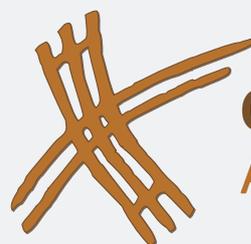


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Migration and patrilineal descent: the  
effects of spatial male mobility on social  
female mobility in rural Kyrgyzstan

Aksana Ismailbekova

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# Migration and patrilineal descent: the effects of spatial male mobility on social female mobility in rural Kyrgyzstan

Aksana Ismailbekova<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aksana Ismailbekova is a research fellow at Zentrum Moderner Orient. She received her PhD at Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale). Some of the material used in this paper is the result of doctoral research conducted in Bulak village from 2007-2008. Further research was conducted in the framework of the Crossroads Asia competence network in the summer of 2011 and in 2012 for one month in Kyrgyzstan and one month in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The author is grateful to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) for funding the follow-up research on the repercussions of migration on those who are in Russia and those left behind in Bulak village, Kyrgyzstan.

## **Abstract**

Migration processes in Kyrgyzstan have given rise to fundamental social and demographic changes with the result that many villages and town quarters are nowadays inhabited solely by women, children and the elderly, whereas younger and middle-aged men live as migrants elsewhere. In this article I explore the role of women in the maintenance of a strong patrilineal descent system, in the absence of their husbands or sons. This is achieved in a variety of ways. Grandmothers play a significant role in transmitting oral genealogies and passing stories on to their children. Other important female roles include changing the names of male relatives of husbands and appointing marriage partners. The role of mothers-in-law in the formation of their sons' marriage ties in the latter's absence furthermore points to the powerful positions of these women. The final point is that young brides continue to live with their parents-in-law, even if their husbands do not, and must be respectful.

## Introduction

Throughout Central Asian history, the role of women and their positions have been widely discussed and targeted as the subject of highly patriarchal and male dominated public discourses. The Soviet scholarship in particular has shaped this kind of stereotypical representation of patrilineal societies of Central Asia. Influenced by Soviet ideology, Abramzon (1971) examines Kyrgyz social organizations through the Marxist prism of 'class'; that is, in terms of the so-called feudal-patriarchy of the nomads. In particular, women in Central Asia have been described in terms of suffering and great injustices.

But when one looks at the works of the second half of the 19th century, Russian explorers and travellers visiting northern Kyrgyzstan noted the relatively high status and power of women.<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyz women also had equal rights during pre-Soviet times as part of the nomadic system, specifically as a result of nomads' need to deal with both the political and economic aspects of their mobile lives within their kinship-based social structure. Instead of saying that women had no rights and their existence was to perform sexual and reproductive functions, as well as to display unconditional obedience to their husbands (Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2001; Tabyshalieva, 1998), I would argue there are many processes through which women actively affect political decisions in the larger society. Women have become subjects of, and ideological sites for religious, political, and economic projects. The recent anthropological and historical literature looks at the construction and reproduction of gender ideology in conjunction with larger political goals, mainly nation building projects of the contemporary societies (Kandiyoti 1991, 1992; Massell, 1974). Issues of women's rights are "part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated and women's appropriate place and conduct are being made to serve as boundary markers" (Kandiyoti 1992: 246).

With this perspective in mind, it is important to underscore the role of the Central Asian women under the Soviet Union as the political tools of the Bolshevik. Women underwent the development of gender socialization, which brought fundamental changes (Edgar, 2003; Kamp, 2006) and Soviet policy improved the position of women in society through women's advanced legal rights and benefits in the social welfare system (Akiner, 1997). The Soviet campaign aimed to abolish the seclusion and inequality of Muslim women and they focused on women's liberation strategically. In order to find allies among the women of Central Asia, party activists launched a campaign in 1927, called a *hujum*, or assault. The campaign against the veil was not easy. Rather, it was very contested, complicated, and contradictory (Northrop, 2004: 12). The liberation campaign of the communist party caused many violent responses that put liberated Uzbek women's lives at risk (Kamp, 2006: 4-5). Despite all these risks, socialism could benefit these women through education and social benefits (*ibid.*: 8). I agree with Kamp that the relatively progressive status of women in Kyrgyzstan today is very much the consequence of earlier Soviet Union policy. It is true that the Soviet Union opened doors for most working-class women, thereby encouraging them to use non-domestic labour as a resource for their self-realisation, and that women were finally granted equal access to education and other resources which were once forbidden to them. Although the practice of bride kidnapping

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<sup>2</sup> Russian explorers and travellers, 1973, pp. 185, 196.

was banned during the Soviet Union, there was still a gap between Soviet policy and actual practice (Kamp, 2008). Nevertheless, as Kandiyoti (2007: 616) rightly argues, “Soviet policies in Central Asia had the paradoxical consequences of both expanding opportunities for women’s education and public presence and stalling processes of occupational and spatial mobility commonly associated with modernity”.

With the collapse of the USSR, and its consequences such as economic collapse, re-islamisation, and unemployment, the role of women is now in the private realm, which serves as a coping mechanism at a time of uncertainty and insecurity (Heyet, 2004: 286). Nation building projects of Central Asian governments contribute to patriarchal authority by symbolizing the head of the government as the male figure (Akiner, 1997). However, the appropriation of ‘patriarchy as national culture’ by the post-Soviet state and the re-islamisation of society are not the only factors that place the role of women in the private realm. Rather, the leaders of the new independent countries in search of ideologies of national independence started focusing on the ideas of ‘de-Sovietization’, calling women to return to their ‘natural destiny’ and giving up their ‘unnatural tasks’ (Kandiyoti, 2007: 616; Uehling, 2007; Constantine, 2007; Kuehnast and Nechemias, 2004). Additionally, there was a decrease in state support for women in the transition period (Werner, 2004a). Kandiyoti (2001: 54) indicates that women were ambiguously incorporated into the postcolonial states, by giving them a position as citizens of states as well as “privileged custodians of national values”. And this was the case in Central Asian countries, by ambiguously incorporating women into the independent states as the keepers of the *hearth* and *home*.

