studies were supported by political authorities on Kyrgyz territory during the early years of the Soviet Union, before they fell out of favor in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup>

### The study of Kyrgyz culture in the Kirgiz SSR

The study of Kyrgyz culture in the Kirgiz SSR was characterized by the allocation of thematic sub-categories to different branches of humanities. While, for instance, linguistic aspects of the Kyrgyz language were being studied in the sphere of Turcology (and therefore Oriental studies), Kyrgyz history remained the subject of local historians and ethnographers. The decision whether one should study the Kyrgyz as “Central Asian” or within the borders of the republic was never made; and it is still a matter of debate in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. The case of the foundation of Oriental studies in the Kirgiz SSR gives us an example of the blurred position the study of Kyrgyz culture and history holds in an academic environment to this day.

In 1963, the sections for Turcology and Dungan<sup>11</sup> studies (*dunganovedenie*) at the Institute of Language and Literature at the Academy of Sciences of the Kirgiz SSR were transformed into a Department for Oriental Studies.<sup>12</sup> However, the tasks of this newly founded department mainly included the investigation of “historical, sociological, ethnographic and philological problems of Dungan studies (history, way of life, culture, language, literature) as well as the history and cultures of the adjoining countries of the East.”<sup>13</sup> With two Central Asian centres for Dungan studies in contemporary Almaty and Bishkek, Soviet Orientalists extensively published on Dungan culture.<sup>14</sup> Dictionaries, books of grammar and ethnographic descriptions gave a detailed picture of Dungan life in the republic. In contrast, historical studies on the Kyrgyz mainly focused on questions of ethnogenesis<sup>15</sup> and on the Russian–Kyrgyz “friendship”<sup>16</sup> of the nineteenth century that followed the annexation of the territory.<sup>17</sup> This is not especially surprising: the small amount of written sources for the history of the Kyrgyz, in combination with a negative attitude towards their allegedly “nomadic” culture,<sup>18</sup> made the study of these subjects unattractive for Orientalists; and academic positions in history and

ethnography were often occupied by political watchdogs who did not have a command of the regional languages. Dungans, on the other hand, made use of the advantages that officially recognized ethnic minorities enjoyed in the Kirgiz SSR. Their lives as peasants and traders were documented in detail, and their language and literature were well preserved. In recent years the *dunganovedy* even discovered "Dungan Islam" (which was not a major object of study in the Soviet Union) as a popular topic for research.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, privately financed journals on Dungan history and culture as well as ongoing academic research give evidence of how strong community commitment remains among Dungans in Kyrgyzstan up to the present day.<sup>20</sup>

The majority of research activities on Kyrgyz culture were initiated from outside the Kirgiz SSR in the Soviet Union, mainly from Russia, with its centers for ethnographic research. In addition, the Academy of Sciences in the capital Frunze (now Bishkek) was not the only institution concerned with the study of the population of the republic; scholars at universities inside and outside the city had similar interests. The institutes of the Academy usually provided the framework and political guidelines along which scholars could structure their research. This led to stereotypical studies which had to date the historical origin of the Kyrgyz as early as possible. They encouraged extremely uninspired ethnographic works on folklore that depicted Kyrgyz culture as a cluster of "pre-Islamic" rites (*de passage*) and popular beliefs.<sup>21</sup> Down to the present day, the works of Saul M. Abramzon have served as a model for many Kyrgyz scholars. His book *The Kyrgyz and Their Ethnogenetical and Historical-Cultural Connections* (1990) is still especially popular among contemporary ethnographers.<sup>22</sup>

However, there is little information on how the study of Kyrgyz culture was organized in the rural regions of the Kirgiz SSR and what kind of networks existed between academics and local scholars. While we can only speculate about the nature of this interaction in the Soviet Union, there are some contemporary examples of professional relationships between trained scholars and village intellectuals in the regions of Kyrgyzstan, as will be shown below.

### **The study of Kyrgyz culture in independent Kyrgyzstan**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, and therefore the independence of Kyrgyzstan, has often been viewed as a radical change in many spheres of public and private life. This is true for such fields as economy, politics and national ideology, but it can only partially be applied to the academic environment. To be sure, after 1991 the academic landscape changed in terms of decentralization and an internationalized scientific discourse. There are now more than forty universities (private, state-funded and foreign) in independent Kyrgyzstan, many of which provide research and teaching on Kyrgyz culture. Nevertheless, a high percentage of current scholars received their education in the Soviet Union and found ways to adapt to the environment of a national state.<sup>23</sup> While some of these scholars are still being supported (or at least tolerated) by the Academy of Sciences, others have taken up positions at international universities. As a result,

