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# Writing travel and the genealogical imagination: Afghan Kyrgyz migrations in contemporary perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The current 'repatriation' programme initiated by the Kyrgyz Republic presents a timely occasion to reflect on the ambivalence of predicating migration in ethnic terms through descent and territorial ascription. Instead, this paper looks at the way Afghan Kyrgyz migrants mobilize and modulate genealogical and territorial registers and the later fulfilment or frustration of their aspirations. A focus on the current 'repatriation' programme is doubly interesting here because it taps into broader questions of citizenship, autochthony, and the securing of durable rights and duties and secondly, because the programme's realization casts ambivalence to the pre-eminence of ethnic ascription in both the experience of migration and migration research. It argues that migrants' relative success in moving back and forth between places of 'departure' and 'arrival' (in the programme's own terms) complexifies the expected linearity of their 'repatriation' and implied definitive resettlement.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2014, Hajji Turdiakhun, former appointee to the upper house of Afghan parliament (*meshrano jylga* in Dari), travelled for the third time to Kyrgyzstan upon the invitation of Kyrgyz parliamentarians. Starting from the capital in Bishkek and then moving southwards to the city of Osh, he detoured to meet distant relatives (*alys tuugandar* in Kyrgyz) in the southwestern Alai district. Stopping first at his ancestors' graves, Turdiakhun, a large white embroidered coat on his shoulders and a white hat (*ak kalpak*) on his head, was filmed crying aloud embracing his distant relatives for the first time in their life. National TV channels diffused moving images of the meeting along with more formal encounters, such as with the President of the time, Almazbek Atambaev, and visits to national monuments. The voiceover underlined the severity of the climate in the Afghan Pamirs, which beyond the effects of war and violence was further compounded by the absence of roads, proper healthcare facilities and schools.

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Since its independence and like other former Central Asian Republics,<sup>1</sup> the Kyrgyz government started a programme of ethnic return migration, or ‘repatriation’ in the programme’s terms. As representative (*wakil* in Dari) of the Kyrgyz ethnic minority to the Afghan parliament between 2005 and 2010 (Callahan 2013, 242), Hajji Turdiakhun continued advocacy – formally established in 1999 by Abdul Rashid Khan (Kreutzmann 2000) – towards the ‘repatriation’ of five families from the Little Pamir and five others from the Great Pamir to Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz government’s specific denomination of migrants as ‘returnees’ (*kairyImandar*) is telling. As the formulation literally implies, the ‘repatriation’ programme presupposes intrinsic ties predicated by kinship and ethnicity between a given ‘homeland’, Kyrgyzstan and their current ‘remote place of refuge’, (*aalys kalkaloochu aimak*) the Afghan Pamirs. Or, in the particularly vivid and moving words of Saltanat Barakanova, ‘their place of sorrow and our homeland’.<sup>2</sup> After Kyrgyzstan’s Prime Minister Feliks Kulov signed an order in 2006 to evaluate the repatriation programme, the government issued a report stating that only nine percent of the twenty-three thousand returnees, who arrived between 1991 and 2005, have obtained citizenship (RFE/RL 2006).

This paper examines how tropes of spatial distance and cultural difference, ethnic proximity and genealogical affinity were shaped and mobilized along Afghan Kyrgyz migrants’ encounters with state and international organizations. Their complex and extended relations tend to be reduced in shared tropes to a visibly out-of-the-way place and a bounded group – better informed by matters of narrative and administrative coherence than established circulation patterns. But the idea of a repatriation also turned to be an important mobilization resource which most significantly took form in the idea of a ‘last migration’ – implying definitive departure of the entire Afghan Kyrgyz population from the Afghan Pamirs. Looking back at recent events in the organization of the ‘repatriation’ programme, I explore how the ascription of kyrgyzness (*kyrgyzchylыk*) is dynamically reframed in migrants’ travel writing, personal encounters with government representatives, and their often quite animated discussions of government policies. In this paper, I argue that the ascription in local history and genealogy writing of both remoteness, ethnic affinity and cultural endangerment compounded with their allochronic location in a remote place and distant time is central to salvage documentary practices, the provisioning of humanitarian aid (*gumanitalryk jardamdy* in Kyrgyz) and the ‘repatriation’ of returnees (*kairyImandar*) to their supposedly titular nation. Genealogy operates here as a flexible classificatory framework that affords the elaboration and strengthening of ties across different moral registers and the distribution of distinct positionings in space and time with often quite surprising outcomes.