As a consequence of the changes in gender ideologies in post-Soviet countries, there has been a revival and legitimation of non-consensual bride kidnapping as a national tradition (Amsler and Kleinbach, 1999; Kleinbach et al 2005; Werner, 2004b; 2009), even though the Kyrgyz government treats bride kidnapping as illegal and a violation of human rights (Criminal Code 1994). According to Kleinbach (2005), 50 percent of ethnic Kyrgyz marriages are a result of kidnappings, both consensual and non-consensual.

There is a scholarly debate surrounding the theoretical understanding of bride kidnapping in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. For Kyrgyz men, bride kidnapping is more than just renewed tradition, it has also become a “primary act defining cultural identity and manhood” (Handrahan, 2004: 208). Werner (2009: 314) cites local discourses of shame and tradition as an explanation for changing marriage practices and to mark a shift towards greater patriarchy in post-Soviet Central Asia. She argues that “these discourses of shame and tradition have helped men assert further control over female mobility and female sexuality” (ibid.: 314). O’Neill Borbieva (2012: 141-143) argues that “kidnapping in Kyrgyz society is used in a variety of ways by individuals who are struggling to respond to a changing conception of love, marriage, and authority. By mediating competing ideals, it is a powerful engine of social change”.

Here I would like to invoke Kandiyoti’s (1988) idea of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ to argue that, by pressuring the bride to stay, older women are helping to maintain patriarchal orders. “The cyclical nature of women’s power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves”

(Kandiyoti, 1988: 279). The idea of 'patriarchal bargain' is that women with available resources have to negotiate in order to maximize their power and choices within a patriarchal structure. The 'patriarchal bargain' greatly shapes women's gendered subjectivity (Kandiyoti, 1988: 275). In the case of Kazakhstan, Werner (2009: 324) also argues that bride abduction is not a "simple act of male dominance over women, but the role of women is crucial in maintaining male dominance".

Another aspect of literature on gender is the exploration of how women in Central Asia negotiate the difficulties of life in the post-socialist era. In Kuehnast's research on the everyday life of Kyrgyz women in times of uncertain transition, she focuses on the influence of Sovietization of women. Her main point is that women in Kyrgyzstan could simultaneously maintain Soviet ideals for women as well as Kyrgyz 'traditional' expectations of women. "Kyrgyz women creatively intertwined Soviet and Kyrgyz gender ideologies as parts of their day to day lives, more through accommodation and collaboration and mutual critique than passive resistance" (Kuehnast 1997: 36). In the case of Tajikistan, Harris (2004) examines the interlinkage of gender and social control by exposing the ways in which Tajik society after the civil war threatens men's masculinity. This resulted in forcing women's conformity despite the suffering that it might cause. Uehling (2007) also talks about how the idea of masculinity is produced and maintained in a highly uncertain political context that "assumes a natural order of things" in Tajikistan (*ibid.*: 139).

In these difficult times women in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were the first to engage in trade (Werner, 2004). In the context of such population shifts in Fergana Valley, Reeves (2012) highlights that the main motivation behind this movement is not necessarily economic, but can also be due to an increase in family status or the need to comply with the obligation to get married. Discussing gendered out-migration in eastern Uzbekistan, Reeves (2011) argues that "whilst spousal absence is experienced by some women as expanding the possibilities for social and spatial mobility, for others it can exacerbate the degree of control exerted by in-laws. The movement of some can constrain (or compel) the mobility of others" (*ibid.*: 555).

Taking into account the role of women in migratory processes, Thieme (2008) and Isabaeva (2011) explicitly mention how women stay behind with their parents-in-law when their husbands are in Russia or Kazakhstan. However, the authors miss the fundamental point that these women are the ones who maintain the patrilocal descent of their families. Despite the emotional difficulties involved in staying behind, migrant sons' mothers nevertheless keep control over their brides and brides keep holding the patrilocal residence. In this line, discussing gendered out-migration in eastern Uzbekistan, Reeves (2011) also argues that the movement of men can constrain (or compel) the mobility of women (*ibid.*: 555).

There is a broader literature on women's 'informal' power and women's role in the reproduction of patriarchy. Ortner and Whitehead (1981: 20-21) argue that in societies where male prestige is heavily dependent on women, women have a capacity to undermine male ambitions and damage male prestige. Tapper (1991) discusses how informal power is exercised by female Durrani Pashtuns of Afghanistan by "subverting social orders through spirit possession or romantic liaisons if their men cannot meet the expectation of protecting the households in whose households they live" (*ibid.*: 195). In the case of Colonial India, women's resistance is most often recognized in a struggle against

patriarchal social norms (O’Hanlon, 1991). Not only resistance, but also compliance is crucial and also involves decision and strategizing (Kandiyoti, 1988; Kamp, 2006). Abu-Lughod (2000) reveals how women of Bedouin communities creatively involve poetry and sentiment in the maintenance of a system of social hierarchy. Rassam (1980:171) argues that in Morocco, men seem to have complete authority over women; however, a thorough examination of the structure of the household shows the presence of a considerable measure of “unassigned power”, which women compete for and utilize to further their own needs and wishes.

Thus kinship and gender dynamics are not necessarily unique to Central Asia, but there are also important parallels to gender systems in the Middle East and North Africa which are shaped by the institutions of patriarchy, and thereby produce an effect on the social order (Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001: 2; Abu-Lughod, 1998). The family bond is very unique to Central Asian societies, which is seen as the source of support and security. Women in Central Asia as well as the Middle East and North Africa are expected to see their interests embedded in the interests of their male kin and to put others before themselves. Thus “patriarchal relationality” of women can contribute to the patriarchal hierarchy (Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001: 7).