the Soviet discourse on culture has lost its exclusive authority. Nevertheless, it is still an important factor in the perception and interpretation of cultural phenomena. While the question of continuity from Soviet to post-Soviet times has not yet been studied in the context of Kyrgyzstan, the political and ideological survival of Soviet academic authorities is striking. Especially in governmental institutions, the reinterpretation of Kyrgyz culture and history mainly resulted in the presentation of a "deSovietized" version of the old canon. As David Gullette has recently shown, the development of ethnic studies in the 1990s was not merely a consequence of the independence movements in the Soviet Union but an integral part of the Soviet approach to "culture" and "nation." According to Gullette, "ethnogenesis had been a Soviet tool to authenticate different 'peoples' and to chart their position on the scale of civilisation," and it was only later "used to demonstrate the independence of new countries and separatist movements."<sup>24</sup>

Out of the many academic institutions to be founded after 1991, the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University and the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek probably have the strongest teaching capacities for the study of Kyrgyz culture. Both were founded during the 1990s and helped to involve Kyrgyzstan in an international academic discourse. While the Manas University, a Turkish enterprise, still focuses on Kyrgyz as part of the Turkic world (research on Kyrgyz culture is mainly located at the Departments of History and Turcology), the American University promotes an anthropological understanding of culture which is very much shaped by contemporary social sciences theories. Degree programs in anthropology, political science and sociology indicate the positive attitude towards social sciences. In addition, the Social Research Center provides support and infrastructure for international scholars.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University participates in the discourse on Kyrgyz culture through the Institute of Strategic Analysis and Prognosis and its specialists on political Islam.<sup>26</sup> The Slavic University was founded in 1992 with Russian support in order to maintain academic cooperation between Russia and newly independent Kyrgyzstan.

All three institutions, the American University, the Turkish Manas University and the Slavic University, constitute vital parts of an international discourse on Kyrgyz culture that serves as background for the emergence of private research initiatives. One of these is the research center Aigine which began work in 2004.<sup>27</sup> Using the example of this research center, I will show how various discourses are integrated and to what extent the struggle for the definition of a research object reflects the struggle for self-definition in society at large.

### **Study of a nation, or defining ethnicity?**

In recent years, Aigine, a small research center in Bishkek, has become one of the main contributors to the study of Kyrgyz culture inside Kyrgyzstan. The research center, which is mainly funded by international donors, regularly publishes books, supports and organizes conferences and round-tables and cooperates with foreign universities. Interestingly, Aigine (a Kyrgyz term meaning "clear" or "definite")

participates in various discourses on Kyrgyz culture at the same time. Some of them are closely connected to academic studies while others are linked to definitions of ethnicity and religion that are far beyond exclusively scholarly discussions. In the following, I will analyse how Aigine, as an institution, acts within these fields of discourse according to its publications, official presentation and an interview with Gülnara Aitpaeva, the center's director.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the discussion about how the population of Kyrgyzstan should be studied became central not only for the state and its officials but also in regard to different initiatives among scholars. One of these initiatives of the 1990s resulted in the founding of Aigine as an independent research center.

When Gülnara Aitpaeva, a trained linguist, was employed by the American University in 1996, she brought forward the introduction of an academic discipline called "Kyrgyz ethnology" (*kyrgyzskaia etnologiia* in Russian or *kyrgyz taanuu*, "Kyrgyz studies," in Kyrgyz). As Aitpaeva states herself, the initially supportive attitude of the American University came to an end when it reorientated itself from Kyrgyzstan to the whole of Central Asia. Furthermore, a "Kyrgyz ethnology" generated fears of nationalism and ethno-centric opinions. When the American University in Bishkek finally decided in 2003 to cover the whole region rather than one republic, anthropology was introduced as a general discipline. Deprived of the opportunity to introduce the anthropological study of Kyrgyz culture at the university, Aitpaeva founded Aigine with support from the American-based Christensen Fund in 2004.<sup>28</sup>

The following mission statement summarizes the basic ideas that have guided the research center since its foundation:<sup>29</sup>

Aigine is [*sic*] cultural research centre, created as nongovernmental public fund, and dedicated to the following:

- 1 Promulgate little known aspects of the diverse cultural and natural heritage of Kyrgyzstan;
- 2 Contribute to the development of cultural heritage management in Kyrgyzstan;
- 3 Search for ways to reconcile and integrate esoteric and scientific approaches to understanding, nature and culture, tradition and innovation, history and modernity, and west and east;
- 4 Emphasize and utilize inter-ethnic, inter-cultural, inter-religious, and inter-age phenomena to promote tolerance and mutual understanding among the ethnicities, cultures, religious groups, and generations of Kyrgyzstan.