To understand the affective, moral and strategic entanglements between these tropes, I pay close attention to travel writings, migrants’ experiences and to the ways complex interlinkages between kinship and ethnicity are made and unmade iteratively across international borders.<sup>3</sup> This paper departs from and unfolds migrants’ successive efforts to elaborate and entertain relations in the style and vocabulary of the governing institutions, media and persons encountered along the way. Exploring how ‘returnees’ describe their own journeys, invoke, and mobilize different moral registers (religious, humanitarian and ethnic) and effectively navigate administrative and bureaucratic hurdles provides a better understanding of the contingent relevance of the ascription of ethnicity in migration and migration research as well. I ask which migrant terms and vocabularies organize and signify Afghan Kyrgyz shifting relations among themselves, across international borders

and in their interactions with state and international organizations? How do figures of genealogical ancestry and tropes of remoteness, cultural alterity and endangerment operate along migrants' movements? Turning attention to migrants' perspectives and movements, as well as Kyrgyz government provision of humanitarian aid and facilitation of migrants' movements across international borders, I highlight the relevance of migrants' contribution in shaping the programme's terms and conditions.

This paper grounds on eleven months of ethnographic research spent in the Afghan Pamirs between 2015 and 2019 as well as two years and a half in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan attending migrants' nodes and participating in the repatriation programme of the Kyrgyz Republic. I conducted more than eighty semi-structured interviews with upland pastoralists, lowland agro-pastoralists, programme 'returnees', Afghan and Kyrgyz parliamentarians, government officials, elders, scholars and journalists. I spent an important part of the ethnographic research in walking paths of the Afghan Pamirs with occasional travel companions or known interlocutors and a considerable amount of time in cars and shared taxis to reach the places where the persons I expected to meet were based.<sup>4</sup> Occasional strolls, remarks at the detours of unexpected encounters and the attendance of the camps' daily activities allowed me to notice details and reconsider the assumed consistency of written accounts. I do thank my travel companions (*andiwal* in Dari and *joldosh* in Kyrgyz) Görg Ali Khaika, Abdulrahman, Nurulhuda, Faisyhah, Ismail Bai, Duwana Bai and Abdikarim Chokoev. Other persons I had the chance to meet too briefly, such the late Hajji Turdiakhun and Erali Bai Khan. My gratitude goes to Esen Turganbaev or Esen Baike colloquially, Saltanat Barakanova and Suleiman Kaipov, who all opened their offices and archives, supporting my research in quite unexpected ways.

The mostly performative and problematic spread of positionality statements at the beginning of peer reviewed publications bequests clarification of my choices (Gani and Khan 2024). I assume a processual approach where outcomes are shaped through the scales and steps of the research in line with the reflections on research ethics of the Swiss Anthropological Association (Perrin et al. 2020). Conceived this way, reflections on my position, research ethics and heuristic methods are not just restricted to one paragraph nor destined only to academic peers but interspersed throughout the paper in relevant places to reflect the ongoing character of the dialogue I engaged with my interlocutors. This implies to establish and maintain a space to discuss the potential issues which may appear with the publication of research outcomes, their impacts on concerned persons and institutions as well as the shifting relationships we used to entertain. I had to constantly adapt my posture throughout the research progress, and I took care to return its conclusions to the persons I worked with.

The contingent nature of the terms employed also requires the use of the narrative 'I' to situate my voice and perspective as researcher in the shifting contexts of our intersubjective encounters. I employ the past tense to convey a definite character to the reported events of the ethnographic research. The discussion in the present tense of the ideas, knowledge claims and arguments of the (principally anthropological) literature is less a claim towards universalism than a way to stress the ongoing character of the discussions I open on the themes. Every person named in this paper agreed with the publication of their direct designation (by their first name as it is of use colloquially), reference and quotations.

Relative distance and foreignness in person and language skills used to feature primarily in encounters with the persons I interacted with and interviewed. Soon I realized that the language skills and knowledge of the rapidly shifting context as well as unevenly distributed. This turned decisive to the research progression in affording reflexivity and comparison of the distinct positions as well as linguistic uses we would encounter. The partial and incomplete translation of certain idioms and interviews is telling of the research context itself and its constitutive lines of distinction. Interviews were conducted in Kyrgyz, Dari, Tajik, Wakhi and Russian, to the preferences of my interlocutors. Certain expressions may sound foreign or wrong to an ear in Kyrgyzstan yet is of ordinary use in the Pamirs – such as ‘Pamirga’ (to the Pamirs) which goes against standard vowel harmony. I specify differences in the quoted interviews for their relevance to situate normative interventions in a heterogenous context.