In this article I examine kinship and marriage practices in contemporary rural Kyrgyzstan and draw attention to changes in family relations brought by massive male migration. My argument is that women who stay behind keep and maintain ‘patriarchal’ orders and strong patrilineal descent in the absence of men. Male migration is not only an individual act, but rather it is a social context in which members of the family and communities are involved (Crossroads Asia Working Group Migration, 2012). I will look at interdependent dynamics of family networks and mobility/migration and how men’s spatial mobility affects the social mobility of women. Here Bourdieu’s distinction between official and practical kinship is useful for my purposes. Bourdieu (1977: 34) provides a pathway of connecting representations, or discourses, on patrilineal descent, for instance, with agencies and practices such as those of women in rural Kyrgyzstan.

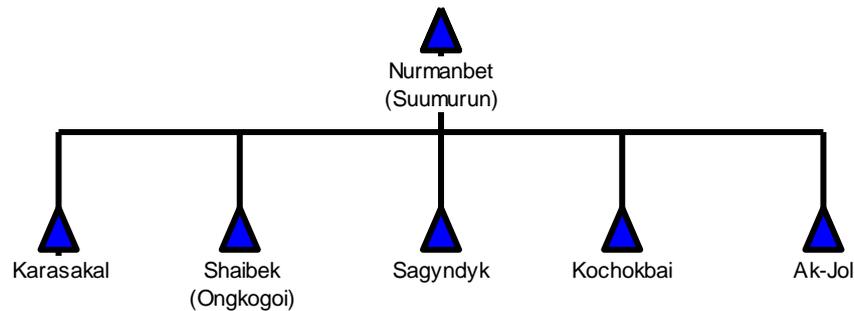
### **Village Bulak**

I encountered Bulak village for the first time in 2007 while following my informants during ethnographic research for my doctoral project. In 2011 and 2012, I had a chance to re-visit the village and examine the impact of migration, as well as the mobility of people from one place to another. At that time, the village of Bulak had 5,042 residents<sup>3</sup> and consisted of 370 households, according to the village statistical report. The village is located in Issik-Ata raion of the Chüi valley in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan. The social life of the village is centered on kinship, i.e. patrilineal descent is the basis of individual and group identity. The Kyrgyz segmentary patrilineage system consists of two emic terms for the lineage: *uruu* and the sub-lineage *uruk*. In this system, *uruu* is divided into several *uruk* sub-lineages, meaning that major lineages are segmented into small lineages. *Uruu* is a higher level of the lineage branch, whereas *uruk* is a lower level of branching. Each *uruk* consists of approximately forty or fifty households, and each can be considered a stable social unit. The members of any one lineage, whether of a lower or higher-level segment, place great emphasis on being able to trace their patrilineal ancestors back seven to ten generations in order to prove their membership of an *uruu*

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<sup>3</sup>The census of the Bulak village, Issik-Ata Rayon, Chüi Oblast, Kyrgyzstan 15.05.2007.

and *uruk*. Thus, *uruu* and *uruk* define where people reside and how they are related to others in their social worlds. In earlier times, those who could not prove their *uruu* lineage membership were instead considered slaves (*kul*). Though residents use the name ‘Bulak’, given by the Soviets, the village is locally named after one common patrilineal ancestor, namely Nurmanbet (Suumurun), who serves as an ancestral point of reference for all Kyrgyz, along with his five minor lineages (Karasakal, Shaibek [Ongkogoi], Sagyndyk Kochokbai and Akjol; see Figure 1), each of which descends from one common ancestor (on kinship in rural Kyrgyzstan, see Ismailbekova, 2011).



**Figure 1: Simplified genealogical chart of the Nurmanbet (Suumurun)**

Kyrgyz also conceptualise kinship through ideas about bone and flesh, particularly of women, both in descent terms and in funeral practices. For example: most of the time, the husband’s patrilineage takes responsibility for burials of women in their village. When a man marries, he brings his wife to the village and they follow the rules of patrilocal residence, so that co-resident males share patrilineal descent. Let me now address genealogies in detail, to show the significant role of women in transmitting oral genealogies and passing on stories to their children.

### **Genealogies**

The following illustrates the importance of genealogies in daily life. Kyrgyz men are expected to know the names of seven of their forefathers, especially when they are still boys. However, many boys are not actually aware of the name of their seventh forefather; instead, they refer to a genealogical expert for detailed information on this matter. When looking at the constantly shifting nature of kinship and descent, it is critical to explore the role of women. Kyrgyz women have a very significant role in transmitting oral genealogies and passing on stories to their children, as well as transforming them in the process. For example, they may develop “new names of the men” in the genealogical charter, the ones which are used exclusively by women, because they are expected not to say the names of their father-in-law in public because they are respected elders. The work of Yessenova (2005: 48) shows the parallel practice in the Kazak example. She notes the role of Kazak grandmothers in transmitting oral genealogical knowledge to their offspring is to shape their sense of past and retain generational continuity.

The role of women in changing the names of fathers, transmitting oral genealogies to children and arranging marriages (deciding whom one should marry) is of great importance in these patrilineal societies. It is true for all women married into the village that they cannot use the name of the father. In the Kyrgyz case, prohibiting women from naming older men in public causes them to create nicknames, the knowledge of which creates a distinction between locals and outsiders. Those who know the nicknames of the patrilineages are considered to be 'local' or 'authentic'; only women know the nicknames of men in the village. For example, brides in the village were not allowed to use the name Shaibek in public, and consequently they decided to give him a nickname, Ongkogui, which depicted his physical appearance (a big nose). So this name was invented by daughter-in-laws and then spread around the village that way. While elders usually have the final say on genealogies, they also take into account the changes introduced by the brides. Another important role of women is in finding a potential bride for their sons by carefully checking genealogies. During my research, I encountered many grandmothers who taught their grandchildren the names of seven generations of their forefathers and encouraged them to learn these names by heart. They constantly recount various tales concerning these ancestors and their great heroic actions in the past. Moreover, a grandmother would also include the story of her own childhood and how she came to the village where their grandfather was born. This demonstrates the role of grandmothers in keeping the oral history of a lineage alive within the village community. In the next section, I would like to discuss the mobility of women.