Aigine's mission statement clearly shows the different discursive levels on which the research center participates. First, the claim to be an institution with full academic recognition is obvious and is confirmed by the close cooperation with universities from the United States as well as the involvement in the Central

Eurasian Studies Society (CESS).<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the promotion of diversity in connection with cultural and natural heritage and the emphasis on local scholars match the requirements of Aigine's main donor, the Christensen Fund, as stated in a declaration on that fund's website. In this declaration, the Christensen Fund presents itself as an organization "that believes in the power of biological and cultural diversity to sustain and enrich a world faced with great change and uncertainty. Therefore, the fund's mission is to buttress the efforts of people and institutions who believe in a biodiverse world infused with artistic expression." According to its declaration, the Christensen Fund supports partners in regions that are believed to be able to "withstand and recover from the global erosion of diversity." In the chosen regions, "community custodians" of this heritage are backed and encouraged to build "alliances with scholars, artists, advocates and others." As the fund considers these challenging goals, it "seek[s] out imaginative, thoughtful and occasionally odd partners to learn with." Partners of the Christensen Fund include universities such as Harvard and Stanford as well as several institutions in Central Asia which conduct research on "sacred sites," "sacred landscapes," "indigenous knowledge" and "folkloristic aspects" of their respective cultures.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding Aigine, research is closely related to its practical use. While the center has no political ambitions *per se*, it still follows guidelines that aim at a socio-political impact. As Aitpaeva states, "there are conflicts between the East and the West"<sup>32</sup> that have to be solved. Therefore, reconciliation is one of its goals, along with the promotion of diversity. Aitpaeva considers cultural diversity as a phenomenon that can be observed in Kyrgyzstan as a national state as well as "inside" Kyrgyz culture, which is scattered throughout various interest groups divided by region, kin and religious orientation.

Almost any attempt to promote diversity along ethnic boundaries is forced to argue historically, and therefore to refer to Soviet historiography. Thus attitudes fluctuate between a broader national ("Kyrgyzstani") point of view and Kyrgyz-orientated, ethno-centric arguments that were maintained to serve the Kyrgyz as the titular nation.

For the most part, these discourses overlap. How intertwined both levels are can be seen from recent Aigine activities: the research on Kalmyk communities in the Ysyk-Köl region is meant to support the reconciliation of Kyrgyz and Kalmyks. Kalmyks in Kyrgyzstan are said to be of "Mongolian origin" and to be connected to the Kalmaks of previous centuries. In this context, Aigine refers to a state of war between Buddhist "Kalmaks" and Muslim "Kyrgyz" kin-groups in the eighteenth century. This period's events were preserved in oral literature and history, but not recorded before the second half of the nineteenth century. Arguably, the interpretation of this conflict as ethnic is a projection of contemporary identities on to the past, since the actual definition of ethnicity resulted from Soviet nation-building. It was in the Soviet period that Kyrgyz oral literature was written down, canonized and attributed to the Kyrgyz as a nation that is defined by language and common cultural features. While promoting ethnic diversity within Kyrgyzstan, one has to go back to the drawing of ethnic boundaries in the early Soviet Union.

The existence of an ethnic majority, as the titular nation that leads the state as well as its minority groups, is taken for granted. The current discourse on cultural diversity is therefore closely related to a Soviet idea of nation and presumably strengthens ethnic boundaries rather than dissolves them.

The practical impact of Aigine's research activities not only includes roundtables on various topics (such as sacred sites, the role of *moldos* (mullahs) in Kyrgyzstan, and transpersonal psychology) as well as community support and the organization of conferences but extensive work on Kyrgyz culture in the form of documentaries<sup>33</sup> and books. For instance, the first research project on "sacred sites" (*mazars*) in the Talas Region resulted in the publication of the book *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan: Rituals and Practitioners in Talas*<sup>34</sup> and caused, according to Aitpaeva, discussions on how studies on Kyrgyz culture should be conducted. The book is divided into two parts. The first includes the voices of "cultural practitioners" (*mazar* guardians and shaykhs) and their opinions on *mazars* as well as a list of *mazars* in Talas. The second consists of scholarly articles, including an analysis of collected materials. The first part especially led to criticism from the representatives of governmental academic institutions. Involvement of people from village communities in the research process was perceived as inappropriate and unacademic.<sup>35</sup>

Aigine's claim of fulfilling an integrating role between scientific and esoteric<sup>36</sup> approaches also relates to the merging of researcher into research object, and vice versa. While participating in an international "esoteric" discourse,<sup>37</sup> Aigine ethnicizes its concept of esotericism (or spirituality) with the term *kyrgyzchylyk*. In the given context, *kyrgyzchylyk* denotes all qualities attributed to "being Kyrgyz." In the field of spirituality, Aitpaeva argues that this means above all the practices of divination and healing. One of Aigine's goals is therefore to be part of what its representatives define as spiritual to such an extent that a bridge between emic and etic understanding can be built. An example of how Aigine not only describes but also shapes the landscape of religious culture is provided by an event that took place between February and March 2008.