My repeated returns to the places where migrants were based proved also convenient to my interlocutors, and I soon acted as messenger, carrying with me hand-written letters, documents, important sums of money and photographs. Moving between their different and often temporary places of residence allowed me to register the contextual relevance of various, often contested, discursive and imaginary trends, to contrast perspectives and to confront testimonies as well. Whilst ‘being there’ is a central tenet of the ethnographic inquiry, paying attention to the discursive and imaginary tropes apparent in official documents, media publications and reports as well as the ways they are reformulated, appropriated, or contested by migrants proved equally relevant. Kinship, ethnicity and genealogy feature here as determining markers for state policies and its allocation of important resources. This does not imply that repatriates necessarily endorse their ascription to a remote and critically endangered condition without resistance, critic or even usually neglect. To the contrary of depictions as passive recipients of state subsidies in media reports and research articles, repatriates were actively participating in the way the repatriation programme was formulated and led – through various means ranging from voiced critique in the media, withdrawal and the quiet return for some to the Afghan Pamirs.

### A contested ‘repatriation’

In the summer of 2017, a dozen families settled as ‘returnees’ (*kairylmandar* in Kyrgyz) in the mountain town of Naryn, Kyrgyzstan. Another fifty persons followed in summer 2019. Those events are the most visible outcome of a longer series of international pledges voiced mostly by important political figures in Kyrgyzstan and directed towards material support to distant parents (Talant 2021). After the 1982 migration of half of the group in Eastern Turkey led by Hajji Rakhman Kul Khan (Denker 1983), several wealthy Kyrgyz men stood out in terms of political and media attention. Mobilizing the momentum of new and imminent threats to their supposedly primordial condition in the Afghan Pamirs, their successive interventions (accompanied by Nazif Shahrani and Alan Dupree in 1981, Ted Callahan in 2008 and myself in 2018) in the media and meetings with government representatives raised in tone and substance the cultural singularity and existential fragility of their continued occupation of the Afghan Pamirs.

In 2013, the Kyrgyz Republic established an embassy in Kabul, and according to the Foreign Ministry,<sup>5</sup> humanitarian aid for the ethnic Kyrgyz of both Great and Little Pamir

was discussed among other issues. At that time, Afghanistan supported all Kyrgyz initiatives (AKIpress 2013). But soon state perspectives diverged in that the Afghan government, opposed to a major outmigration, presented the initiative in the durable terms of a schooling programme whilst the Kyrgyz government explicitly aimed their definitive ‘repatriation’ (Isabaeva 2018, 4). By 2016, the programme supported the immigration of about fifty thousand of the estimated six hundred thirty-six thousand ‘ethnic Kyrgyz’ living abroad (Wood 2018).

Given the insistence of Kyrgyz state responsibilities on repatriating the entire Kyrgyz population from the Pamirs to Kyrgyzstan, Afghan Kyrgyz occupy an exceptional position in the programme with outstanding pledges to allocate US\$3 million from July 2022 onwards. The ‘repatriation’ of several families to Kyrgyzstan stands out from ordinary migration patterns in Central Asia – principally informed by the mutually binding dynamics of migrant labour and remittances.<sup>6</sup> Whilst a number of studies address the moral and cultural dimensions in Kazakh return migration,<sup>7</sup> the policies adopted by the Kazakh government, or the role of repatriates’ organization themselves (Kaiser and Beimbetov 2020), comparatively few works address similar dynamics as featured in the Kyrgyz government programme or conceive the effects of the ascription of ethnic lines of difference in local history and genealogy writing.

Repeatedly postponed until 2017, the contested and fragile realization of the programme contrasts with the assumed consistency between ethnic and kinship ties as well as the ineluctability of a ‘last migration’ from the Afghan Pamirs in the way suggested in earlier publications.<sup>8</sup> Partly because of the unconventional mediatization of their movements, Afghan Kyrgyz migrants visibly stand out from other ‘repatriates’ (*kairylmandar*) coming from other countries (mostly neighbouring Tajikistan).<sup>9</sup> The important media attention upon migrants’ arrival had both effects of singling out Afghan Kyrgyz’ presumed cultural distinctiveness and genealogical ancestry as well as of raising important debates over the justification of the ethnic return migration programme.