### **Marriage in the village**

The young brides I talked to in Bulak were all from distant villages. In this village, as well as in other villages, exogamy is widely practiced, and sustains the patrilineal lineage system. Villagers are forbidden to marry members of their own lineage (*uruu*) within the village, that is, someone who shares a common patrilineal ancestor within seven generations. Marriage is permitted only between those who are separated by at least eight generations of patrilineal ancestors. It is preferred that women marry into the village so the ideal marriage is one between people who are extremely distantly related. It is not approved of if a new bride lives close to her own family, because it is thought that she might be constantly returning to them instead of taking care of her husband's family. On this point, there is a proverb to which the Kyrgyz refer: when a bride gets married very close by, her house is in chaos (*jakyndyn töshögü jyiylbait*). I have also often heard parents wishing that their daughters would not marry far away, meaning the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, as it would be very difficult for the daughters to visit them. Nevertheless, villagers would prefer not to have their daughters too close either (i.e. neighbouring villages); rather, they would prefer to give their daughters as brides to men in a different province. The man can also decide whom to marry, following which he needs to gain approval from his parents. However, sometimes the parents of a girl also play an important role in their daughter's marriage.

According to young brides, they are expected to be obedient wives. The bride has to be subordinate to the husband's family, but she also becomes affiliated with her husband's lineage. The bride has no right to use the name of any male member of her husband's family; instead, she must use other words to address these relatives. This prohibition (*tergöö*) usually functions throughout the life of the bride, and as a sign of respect even in old age, a woman will not use the names of her deceased

husband's male family members. Instead, the woman addresses her husband's male relatives using the names of her children. Several prohibitory customs are usually attached to the bride. In addition to the ban on using the names of her husband's relatives, she also cannot sit with her back to her husband's relatives, sit with an outstretched leg, talk in a loud or sharp manner or walk bareheaded or barefoot. A new bride should also try to avoid direct meetings with her senior in-laws. All of these prohibitions reinforce the subordinate position of the bride, as well as the respectful nature of her relationship with her husband's family.

What I found very interesting about the young brides with whom I talked was that, even after being married for several years, they kept wearing white scarves and bowing to their husbands' parents. The display of respect through the white scarf and bowing lasts for many years in some families, but in other families women stop bowing after having given birth to more than three or four children, although they keep wearing the scarf. This also depends on the families; some prefer to put an emphasis on tradition and are concerned about what people would say or observe that "someone's bride is not respectful because she is not wearing the scarf or bowing", but not all. Grooms' mothers are instrumental in making sure that their daughters-in-law behave appropriately in this patrilineal context. In the next section I explain the role of the groom's mother in finding an appropriate bride for her son as a way of keeping the status of her patrilineal descent.

### **The role of the groom's mother in marriage**

The role of the groom's mother is crucial, especially when it comes to the marriage of her son<sup>4</sup>. The mother usually has a role in deciding whom her son should marry and gives blessings to her children at the time of their marriage. There are two kinds of weddings that Kyrgyz usually practice: 1) bride kidnapping and 2) *söikö salami*, where the bride receives earrings from the groom's family.<sup>5</sup> In both of these types of wedding, the role of the groom's mother is important, and she is influential as an organiser and decision maker.

#### *Bride kidnapping*

The first type of Kyrgyz marriage that was widely practiced in the village of Bulak was bride kidnapping. It is important to note that, despite the name, 'kidnapping' does not always happen against the will of the girl. In the practice of bride kidnapping – '*ala kachuu*', which translates roughly as 'grab and run' – a girl is taken by a man on an involuntary basis (non-consensual) or voluntary basis (consensual), depending on the individual case, in order to enter into marriage. My informants told me that this often happens because the man then pays a lower bride price. Consensual kidnappings occur if a young couple has been dating for many years and decides to get married despite their parents' refusal to agree to their marriage. However, grooms' mothers can also initiate and support the bride kidnapping practice if their sons do not get married on time. This is best exemplified by my informant, Nurjan, in Bulak village.

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<sup>4</sup> In some of the ethnographic cases, father-in-laws are not mentioned at all because they are deceased. In some cases, father-in-laws are alive, but completely disengaged from the organizational matters of their sons' marriages.

<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to mention that there are also other possible marriages (such as dating), which I do not talk about here due to lack of space.

Nurjan, 58 years old with three children, found a potential bride for her eldest son by asking neighbours and other distant relatives. She took this action because Kanybek, her son, was not planning to get married in the near future and was completely ignoring the request of his mother. Kanybek, almost 29 years old, had been working in Russia for five years and been constantly ordered by his relatives to get married as soon as he could find a suitable bride, but for him it was very hard to date a girl in the village because he considered many of them to be his sisters. He did not have time to go to the neighbouring village or the city to search for a marriageable girl, so working in Russia was one way of avoiding the constant social pressure to get married (it should also be noted that he was not interested in the Kyrgyz girls in Russia either). According to social norms, by the age of 28 men have to be married and have two or three children, but this was not the case with Kanybek. However, Nurjan would constantly tell Kanybek that she was tired of being a young wife (*kelin*) by cooking for her children, cleaning the house and washing the clothes of adult children at 58 years old; instead, her wish was to take care of her grandchildren and spend enjoyable times with her girlfriends and neighbours by drinking tea or having conversation. Moreover, she desperately needed someone to help her with the household tasks so that she could return to her position as a history teacher at the local secondary school.