The ceremony of *Uluu Ot*<sup>38</sup> ("Great Fire") was conducted by Aigine at several places in northern Kyrgyzstan in cooperation with Apela Colorado, a scholar from the American-based Wisdom University,<sup>39</sup> and "traditional Kyrgyz practitioners." The bonfires were organized on several occasions, though especially in connection with *navruz* (*nooruz*), the festival for the summer solstice that is widely celebrated in Iran and Central Asia. Aigine promoted the event as follows:

All over the world, indigenous Elders and Healers are gathering. Everyone is concerned about the great changes the world faces, and we have realized that the time, so long prophesized, is here. The Mayan Calendar, which keeps time in 26,000 year cycles, predicts an epochal shift in 2012. While this is a natural adjustment for Earth, indigenous wisdom predicts a catastrophe for humanity if we do not change the way we relate to life. The Uluu Ot is a powerful way to remember our relatedness as a global community and with the Earth – and to commit to life sustaining change and to help it happen.<sup>40</sup>

The organization of *Uluu Ot*, as well as other events,<sup>41</sup> suggests that Aigine participates in a broader "esoteric" discourse<sup>42</sup> that is embedded in an international environment. As Aitpaeva said in the media, events such as *Uluu Ot* are not seen as "religious": "This is not a religious act, but a spiritual activity that unites different religions, people and cultures."<sup>43</sup>

The fact that Aigine, even if intending otherwise, ethnicizes the study of Kyrgyzstan and its inhabitants while at the same time promoting diversity is symbolic of an ongoing and highly political discussion in the country. The question of whether studying the Kyrgyz means studying the country and the issue of how ethnicity can be defined in a state where those classifications do not have a long history remain unsolved. However, the definition of what is considered indigenous and therefore entitled to authority is a challenge not only for academics but also for local scholars in different parts of Central Asia. In the following section, I will therefore describe a small community of "village intellectuals" who not only study their local environment but also interact with scholars from the outside.

### Local studies and the question of *kraevedenie*

When I conducted field research on Islam among the Kyrgyz of Murgab (Eastern Pamirs, Tajikistan) in 2008, I met many local men who are regarded as scholars by their fellow citizens. Some of these men are mullahs (*moldo*), others teachers and others politicians, but what they all have in common is their relation to the study of Kyrgyz culture. While many just teach their families and neighborhood, others publish books outlining what they believe to be the true story of the local Kyrgyz population.<sup>44</sup>

I conducted an interview with a "village intellectual" who proved to be especially active in the field of cultural research, and indeed his house was stuffed with history books. Later he told me about his correspondence with many of the important scholars in Soviet-Kyrgyz historiography and depicted himself as their local adviser and mentor. However, I was fairly surprised when he told me that he had read Aigine's book on *mazars* and considered it so valuable that he did not wish to comment any further on "Kyrgyz Islam" himself. "Read this book, everything is written there" was his advice, and he kindly showed me the door.

Surely, the local Kyrgyz scholars of the Eastern Pamirs are not exactly well integrated into a network of Kyrgyzstani academics. The Kyrgyz minority in Tajikistan is to a great extent cut off from discourses in "their" capital Bishkek, and there is no institution in the Eastern Pamirs capable of coordinating research activities. All the more surprising, then, that Aigine could send out its message to the Kyrgyz minority in the neighboring republic.

As the example of the Pamir Kyrgyz indicates, local research on Kyrgyz culture and history is conducted even in remote areas, such as the Tajik Pamirs. Local scholars adapt data and concepts from academic publications and therefore participate in the respective discourses. However, there is an ongoing discussion on how these "village intellectuals" have to be classified and to which scholarly tradition they refer.