## Migration terms

In the Afghan Pamirs, migration (*kutch*) – not necessarily conceived in the terms of a definitive resettlement but rather as the possibility to cross otherwise closed international borders – figured as a recurrent theme in discussions with wealthy livestock owners (*bai*) as well as a potential and hopeful response to the mounting pressures which we used to discuss evenings while drinking tea. In their words, migration appears as a focal point of debate and contention. Some compared the government’s explicit aim to repatriate the entire Kyrgyz population from the Afghan Pamirs with *ürkün* – a definitive and forced exodus under exceptional circumstances. They dismissed the problems that I envisaged when discussing their travel plans, such as the lack of biometric passport or even identity documents for most of the population in the Afghan Pamirs. Instead, their answers presented migration as an attractive choice offering the possibility to opt out from extreme political and climatic pressures. It took form in expressions like: ‘if life turns too hard here, I will leave for China. I have parents there’, and genealogically inflected reflexions such as ‘there are a lot of Alapa (major descent line) in this area’.<sup>10</sup> Talking outside and out of elders’ ears and sight, young men insistently asked me about the cost and value of life in large cities, expressing their wishes to visit major centres in the world, mostly referring

to the cities of Paris, Dubai and New York. Women often sat silently during such discussions, nodding in chuckles to our projections, commenting at times. Primarily staged and discussed as a men's affair, women were actively participating in determining the central tenets of the planned movements. While men set precedence in the public sphere and wealthy owners led the initial meetings and discussions with the programme's responsible, women's interventions in the camps, in words, preparation of the food for travels and keeping of the camps' livestock were central to the modalities and timing of men's movements. Men did not necessarily feature as my main and privileged interlocutors and the women I got acquainted with preferred to speak on condition of anonymity. This explains their nominal underrepresentation in this paper which does not reflect their effective contribution as the wives of the representatives I interviewed were integral parts of the discussion – often arresting a decision.

After the initial 'repatriation' of a dozen families, migration turned to be a major topic in our everyday discussions back in the Pamirs. In the interviews I published in regional media, migrants insistently refer to lacks in terms of infrastructure, health and education. Migration appeared as a hopeful option to leave conditions in the Afghan Pamirs which my interlocutors would inscribe in the terms of absence, backwardness or archaism as described before. In tone with the way the Afghan Pamirs are framed as an exceptionally remote area in media and government reports as well as research articles, Mullah Abdyl Hak raised that 'there is no road, no school, no doctor, no state, only little humanitarian support reaches the Pamirs, life is hard here. We stayed in the seventeenth century; we are not reaching'.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor of 'we are not reaching' (*biz jetpeibyz* in Kyrgyz) resumes herders' aspirations to participate in global circulations and their impressions of stuntedness relative to the faster pace of exchanges which the Pamir and Karakoram Highways came to represent. The obverse and hopeful idea of a road connection raised opposite expectations, 'there would be work, a road, a doctor, a school, people would be happy'.<sup>12</sup> However, common expectations of state-led development and modernization induced by the construction of a road (and its 2020 completion) were not unanimously met with the same appreciation among upland dwellers. Early on, herders started to anticipate potentially disruptive effects, such as the evanescence of ordinary acts of mutual support and lending practices under the greater pressure of monetary and market logics that were expected to prevail elsewhere. Along the course of their travels, migrants' aspirations translated in mundane expectations of a better life abroad and later shifted to acerbic critics of the Afghan government's principled opposition to the entire ethnic group's outmigration (*ürkün*) and of the administrative and clientelist hurdles they faced to obtain a Tajik visa.<sup>13</sup> Their expectations to obtain from Afghan or Kyrgyz governments transit funds via Dubai to reach Kyrgyzstan were not met either. Some migrants eventually resorted to their own resources. They mostly sold livestock for foreign currencies which I happened to convey.