One day, Nurjan decided to visit her sister, Gulsun, in the city of Tokmok to discuss her concerns about Kanybek's marriage. While they were talking about various alternatives and potential brides around, one of them remembered that their mother's younger brother, who lived in the village of Emgekchil, had three daughters. Nurjan recalled that she had seen them as small girls only once before, when she visited the village for a funeral 10 years ago. Nonetheless, she realised that one of these daughters should be at a marriageable age by now, since almost ten years had passed since the funeral. One of these daughters would be an ideal bride for her son, because Nurjan knew the parents and their educational backgrounds. Moreover, Nurjan thought that by joining their children in marriage, she would "renew the bones" (*söök jangirtuu*) between two distant relatives and strengthen relationships with the relatives of the deceased mother and their mother's brother. Nurjan and Gulsun went to the village of their mother's younger brother just to visit and say hello to them. Once they were in the village, they found out that one of the elder daughters of the family had already gotten married, but that their second daughter, Mirgul, 17 years old, was studying at the medical school in the city of Tokmok. Nurjan did not tell the father of the girl of her intention; rather, she expressed her happiness that finally the relatives had gotten together and they should do it more regularly.

Mirgul welcomed Nurjan and her sister Gulsun splendidly and showed great hospitality to her distant relatives. The day before going home, both Nurjan and Gulsun suggested that Mirgul visit their own village and spend the night there, and then the next morning go to the city from their village directly to her school, which was 10 kilometres closer than the village where Mirgul was living. Mirgul immediately agreed to be a guest in the house of Nurjan. When Nurjan, Gulsun and Mirgul all came home together, Mirgul did not even suspect that in a few minutes she would be asked to stay at this house forever; rather, she was enjoying tea in her relatives' house. Once the girl was in the house, Nurjan told Kanybek that she had brought this girl back to the village with the specific intention of making her his bride and future wife. Kanybek was shocked and totally disagreed with this option, as

well as with the decision of his mother, but the mother insisted that he had to get married soon and this was the only girl she wanted to see as her daughter-in-law, threatening not to give her blessings in the future otherwise. Kanybek finally had to agree with his mother because he had run out of any other options. He hoped that “if mother says that she likes the girl, perhaps I will like her eventually”. When everything had been settled with Kanybek, the mother told Mirgul directly that she had been kidnapped and would be expected to stay in the house and be Kanybek’s wife. Mirgul attempted to leave, but Nurzhan did not allow her to go home. Moreover, the mother invited many of her village women to help her with the young bride. Mirgul tearfully protested but the other women in the village physically restrained her and persuaded her to accept her fate by staying with the groom’s family, saying that the family was well-respected in the village. They also described Kanybek as a positive and kind person. A delegation (*achuu bazar*) was then sent to Mirgul’s family to inform them of the news that Mirgul had been kidnapped. After several hours of resistance and the constant persuasion of the women, Mirgul finally decided to accept the ‘proposal’ on the basis that the groom was not a bad person and the family was well-respected in the village. Moreover, the Kanybek’s family members were not complete strangers because of their distant familial relationship. When the family of the girl arrived in the village, Mirgul had already accepted that she would be married to Kanybek by symbolically taking the white scarf. Mirgul told me that for a few months it was very hard to adapt to the new house and family, but after a year she was very happy with her husband and mother-in-law. Many female relatives in the village even took a dislike to Kanybek because he was now too close to his wife by being very attentive and helpful to her and constantly buying her various kinds of gifts.

In this way, Kanybek’s family brought a new member into the household and the bride was incorporated into the lineage of Kanybek. However, Nurjan wanted to ensure that her bride was treated well by her husband once she was married, so that she did not go to her natal family with any complaints. After living together for almost three months, Kanybek went to Russia for half a year and returned when his wife gave birth to their first son.

The active role of the mother was crucial in *in arranging the marriage for a migrant son*. This case study shows a strong woman taking a leading role in the decision making process and being responsible for providing her son with a wife. Nurjan is the head of her household and she tries to keep the family of her deceased husband alive in the village as well as in front of her distant relatives.

#### *The marriage ‘söikö saluu’*

The second type of marriage, *‘söikö saluu’*, involves the custom of giving earrings, a ceremony which is also a widely practiced phenomenon in the village of Bulak. During my research I met Nazgul, a girl in her early 20s, who in 2010 had the chance to visit her uncle in Novosibirsk, Russia, for three months in order to help him with his business. Although she enjoyed her stay in Russia, she decided to return to Kyrgyzstan because her parents needed her to help in the household. On the way to Kyrgyzstan, whilst on the train, Nazgul met a 24-year-old man named Altyn. The pair got to know each other better by conversing for three days on the same train from Russia to Kyrgyzstan. When they arrived in Kyrgyzstan, the young man went to Osh (southern Kyrgyzstan) and the girl stayed in Bulak village near to the capital. However, both of them exchanged telephone numbers in order to

keep in touch with one another. When Altyn was in Osh he informed his relatives about his intention to marry – demonstrating that he did not intend to ‘steal’ her – so it was time for the family to visit the potential bride’s home and discuss arrangements with her parents. Nevertheless, his mother insisted that she would meet the bride first and assess her before giving her blessing. A few weeks later, the young man telephoned Nazgul from Russia and asked her to marry him and to meet his mother in Bishkek. Nazgul agreed to do so because she liked the young man. However, Altyn’s mother wanted to use this opportunity to introduce herself to the girl and to check out whether she would be a good new daughter-in-law (*kelin*).