As I mentioned earlier, there have been traces of local research on the Kyrgyz as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. Later, the Soviets promoted *kraevedenie* in Central Asia in order to strengthen their concepts of nationality and the development of ethnic identity. In the 1930s, *kraevedenie* and the *kraevedy* were discredited in the context of political repression, and those studies disappeared for the most part and were perceived pejoratively. Therefore, it is not easy to assume a continuity, although the term *kraeved* is used as self-designation today.<sup>45</sup> As Emily Johnson stated in her study on Russian *kraevedenie*, the discipline became popular again in the 1990s: "Since the early 1990s, Russia has seen – in addition to the creation of new departments, centers, and schools of gender studies, public relations and marketing – a significant increase in the number of academic units and institutions devoted to *kraevedenie*."<sup>46</sup> Clearly, the scholars of Murgab do not define themselves as *kraevedy*,<sup>47</sup> and I do not intend to impose this category on them in the sense of a discipline that was politically supported in early Soviet times and later lost its significance. But while the term *kraevedenie*, with all its historical connotations, might be inappropriate to describe a phenomenon that emerged in recent years in the Tajik Pamirs, the concepts behind the two approaches to local studies show striking similarities. Emily Johnson's definition of Russian *kraevedenie* can, to a large extent, be applied to the studies of the Murgab scholars:

I intend to treat Russian *kraevedenie* as an identity discipline, a field of specialization that combines a certain amount of external structure with substantial internal diversity; in which scholars tend to identify strongly with the subject they study; and where the pursuit of knowledge can easily merge with political and social activism.<sup>48</sup>

Even though the scholars of Murgab are only marginally connected to the network of Aigine (not to mention governmental academic institutions, both in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), they stand for a fundamental shift in the study of Kyrgyz culture in a local context. In recent years, the importance of local studies and private initiatives has grown to such an extent that they can hardly be ignored by academic scholars in the capital.<sup>49</sup> Rather than promoting cultural diversity, the local research projects I encountered put their emphasis on ethnic distinctiveness and Kyrgyz kinship groups. Usually Kyrgyz – not Kyrgyzstani – heroes are studied, and the Eastern Pamirs are promoted as the Kyrgyz *Sarykol* rather than as a territory of cross-cultural interaction.

## Conclusion

The study of Kyrgyz culture in Kyrgyzstan oscillates within the borders of the study of an ethnic group and a nation. This heritage from Soviet nation-building, when the ethnic majority defined a republic's name and cultural orientation, is still alive today and is unlikely to disappear. The very foundations of Kyrgyzstan (and some other Central Asian republics) lie in the conviction that the majority rules

the country and shapes its history. Even though the definition of "Kyrgyz" is often blurred and a common ethnic identity sometimes seems to be an effect of Soviet (and post-Soviet) political agendas, such categories are perceived as real and objective in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. This is the reason why I argue that the balancing act between ethno-centrism and nationalism can now be found in most institutions concerned with the study of Kyrgyz culture, even if they are not directly dependent on political authorities and ideological planners.

Today there is a variety of approaches to the study of Kyrgyz culture. Whether the respective institutions are embedded in an international, "esoteric," nationalist or local context (or all four) often reflects strategic considerations as well as the financial and regional background. While such governmental institutions as the Academy of Sciences are in a constant state of financial crisis and therefore have to limit their research to ideologically acceptable fundraising activities, a center like Aigine is able to participate freely in various discourses at the same time. The scholars of the Kyrgyz minority in the Pamirs, on the other hand, not only try to legitimize the community's existence on Tajik territory but also have to take into consideration the interests of the local Kyrgyz administration and its relationship to higher Tajik authorities. Not surprisingly, the *akim* (district governor) of Murgab is a locally respected poet and interested in the history of his people.

There is no clear-cut distinction between trained academic and non-academic scholars in the study of Kyrgyz culture in Kyrgyzstan. Where governmental institutions fail to maintain the prerogative of interpretation, private research initiatives emerge and often lead to local historiographies and ethnographies. However, these boundaries are permeable. A local scholar can turn into an academic, while university lecturers and other academics can contribute to local historiography.

As is the case for most former Soviet republics in Central Asia, the realm of the history of Soviet research on culture remains understudied up to the present day. Even though this fact limits the opportunities of comparison in a regional context, I suggest that the attachment to "academic authority,"<sup>50</sup> which is obvious in a Kyrgyzstani context, often resulted from a politicized distribution of academic positions and was probably not restricted to the Kirgiz SSR. This assumption, however, remains a hypothesis lacking a historical study of Soviet-Kyrgyz academic institutions and their scholarly networks within the Soviet Union.

Today, the discourse on Kyrgyz culture (and the cultures of Kyrgyzstan) is to a great extent ethnicized and unhistorical. Present categories are projected to the past and stay within the framework of national borders. The fact that cultural phenomena in Kyrgyzstan are often labeled Kyrgyz, or Muslim, or Central Asian (but rarely all three) reflects a scholarly environment that is still in need of demarcation from the "national schools" of the surrounding republics.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to express my gratitude for criticism and comments to Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (Bern), Angelika Rohrbacher (Vienna) and Stefan Rademacher (Bern).