Stretching along established corridors of itinerancy such the Pamir Highway, migrants' back and forth movements appear flexible and adaptive when contrasted to the way their mobility is conventionally imaged or portrayed in Kyrgyz media and the government programme but also reports and research articles. Their repatriation is revealing moral positions where to stay or to go is the result of a deliberate choice rather than irreducible to clearly identifiable push and pull factors nor clear-cut boundaries. But not only, Afghan Kyrgyz migrants' back and forth movements also reflect greater claims for equal



participation and recognition beyond their conventional location at the margins of regional and national borders and conduits of exchanges as well. Monsutti raises that migrants' 'mobility represents a protest against the global distribution of wealth and security, as well as a subversion of classical forms of political territoriality. As such, it can be conceived – through its structural consequences more than individual intentions – as a political act' (2018, 454). In moving across supposedly stable and established boundaries of mobility and representation, Afghan Kyrgyz' movements, I suggest, subvert the programme's frames and categories as they spatially root and confine the group to a distant space and time. Instead, and here I anticipate my main argument, the 'repatriation' programme underscores the relevance of migrants' sustained efforts in travel and speeches to establish themselves and close agnates in a wider landscape, reshaping ascribed tropes of spatial remoteness, ethnic ancestry and cultural endangerment which in turn afforded them a greater range of resources and movements. There is thus value in distinguishing use and usage or writing travel as a practice and travel writing as a popular genre in Central Asia – as elaboration or review of territorial and genealogical ascriptions.

The relative ease with which some migrants moved back and forth across international borders is a prompt to think beyond the state as a central point of reference to the institution of social boundaries (Reeves 2011b; Schetter 2005) and turn our attention to the ways migrants participated in shaping and reframing government programmes and policies. Migration in this sense reveals moral positions in a context marked by important but not determining inequalities rather than irreducible to clearly identifiable push and pull factors nor clear-cut boundaries within the group, but also their ascribed spatiotemporal location and actual movements.<sup>14</sup>

### Distant emissaries and the making of Kyrgyz spaces

On our walks to the Pamirs, Kyrgyz or Wakhi travel companions used to halt in the vicinity of distinct landmarks (*oston* or *mazar*) to pray or more briefly address their greetings to the persons or entities the sites stand for. The slowed pace and extended length of our walks (twenty to forty kilometres per day) also led us to review the traces left as palimpsest of larger scale migratory or geopolitical events. On our way down to the lowland hamlet of Sarhad e Broghil from the Little Pamir, Mullah Abdyl Hak stopped and looked around for a while to find a stone bearing an old Chinese inscription (*bar bai jer*). He spontaneously explained, 'the Chinese now claim that this place belongs to them, the stone is of great value to them'. He later pointed to and commented the sparse words written in Dari next to the petroglyphs we came across in Langhar, 'Arif and Malyk Kutlu (Hajji Rakhman Kul Khan's sons) wrote their names in 1979 while leaving the Pamirs to Pakistan', he added. Leaving small traces behind, travellers signal their passage as well as the time of their making in places noticed much earlier with surprising redundancy. Our walks were often punctuated by breaks of this kind, prompted by one of our companions to consider a particular aspect of the surrounding landscape, reminded as we were of the earlier presence of other travellers. While their distribution forms a coherent ensemble across the Pamir-Hindukush Mountain ranges (Mock 2011, 2013; Safinov 2009), landmarks' significance is contingent and many. Because their motives, meanings and contexts remain often indecipherable, their reading and



subsequent interpretation is open to the viewer's dispositions. Landmarks' consistent location at a crossroads, along main routes or an outstanding rock formation raise a sense of continuity in migrants' contemporary appreciation of the landscape's specific features, often expressed in 'we/them', 'now/then' distinctions which the signs supposedly attested – this besides the distance in space or time which separated the viewers from landmark's authors. Literally walking onwards, the traces of earlier visitors enabled us to read the landscape in the footfalls of those who preceded us. On our south side, my travel companions pointed to an irrigated area which stood as a farmland which belonged to Afghan Kyrgyz prior the 1978 migration to Turkey – thereby destabilizing their common conception as strictly pastoralists.

The relationship between travel and writing is part of a longer history in Central Asia. To Nile Green, 'mastery of the written language was itself a tool that enabled and encouraged educated men to travel and find service in the chanceries of distant states' (2013, 12). Important contributions already highlight the relevance of visits to old sites (*mazar*,<sup>15</sup> *kümböz*<sup>16</sup> and national monuments) to foster a sense of continuity and cohesion among those who identify as Kyrgyz.<sup>17</sup> Wealthy owners' sons pursue education in China, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey while some work as advisers for the Afghan ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic. Several wealthy owners' sons were sent for schooling purposes to China, Iran and Kyrgyzstan in the last years. Beyond learning the language, they actively seek support and relations with political authorities.