The question as to whether or not the mother of the young man would like the potential young bride is thus quite important. The requirements for the bride in the south were completely different to those in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan. Many southern mothers prefer not to have brides from the north because of their *russified* character and inability to meet the harsh requirements of the mother-in-law and various kinds of domestic tasks. If the mother of Altyn liked the girl, therefore, there would be a high chance of the young man getting married very soon. However, after the meeting with Altyn’s mother, Nazgul was not sure whether the mother liked her or not, because she seemed to be a very strict and uncommunicative person. Nevertheless, both the young man and girl kept talking to each other on the phone. A few days later, Nazgul got a call from Altyn, asking her to get prepared because his mother had agreed to his marriage and his relatives and mother were on their way to Bulak in order to arrange the *kuda tūshüü* wedding and *söikö saluu* (the bride receives earrings from the groom’s family). *Kuda tūshüü* is the traditional visit of the groom’s family members to the potential bride’s family to express their interest in becoming relatives. If the bride’s family has no objections, the groom’s family then takes the bride to their own household. The movement of the bride from one place to another is accompanied by a ritual action known as *arkan tartuu*.

When Nazgul heard this news, she told her mother (whom she had already spoken to about her boyfriend in Russia) so that she could prepare for the guests’ arrival at pre-arranged time. On the eve of the groom’s arrival, the girl, as is custom, said goodbye to her relatives ‘*kız uzatuu*’. It was very a modest event, to which only the closest relatives and neighbours were invited. While saying goodbye to Nazgul, her relatives told her that if a girl is married, she always leaves her father’s lineage (*‘kız chykkān chiyden tyshkary’*); once the girl is married, she is an outsider or a woman of another people (*‘kız bashka eldin kishisi’*).

When Altyn’s parents arrived in the village, Nazgul’s close family members organised a ceremony, *jüz körüşüü*, where her brothers’ wives (*jengeler*) revealed the face of the bride to the groom’s parents, for which they received various gifts and money. In addition to the long ceremonies, there was the negotiation of a ‘bride-price’, which, according to southern tradition, the groom’s family had to pay. In return, the bride’s family also followed northern regional ways by providing a dowry. The final event was the *soiko saluu* ceremony (the bride receives earrings from the groom’s family), following which the groom’s family put a scarf over the bride’s head as a symbol of blessing and took her to their own household.

Normally the groom would come to the village with his friends to take Nazgul, but since Altyn was in Russia at that time, he could not join his own wedding ceremony process. Instead, his mother and

other relatives came to the house of the bride and took her to the southern region of Kyrgyzstan. Nazgul had to live with her husband's family alone for a few months, after which her mother-in-law accompanied her to Russia to bring the bride to her husband personally and to give her blessing to the marriage. Nazgul later told me that she was with her mother-in-law in Russia for three months and both of them went back to Kyrgyzstan together when she knew she was pregnant. Nazgul was expecting her first child and her husband was supposed to come back home for the birth of their son in a few weeks' time. Nazgul was excited about husband's arrival because the couple intended to go to Russia together after the birth, leaving their first child in the care of Altyn's mother. This case example shows the powerful role of the mother-in-law in blessing the potential bride, because without her blessing, her son would not have entered into marriage with Nazgul.

So far, I have discussed the decisive role of the son's mother in marriage strategies, especially in finding brides for the migrant man, their involvement in kidnapping and marriages and approving decisions about the choice of a spouse. This pattern operates better with the migrant youth, because they are far away from their homes most of the time and they have to completely rely on their mothers' support in terms of finding a spouse. In the next section, I would like to describe the invisible as well as powerful roles of brides in their husbands' households, as well as their social importance and contribution to maintaining patrilineal descent in the absence of husbands.

### **The Role of Brides (*kelin*)**

The term *kelin* comes from the verb *keloo*, to come and enter, because usually young brides move from their natal family to the husband's family. In Kyrgyzstan, *kelin* has the lowest status within the family and kinship group. The wives of the youngest brothers usually remain in the families of the husband forever, in order to take care of their parents-in-law, but the wives of elder brothers move to their own houses after a certain amount of time. Each *kelin* has her own position within the kinship grid, and her main job is to be responsible for domestic tasks. However, the bride's position does not always remain at the same level; rather, it increases gradually depending on the children's growth and their subsequent marriages – as in the case above describing powerful mothers-in-law. Here, I describe the experience of a *kelin* from her own point of view and show that she also holds a respected position in the household of her husband.

I start with the story of a young bride, Umut, who was 20 years old when I met her. She was six months pregnant during my interview. I asked her to tell me about her married life. She told me that she had been kidnapped by her husband one year previously, when she was studying at the university in Bishkek. She did not plan to get married in the near future, but she was kidnapped and she could not change her fate. She had not previously known her husband, Murat, a young 28-year-old man and the eldest son in the family. When the parents of the groom asked her to stay as their bride, after some struggle she decided to stay with the family and accept their proposal because of the 'shame' involved in deciding to leave the house of the kidnapper and also because Murat looked like a very handsome young man who would be supportive. The family of Murat was also wealthier than other families in the village. Murat had two younger brothers and one younger sister. His father was a school director and his mother also worked at the school as a Russian language and literature teacher. Murat and his two brothers had been involved in business in Russia for many years. The

younger sister of Murat was 16 years old and attending the secondary school in the village. They were economically very stable compared to the family of the girl.

When Murat got married, the family organised a big wedding celebration, which was accompanied by shows and amusements, including a lot of games, songs and music, and competitions. The family of the groom provided a bride price to the family of the bride and arranged for the presentation of a bridal headdress – a ritual act in which the “*shökülö*” (a cone-shaped headdress with a veil on top) is taken off and the bride is given a white scarf instead. Umut told me that, usually, the white colour of the scarf symbolises purity, a happy demeanour, happiness and pure thoughts. She hoped that her marriage would last forever, as the white scarf signifies. Such a celebration typically lasts from one to three days and involves the participation of close and distant relatives, friends and neighbours in meals together at a restaurant.