- 2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1994). I would like to make a distinction between "Orientalism" in the sense of Edward Said (with all its negative connotations) and "Orientalist" as a term for an academic who studies the cultures of the Middle East and Asia, even though they coincide in specific cases. For a critical differentiation of Said's concept, see Max Deeg, "Wer eine kennt, kennt keine . . . Zur Notwendigkeit der Unterscheidung von Orientalismen und Okzidentalismen in der asiatischen Religionsgeschichte," in Peter Schalk et al. (eds.), *Religion im Spiegelkabinett. Asiatische Religionsgeschichte im Spannungsfeld zwischen Orientalismus und Okzidentalismus* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), 27–57.
- 3 For the early development of Russian Oriental studies, see Vera Tolz, "European, National, and (Anti-) Imperial: The Formation of Academic Oriental Studies in Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Russia," *Kritika* 9/1 (2008) 53–81.
- 4 Vladimir G. Petrov, *Pishpek ischezaiushchii 1825–1926* (Bishkek: Literaturnyi Kyrgyzstan, 2008), 57.
- 5 Osmonaaly Sydyk, *Mukhtasar tarikh-i qirghiziyya* (Urumchi: Shinzhang zhashtar basmasy: 1986) and Osmonaaly Sydyk, *Tarikh-i Qirghiz-i shadmania* (Urumchi: Shinzhang zhashtar basmasy: 1986).
- 6 Murat Kozhobekov, "Osmonaaly Sydyk uluunun ömür baianina airym taktoolor," "Manas" universiteti. *Koomduk ilimder zhurnaly* 14 (2005), 13–28.
- 7 Üsön Asanov et al. (eds.), *Naryn oblusu* (Bishkek Kyrgyz entsiklopediiiasynyn bashky redaksiiasy, 1998), 336.
- 8 Ingeborg Baldauf, "Kraevedenie" and Uzbek National Consciousness (Bloomington: Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1992), 1ff.
- 9 Ibid., 30.
- 10 Even though *kraevedenie* was considered "non-academic" from the 1930s, the boundaries remained blurred and indeed permeable. As Philipp Rott, a leading Kyrgyzstani archeologist, told me in an interview, *kraevedy* could turn into academic specialists in the field of archeology (interview, 17 February 2009). An example of how undefined these categories remained in the early Soviet Union is Fedor Fiel'strup, an ethnographer who was a specialist on Kyrgyz culture and repressed under Stalin in 1933. Fiel'strup is sometimes mentioned as *kraeved* even though he was a professional Russian ethnographer with working experience abroad. See Iaroslav V. Vasil'kov and Marina Iu. Sorokina (eds.), *Liudi i sudby. Biobibliograficheskii slovar' vostokovedov – zhertv politicheskogo terrora v sovetskii period (1917–1991)* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, 2003), online: <http://memory.pvost.org/pages/fielstrup.html>; and Fedor A. Fiel'strup, *Iz obriadovoi zhizni kirgizov nachala XX veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 2002).
- 11 Dungans are Chinese Muslims who migrated from China to Central Asia in the course of the nineteenth century. Even though they number only around 1 percent of the total population of Kyrgyzstan, they play a vital role in public life and are widely known through their popular cuisine, agriculture and trading.
- 12 Mukhamed Ia. Sushanlo, "Razvitie vostokovedeniia v Kirgizii," in Ashot P. Bazilians (ed.), *Vostokovednye tsenry v SSSR*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), 101–108.
- 13 Ibid., 101.
- 14 Wassilios Klein, "Die Dunganen. Literaturbericht über die aktuelle Situation von aus China stammenden Muslimen in den mittelasiatischen GUS-Republiken," *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 98/3 (2003), 310–320.
- 15 See Marlène Laruelle, "The Concept of Ethnogenesis in Central Asia: Political Context and Institutional Mediators (1940–50)," *Kritika* 9/1 (2008), 169–188; and David Gullette, "A State of Passion: The Use of Ethnogenesis in Kyrgyzstan," *Inner Asia* 10/2 (2008), 261–279.
- 16 The rare voices who doubted the friendly nature of this international relationship became silent when the various Soviet friendship myths took over in the 1940s. A good example is Saul M. Abramzon (based in Moscow and not a Kyrgyz scholar), who dared to use the