On an evening spent at Mullah Abdyl Hak's summer camp, he showed the photographs of his 2008 travels to Bishkek and Istanbul to me, sitting in a yurt in Naryn with Hajji Osmon and Hajji Turdiakhun. Both made a round-trip through Kyrgyzstan's main towns and spent two weeks in the Kyrgyz settlement of Uluu Pamir Khoyu in Vang, Eastern Turkey. As part of their journey, they were received by the Kyrgyz prime minister and gave interviews to journalists, meeting the political organization *Zamandash*, in a similar attempt to gather political support towards a potential migration. Yet the staged importance of travels to old sites to actualize kinship ties was contrasted by the ambivalent sentiments and frustrated expectations of the 'repatriates'. The collection of the necessary documents (most had to be created *ex nihilo*) required claimants to prompt in person the various state agencies to issue them. 'You go here, you go there to get the documents and each time you have to prove them how Kyrgyz you are', Abdulwali, son of Abdul Rashid Khan, complained on our visit of Bishkek's main monuments. Our travel companion, Abdulwali, did not share the enthusiasm of his host, Esen Baike, and saw in the visited monuments only the 'inert stones of our ancestors' (*babalarybyzdyn ölgön tashtar*) – moving between a proclaimed sense of affinity and the obvious distance in treatment which he felt subjected to. The visits organized by politicians and genealogists to distant parents (*alys tuugandar*) and monuments were met with ambivalent reactions.

During occasional strolls with migrants in the town of Naryn, our walks led us to the museum for history and culture (*tarykh i madaniyat*), the central Mosque and the bazaar. In the museum, Faisylhak could not refrain from smiling when our guide, stopping next to a yurt (*Kyrgyz* or *boz üi*) described that 'in the past, Kyrgyz people (*el*) used to live in yurts year-round, now only pastoralists install them in summer'. Though seemingly banal and anecdotal, the remark and my travel companion's giggle are representative of the gap between his own experience and its location in an imaginary topography

where his past mode of living is curated as remote and associated with a time now gone. The documentation in Kyrgyzstan of Afghan Kyrgyz' contemporary mode of dwelling as 'a thing of the past' is yet another instance of the imaginary coincidence in popular discourse of their putative genealogical (and assumed temporal) ancestry with spatial distance. Conversely, such archival documentation practices along the way or in museums of Afghan Kyrgyz' movements are yet another instance of the collapsing in travel writing of genealogical (and hence temporal) ancestry with spatial distance.

### Between departures and arrivals: establishing a transnational space of migration

Once in the Little Pamir, the elders (*aksakal*) Ismail and Duwana Bai inquired to me whether Kyrgyz in Tajikistan truly know their seven forefathers. Ismail claimed to know only four, Duwana laughed as he admitted knowing only two. 'Our knowledge of one's own seven forefather', both assumed, 'is incomplete in both Pamirs'. Their remarks directly upset and confront assumptions of the scholarship. Ismailbekova's account is illustrative of the general confusion in the scholarship between levels when asserting that 'Kyrgyz in Afghan Pamir's Province trace their ancestry back seven generations along the male line, which is necessary for proof of identity and their claims to membership in a particular Kyrgyz *kichik uruu* (small lineage) or *chong uruu* (big lineage). Those who did not know their origins were considered *kul* or slaves, but this genealogical methodology was also used by individuals who were the descendants of mixed marriages between Kyrgyz and non-Kyrgyz and the offspring of Kyrgyz married to slaves' (2017, 26). The shift in the second sentence to the past tense is illustrative of the allochronic location which undergirds problematic assumptions such as the prevalence of agnatic descent principles to Afghan Kyrgyz society's structure taken as a coherent whole or of the knowledge of forefathers up to the seventh generation. Instead of conceiving them as given of the society, the commentaries of Ismail and Duwana Bai suggest the opposite.