After the wedding, Umut moved to the Murat’s parents’ house. In the beginning, according to Umut, it was very hard to adapt to the new family and their tastes and requirements. However, after a few months she almost became used to living with her husband’s family. Her mother-in-law was supportive and taught her some cooking skills. Once the girl was settled in the new household, and after a few months of resting and celebrating his wedding, it was time for Murat to work, so he went back to Russia to expand his business in the city of Yekaterinburg, where he and his brothers worked together. Later, Murat’s youngest brother became responsible for distributing goods from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, while the other two brothers were responsible for distributing the goods to various traders in Yekaterinburg. Umut would see her husband very frequently because Murat basically lived in Russia but returned to the village for a few months each winter. Murat was building a huge house near his parents and he wanted to finish building within a few years. Now Umut lived with her mother-in-law, father-in-law and her younger sister-in-law in the village and became engaged very quickly in the family’s business and initiatives.

Whenever I visited the house of Umut, she would be at home alone and always busy with household tasks such as cooking before the parents came home from work, cleaning the house and baking bread before 3 p.m.. Apart from her household tasks for her husband’s family, she was also a bride within their lineage (consisting mainly of up to 60 families); therefore, she was constantly asked to give a hand to neighbours organising their own events, as it is the obligation of brides in a patrilineage to help each other in times of need. Depending on the life cycle events and the degree of closeness of the families, young brides would usually work from one to three days helping the family by cooking various kinds of food, washing up dishes and constantly serving tea for guests.

Apart from the labour service she provided for lineage members, she was also actively engaged in the social aspects of these events. Being a figurative *jenge* (older sister-in-law), a young bride has a social obligation to bring the dowry of the daughters of the village to the family of the groom and to welcome other young brides into the village during the wedding. For Umut’s social tasks and active engagement, she would receive money and various gifts as well in recognition of being a good *kelin* in her husband’s family. She would be the first person to tell the natal families of brides recently brought into the village that their daughters were virgins, for which she would yet again receive

many gifts (*süüñchü*). She was also the one who would first see the potential grooms first and again receive a gift for describing the grooms to the families of the potential brides.

Another task she was involved in was making Kyrgyz traditional carpets – ‘*kiyiz*’ and ‘*shirdak*’ made from warm felt and richly decorated with ornaments – together with other young wives of the village. In the village of Bulak, Kyrgyz women invest a great deal of time and effort in making beautiful and elaborate felt carpets. The *shirdak* is sewn by applying a mosaic technique based on joining felt work pieces with many-coloured threads. Work on a single carpet is time-consuming and can take several months if one single woman does the whole job. Therefore, a few women usually get together, not only to make carpets, but also to gossip, socialise and share with each other their experiences of living with their husbands’ parents in their absence.

The case of Umut shows that her social life in the village was very busy, not only with domestic tasks, but also with social tasks outside the home. The migrant husband’s wife lived with her in laws and was involved with the family of the groom, but also integrated into the social life of the community by actively participating in life cycle events and joining a group of young women in making carpets and also providing labour for her neighbours. She was not alone, but rather surrounded by more than twenty young brides who had the same tasks and experiences. Even though her husband was in Russia, she was still so fully engaged in community life of her husband that sometimes she would forget to pick up the phone when her husband called. This case study clearly shows how patrilineal order is maintained in the absence of men by young women, by constantly living with the parents of their husbands, engaging with social tasks on behalf of the community and also by being very respectful to her husband’s family. The status of the husband depends on the socialisation of his wife in village social life, while the status of the young wife depends on how well she performs in her husband’s parents’ house. In the next section, I would like to describe the case of the groom’s mother’s relatives and their crucial contribution to the maintenance of patrilineal order.

#### *Aida’s in-law family*

Aida, one of my informants from Bulak village, married Azamat in the summer of 2011, at the time when I visited the village. Azamat was a migrant worker in Yekaterinburg and had been working in Russia for the previous four or five years. When I was in the village, Aida invited me to attend her wedding and to observe her boyfriend’s wedding preparations. Azamat and Aida had been dating each other for many years because they used to work together in Russia. Azamat was in the village only for one month for his wedding, after which he needed to go back to Russia again for a few months. It was discussed in advance that Aida would stay with her husbands’ parents for one year, as in the aforementioned cases. One week before the wedding Azamat came back from Russia and the family started to prepare for the wedding. Azamat’s father had one sister, who lived in Bishkek, but she could not attend the wedding preparations; instead, I would fill her role by spending time with the relatives of Azamat’s mother’s side, especially his mother’s brothers and sisters. The distant lineage members of Azamat’s father and neighbours came only when they needed to slaughter a horse for the wedding. Azamat’s mother came from Toktogul along with six of her sisters and three brothers. A few sisters and two of her brothers came all the way from Toktogul to the village of Bulak in order to help her with the wedding preparations. Azamat’s mother also invited local brides to help.

Prior to the feast there was much preparation, during which Azamat's mother's relatives took leading roles. One of Azamat's maternal uncles was working in Yekaterinburg and he sent Azamat USD \$2000 for his wedding as a gift because he could not attend. Azamat's father's distant relatives also helped, but they were not as active as the mother's side, especially financially. The organising of the wedding party, which included buying various gifts, slaughtering sheep and arranging a café in the city, was in the hands of Azamat's mother.

The wedding party was organised in the small town of Tokmok, where more than 250 people attended. The café was large and wide, built especially to accommodate many people celebrating major events. The walls were decorated with traditional paintings depicting yurts, horses and a Kyrgyz family. The building was also fully furnished with modern furniture. The mostly rural guests, stunned by the urban appearance of the café, were asked to sit down at particular tables with close friends and acquaintances, in order to make the event interesting and comfortable for everyone. Meanwhile, Azamat's father greeted his guests outside the café and accompanied them inside.