- term "conquest" in the publication of his *kandidatskaia dissertatsia* of 1946. He would later save his career with more conventional works. See Lowell Tillett, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 106; Sofia D. Miliband, *Biobibliograficheskii slovar' sovetskikh vostokovedov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 10.
- 17 See, for example, Vladimir M. Ploskikh et al. (eds.), *Istoriia Kirgizskoi SSR*, 3 vols. (Frunze: Kyrgyzstan, 1984–1986). The first volume is dedicated to the early history of the territory of the Kirgiz SSR; the past 200 years are covered in vols. 2 and 3. Abridged and updated versions of this work are published as textbooks for students. See, for example, Vladimir M. Ploskikh and Dzhenushaliev D. Dzhunushaliev, *Istoriia kyrgyzov i Kyrgyzstana* (Bishkek: Raritet Info, 2009).
- 18 For the case of religion, see Till Mostowlansky, *Islam und Kirgisen on Tour. Die Rezeption "nomadischer Religion" und ihre Wirkung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 63–83.
- 19 Klein, "Die Dunganen," 314.
- 20 Ibid., 317.
- 21 See Saul M. Abramzon, *Kirgizy i ikh eñnogeneticheskie i istoriko-kul'turnye sviazi* (Frunze: Kyrgyzstan, 1990); and Toktobübü D. Baialieva, *Doislamskie verovaniia i ikh perezhitki u kirgizov* (Frunze: Ilim, 1972).
- 22 See, for example, a recent ethnographic Ph.D. that was defended at the Academy of Sciences in Bishkek and in which Abramzon's book is cited as a "fundamental work" (*fundamental'nyi trud*): Abdymitalip K. Murzakmetov, *Obriady i pover'ia kyrgyzov, sviazannye s rozhdeniem i razvitiem rebenka (po materialam Iuzhnogo Kyrgyzstana). Avtoreferat* (Bishkek, 2007), 6.
- 23 A vivid example of a well-adapted researcher is the historian Vladimir Ploskikh, who leads a yearly archeological expedition to Lake Ysyk-Köl. Utilizing "underwater archeology" and with the assistance of Russian donors, ancient civilizations and sensational objects are discovered to boost national pride. Mysteriously (or maybe not), all great civilizations tend to be assembled at Kyrgyzstan's best recreational space (the beaches of Lake Ysyk-Köl). For the role of archeology in the construction of Soviet and post-Soviet nationalisms, see Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (eds.), *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Philip L. Kohl, Mara Kozelsky and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (eds.), *Selective Remembrances: Archaeology in the Construction, Commemoration, and Consecration of National Pasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- 24 Gullette, "A State of Passion," 265.
- 25 For information on the history and contemporary role of the American University, see Julia Dröber, "Aufstieg und Niedergang einer 'Liberal Arts Institution': Die American University – Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan," in Matthias Bürgel and Andreas Umland (eds.), *Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftliche Hochschullehre in Osteuropa III. Transformation und Stagnation an postsowjetischen Universitäten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2007), 69–83; especially Alexander Wolters "Die American University – Central Asia. Über eine Bildungseinrichtung in Zeiten der Revolution," in *ibid.*, 85–95.
- 26 See Kadyr Malikov, "Svetskoe gosudarstvo i islamskii politicheskii protsess v Kyrgyzstane: musul'manskii resurs kak faktor gosudarstvennogo stroitel'stva," in Bulat K. Sultanov (ed.), *Sekuliarizm i islam v sovremennom gosudarstve: chto ikh ob'ediniaet?* (Almaty: KISI, 2008), 151–178.
- 27 The number of research initiatives in Kyrgyzstan is hard to assess and mainly dependent on the availability of NGO grants. Out of the many smaller projects, I consider Aigine the most prominent due to its continuity and its numerous publications, although others could be named, such as an international scientific center of Tengrist studies headed by Dastan Sarygulov. See Marlène Laruelle, "Tengrist: In Search for Central Asia's Spiritual Roots," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 8/6 (2006), 3–4.