I recounted then to both elders how Abdikarim Chockoev, an elder and local history writer (Mostowlansky 2012) living in neighbouring Eastern Pamirs impressed me with a handwritten list of twelve forefathers hidden in his wallet which he could recite by heart. I then enumerated the classificatory terms for agnatic descent which I learned from an elder in K n  Korgon, a village in the Eastern Pamirs, Tajikistan (in ascending order: *ata*, *chong ata*, *baba*, *buba*, *kuba*, *joto*, *jete* in Kyrgyz). Both playfully joked, 'you are definitely more Kyrgyz than we are'. Duwana explained the difference in his own terms, 'in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, the state is strong (*mykty*). Here there is no school, we do not know how to write here, we simply forgot, and people took our genealogies (*sanjyra*) away with them when they left during the Soviet time (*shuravi*)'. In our discussion, I cited the admonitory proverb written above the entrance of the Museum dedicated to the study of local history and genealogy on the south shore of the Issyk Kul in Kyrgyzstan: 'not knowing one's seven forefathers, one will end a slave' (*jeti ata bilbegen, kul bolot*). Duwana amusedly replied that to the contrary, not knowing his seven forefathers allowed him exactly to marry the daughter of one of the wealthiest owners (*bai*) in the Little Pamir. He later explained that 'we lost our *sanjyra*, our parents took them away during 1978 outmigration'.

Conceived by Callahan, Ismailbekova and Shahrani as a prescriptive rule of alliance,<sup>18</sup> the obligations such knowledge implies stand as an explanation for the quasi absence of genealogical texts and the oblivion of the knowledge of one's own seven forefathers in the Afghan Pamirs to resolve the problems of having to establish alliances with closer cousins given the limited number of available partners. Supporting the proposition, Callahan observes that 'a high degree of clan (*chong uruu*) endogamy is found among the Kyrgyz elite' (2013, 113). Consequently, the designation and ascription of a set of knowledges and practices to Afghan Kyrgyz stand as an example of the kind of productive misunderstandings that demanded to be resolved when migrants presented their own accounts to experts in Kyrgyz genealogy.

Kyrgyz genealogists' (*sanjyrachy*) efforts to document and map Afghan Kyrgyz kinship relations in the logic and framework of a popular travel writing genre are decisive, although contested, to their integration in the moral and hierarchical framework of a conception of Kyrgyzness by descent. Such inclinations to fix and document kinship and ethnic ties can be traced back to the Soviet policy of indigenization (*korenizatsia* in Russian) with the intention to follow 'a linear path of development from kin-based or clan groups, through tribes and tribal federations, to finally reach the stage of modern nation-states as represented by the Soviet Republics' (Ismailbekova 2017, 30).<sup>19</sup> Its link to *rodologia* (the study of kinship, *rodstvo* in Russian) is striking for the popularity of the genre in Russia during the same period (Leykin 2015). Genealogical reckonings in travel writing gained traction in post-Soviet Republics to explain historical events in a similarly teleological fashion based on a Lamarckian-like idea of heredity. The allochronic framework of ethnogenesis assumes the outline of specific and stable 'ethno-genetic' dominants to specify phylogenetic structures (Kayipov 2010, 183).

Genealogies, like oral histories, are the objects of many uses (Humphrey 1979) but also objectify many practices. They ground arguments and foreground encounters. Experts compare various accounts, criticize the one or the other version, notice 'errors', inconsistencies and contradictions.<sup>20</sup> Their accuracy mostly depends on the spatial and genealogical proximity of the author to the descent line he describes but their relative indeterminacy, more importantly, allows for creativity to contemporary claims. Unlike James Scott's rehearsed proposition<sup>21</sup> on the relevance of text as a crucial instrument of statecraft and as 'an indisputable point of reference, (that) provides the kind of yardstick from which deviations from the original can roughly be judged' (Scott 2009, 227), and Scheele's (2012) or Shryock's (2008) observations in their respective ethnographic contexts that deviation from the written text is perceived as scandalous, the production of local histories and genealogies in Kyrgyzstan objectifies relationships in a flexible and not rigid framework which in turn affords the negotiation of ethnic, territorial ascription. Gullette stress their contingency, since 'maintaining these vital relationships is essential (...), finding and establishing connections with people is important, but knowledge of *uruu* and *uruuk* does not guarantee support' (2010, 179). Considering the effect of the sustained attention to kinship ties along Afghan Kyrgyz migrants' iterations, I suggest that kinship is both over- and underdetermined, contingently resourceful to migrants' movements. Given the relative flexibility and adaptability of migrants' and experts' readings of both written and oral histories in either or both places of departure or arrival, genealogies and local histories translate rather than determine instrumental modes of inclusion and exclusion – as grasped in early debates over the classic notion of segmentary

association.<sup>22</sup> Again, the formation of groups along kinship terms does not determine a course of actions but is the product of meeting trajectories. Hence the relevance of the distinction between kinship as a formal set of relations to be actualized and as a process and sequence of events.