Those who were invited were mostly Azamat's father's close and distant kinsmen, colleagues, friends and the parents of Aida. Moreover, there were also relatives from Azamat's mother's side and Azamat's group mates, classmates and colleagues. Invitations were delivered orally through social networks, specifying the date and time of the occasion. Once the guests arrived at the café, the organisers started to give out their pre-prepared welcome letters. Since so many people had been invited, several assistants had been recruited to help out on the day of the feast; many of them were Azamat's mother's relatives. The mother's relatives worked on a voluntary basis and served Azamat's guests with food and tea and distributed meat. Their experience in organising feasts was crucial to the success of the wedding feast. Their tasks (such as cooking and various other services) were divided according to their age and gender. Younger assistants were responsible for serving the guests, delivering and clearing dishes of food, cleaning dirty dishes and pouring tea.

The organisational part of the event was decisive because the guests evaluated every detail of the feast and the hospitality of their hosts (including the *tamada*, the speeches and the food). The feast and hospitality would only be classed as excellent if the norms and guests' expectations were fulfilled.<sup>6</sup> Once the task of the hosts had been accomplished, the guests would be indebted to them. Despite the capable knowledge of the Kyrgyz waiting staff, what was interesting was the fact that these staff still received orders from the feast organisers, Azamat's maternal kin.

During the wedding, however, many close and distant kinsmen of Azamat's father's side received more attention and appreciation for organising such an extraordinary event. Azamat's father's authority immediately increased in the eyes of his relatives, who glorified his fulfillment of his duty as a father, i.e. marrying off his son. Azamat's mother's side was considered *taike jaak*, which implies they are theoretically distant and should stay more respectful. However, most of the time they were

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<sup>6</sup> Women waited until the hostess approached them and asked them to circulate and mingle. Otherwise, guests were not expected to be independent and free, which would be deemed as 'misbehaviour' and discussed later during informal talks. This would be interpreted as disrespectfulness to the host.

not even mentioned in the speeches, but were considered as distant relatives. Even the *taike jaak* praised Azamat's father for raising a son like Azamat who works hard and helps his parents. Overall, the leading role in organising the wedding feast was taken on by relatives on the mother's side, but their contribution had not even been mentioned in front of many guests; rather, the mother's relatives venerated Azamat's father, thereby increasing his authority vis-à-vis the guests.

This example shows that a woman and her kin expend a great deal of social effort and energy on behalf of her husband and his family in the patrilineal system. A man's prestige depends on such labour and the affirmation of his wife.

## **Conclusion**

Following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, people suddenly found themselves without state support and social protection; more precisely, the factories at which people worked closed due to a lack of supplies/sales through a centralised economy, and no subsidies. In this relatively unindustrialized region, the loss of rural livelihoods through decollectivization and privatization has poses an immense challenge until the present (Kandiyoti, 2003; Trevisani, 2007). The consequence of this transformation was palpable and very harsh on the people, and as a result of high unemployment, many lost their jobs due to a dramatic drop in demand for products. These changes shifted the nature and scope of resources and power available to women and men. The uncertainty and chaos resulted in the intense renegotiation between men's and women's roles in society. Patriarchal structures and men's power and authority in Kyrgyzstan have been strengthened as a result of nation building projects, globalization as a way of finding unique Kyrgyz identity, and flow of migratory processes. Thus ideological preference shifted from the Soviet notion of women in the public workforce to the more traditional notion of women at home with the family (Kuehnast and Nechemias, 2004: 2).

Despite women's role in private or domestic realms, they are key contributors to social capital in the development of their communities. This empirical study provides an important insight into the situation of women, their crucial roles in marriage strategies and their economic activities in the households of their husbands. Due to the large-scale work migration of men to Russia, Kyrgyzstan's villages are almost exclusively lived in by elders, women and young children, which has resulted in the formation of many female-headed households. After husbands leave, problems in the home fall on the woman's shoulders. Thus, one of the effects of spatial male mobility on social female mobility is an increase in women's authority and power.

I explored the 'invisible' role of women within a strong patrilineal descent system and their great courage in maintaining the status of their husbands' families. I refer to the term 'invisibility' in order to highlight women's domestic power which has not been sufficiently recognized in Central Asian studies. I have discussed women who have a significant role in transmitting oral genealogies and passing on stories to their children. Kyrgyz women also change the names of husbands' male relatives, and appoint those whom one their sons should marry. Moreover, the key role of mothers-in-law in the arrangement of alliances and in socializing children should not be discounted. Brides also produce progeny and by their appropriate behavior uphold the reputation and status of the

families they marry.

There are the stereotypical representations of the 'patrilineal systems' as harmful or disadvantageous to women. However, it is important to consider the complexity of the roles and the genuine relationships between a bride and her new family, the powerful position of women and the growth of status depending on their age. I thus invoked the notion of a 'patriarchal bargain' in which women "actively collude in the reproduction of their own subordination" (Kandiyoti, 1988: 280).

It would be interesting to revisit Bulak village after another decade of migration to see if marriage patterns and inner-family role divisions have been modified or not, because migration processes and experiences are relatively young in Kyrgyzstan. In the case of the outmigration of Turkish workers to Germany in the 1970s brides typically co-resided with in-laws (much as the case study above demonstrates). However, studies carried out in the later 1980s showed that brides had started setting up an independent household, managing their own bank accounts and dealing with institutions of the society (banks, post offices etc.)<sup>7</sup> (Abadan-Unat, 1977: 48-49).

The main argument of the article is that as a consequence of mass male migration, the role of women in family and community building, and even in maintaining and reproducing patrilineal groups or lineages, has increased significantly, despite a predominant conceptualization of Kyrgyz society as dominated by men. Women's roles in the preparation and arrangement of the son's marriage became very significant especially with migratory processes, because mothers now have the privilege and responsibility of managing remittances, which also contributes to the increase of their role in arranging marriages alongside with other key roles that they possess as the head of the household. However, it does not mean that these patterns persist only because of migration. Rather, these patterns have existed throughout history with slightly different forms. Also, it is important to keep in mind that women's key role in the reproduction of patriarchy does not imply that society is not dominated by men.

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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to Northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **“Conflict”** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **“Migration”** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **“Development”**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network aims to mediate between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de).

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