- 28 The information presented in this paragraph is drawn from an interview with Gülnara Aitpaeva which I conducted on 7 January 2009. A second Aigine donor is the Open Society Institute & Soros Foundations Network.
- 29 <http://www.aigine.kg/Articles/ViewSection.aspx?ArticleID=193> (last visited on 18 May 2009).
- 30 Aitpaeva was a board member of CESS from 2006 to 2008.
- 31 See [http://www.christensenfund.org/frame\\_grants.html](http://www.christensenfund.org/frame_grants.html) (last visited on 18 May 2009).
- 32 Interview with Aitpaeva, 7 January 2009.
- 33 A series of documentaries on *mazars* was produced and broadcast in 2008. A further tool for the popularization of research results is the schoolbook. An officially recognized teaching book on Kyrgyz cultural heritage was published in 2008. See Gülnara A. Aitpaeva and Aida A. Egemberdieva (eds.), *Muras taanuu 4* (Bishkek: Aigine, 2008).
- 34 Gülnara Aitpaeva, *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan: Rituals and Practitioners in Talas* (Bishkek: Maxprint, 2007). This book was published in English and Kyrgyz. See also Gülnara Aitpaeva, *Kasietüü Nyldy Ata* (Bishkek: M Maxima, 2006); and Gülnara Aitpaeva, "The Phenomenon of Sacred Sites in Kyrgyzstan: Interweaving of Mythology and Reality," in Thomas Schaaf and Cathy Lee (eds.), *Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes* (Paris: UNESCO, 2006), 118–123.
- 35 Interview with Aitpaeva, 7 January 2009.
- 36 In the interview, Aitpaeva states that she would now use the term "spiritual" rather than "esoteric." For a critical assessment of the terms "spirituality" and "esotericism" in New Age discourses, see Christoph Bochsinger, "New Age" und moderne Religion. *Religionswissenschaftliche Analysen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 371–398.
- 37 See Kocku von Stuckrad, *Was ist Esoterik? Kleine Geschichte des geheimen Wissens* (München: Beck, 2004), 216–236; and Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2001). In different national and cultural contexts "esoteric" is defined differently. As to Kyrgyzstan, I suggest that the main influences come from Russia and the USA through literature and personal contacts.
- 38 <http://www.onesacredfire.org/> (last visited on 18 May 2009).
- 39 <https://www.wisdomuniversity.org/IM-faculty-graduates.htm> (last visited on 26 August 2009).
- 40 <http://www.aigine.kg/Articles/ViewSection.aspx?ArticleID=274> (last visited on 26 August 2009).
- 41 Such as, for instance, a festival/workshop on "Popular Spirituality and Building Socio-Ecological Resilience." See <http://www.aigine.kg/Articles/ViewSection.aspx?ArticleID=278> (last visited on 26 August 2009).
- 42 Johan Rasanayagam recently described the fusion of "esoteric" and "religious" categories in Central Asia. See Johan Rasanayagam, "Healing with Spirits and the Formation of Muslim Selfhood in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (2006), 377–393. The fact that these patterns are closely intertwined and, especially in the field of healing, promoted as science indicates their future importance for the study of Central Asian cultures.
- 43 <http://www.for.kg/goid.php?id=60526&print> (last visited on 26 August 2009).
- 44 See, for example, Abdugarim Mamatmusa uulu Chokoev, *Zhergemdin murastary zhe ötkön ömürgö kairylyp (darektüü baiandar)* (Khorog: Logos, 2008); Süiünbek Tadzhinov and Sultan Parmanov, *Legendy Sarykola* (Osh: Kagaz Resurstary, 2007); Aidarali Saparbaev and Kubanychbek Temirkulov, *Pamir kyrgyzdary* (Osh: self-published, 2003); Bekzhol Taipov, *Sary kol tarykhynyn kyskacha ocherkteri* (Murgab:

- self-published, 2002); Mitalip Zhumabaev and Sultan Parmanov, *Sarykol kairyktary* (Osh: self-published, 2002).
- 45 See, for example, Petrov, *Pishpek ischezaiushchii*; and Vladimir G. Petrov, *Frunze sovetskii 1926–1991* (Bishkek: Literaturnyi Kyrgyzstan, 2008). Petrov is mentioned as a *kraeved* and not as an academic scholar in the author description.
- 46 Emily D. Johnson, *How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself: The Russian Idea of Kraevedenie* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 3.
- 47 Usually, the Kyrgyz term *aalym* is used, or in Russian translation *uchenyi*.
- 48 Johnson, *How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself*, 6.
- 49 Private initiatives for the study of local heroes and genealogies can be observed all over Kyrgyzstan. An example is the "newspaper" *Baitik Baatyr* that was published in the village Baitik for some time in honor of the local hero after which the village is named. See *Baitik Baatyr* from 29 July and 5 November 1996. The newspaper consists of a collection of historical articles on Baitik and genealogical data. Another example is the Kyrgyz newspaper *Sarykol*, published in the Tajik Pamirs, which presents information on the region's culture and history.
- 50 I referred to Saul Abramzon for the field of ethnography; representatives from other disciplines, such as archeology (Aleksandr Bernshtam) and history (Vasilii Bartol'd), could be mentioned as well.