The textual transcription of kinship and ethnic ties translates such problematic attempts at recovering gaps or absences in collective memory. In Kyrgyzstan, the writing of local history and genealogy is a popular activity among elders (*aksakal* in Kyrgyz). Their publications (*sanjyra*), displaying personal political trajectories along with their integration to the Kyrgyz lineage system (Beyer 2016), are important markers of one's attachment to a specific place and typically resorted to during political elections (Gullette 2007; Petric 2015). Instead of standing as absolute and definitive accounts, texts' objectivizing and visualizing affordances are instrumental to genealogists' attempts to precise people's spatial and temporal location as well as their relations with past eminent figures. Text and the ordering of relations along a structural-functionalist framework is valued by genealogists who examine documents comparatively and recursively, without implying that their transcription necessarily settles disputes and disagreements.

Instead of conceiving of the two different perspectives as irreducible contradictions between the temporal binaries of tradition and modernity, spatially located on each end of migrants' iterations, both genealogists and migrants found an elegant solution to the apparent contradiction in assuming oblivion due to the eventful disruption of both the Soviet Afghan war and subsequent migration to Turkey. In this context of rupture and separation, the 'repatriation' programme afforded the elaboration, imagination and documentation of new, not preexisting, relations and to recover from gaps or inconsistencies in their respective accounts.

### Blood ties and the unmarried adult man: contingency in genealogical ascription

In his mid-twenties, Ismail is part of a growing number<sup>23</sup> of livestock breeders who achieved relative self-sufficiency and autonomy from otherwise binding livestock lending practices (*amanat* in Kyrgyz) in the Little Pamir.<sup>24</sup> Finding someone to marry was difficult for him, 'expectations are high among men, and if you have a daughter, your future is saved in the Pamirs', he explained. The bridewealth (*kalyng* in Kyrgyz) ordinarily resumes in the trope of hundred sheep (*jüz koi*) but effectively includes more. General expectations among the elite convene over an added fifteen to twenty yak (*kotoz*), three to four horses, thirty to forty thousand Afghani (equivalent to four to five hundred US dollars), home furniture in mattresses (*tuchak*) and coffer (*sandyk*) filled with basic cooking utensils and other gifts. Ismail eventually concluded that 'there are many girls [who] men simply cannot afford. About thirty men of age remain unmarried'. Moreover, exclusive alliance strategies among close kins further restrict opportunities. As Ismail explained, about a hundred persons in both Pamirs married the siblings of their partners (*kuda* in Kyrgyz), such as the current Khan's brothers with Osmon Hajji's three daughters, both members of a close descent line, Teit.

As a result, only wealthy livestock owners afford the expensive *kalyng* for their sons as part of their anticipatory inheritance (*enchi*) while 'the majority of Kyrgyz males are not so

fortunate, leaving them few alternatives. A common strategy is for a man to try and build up his own herd, and borrow from close relatives if possible, so that he can eventually afford to pay the *kalyng'* (Callahan 2013, 116). Usually, brothers stay together in a camp (*aiyl*) and share the duties in stocks' watch whilst ownership is still strictly separated. Mullah Abdyl Hak, an important religious expert and exceptional speaker adamant to the repatriation, owned only a few sheep and twelve yak while his brother Nurylhak was counted as one of the wealthiest owners in the Little Pamir. Together, they moved with their families in Kyrgyzstan and left their stock as *amanat* to Samaat, their cousin (MBS). Still, other opportunities are afforded in movement. Samaat met his current wife while serving as a soldier in the district capital of Faizabad and returned to the Pamirs when the Afghan government collapsed in 1992. Since, she followed him and settled in the Little Pamir, exclusively addressing peers and myself in Kyrgyz, asserting besides and with chuckles how long and at pains she was to 'become' Kyrgyz while Samaat used to complain over his current situation in nostalgic tropes. 'Dr Najibullah was a good man, the Soviets were good' (*Dr Najibullah, Shuravi khub bud* in Dari). Having had to comply to the brutal reversal of power in the district centre, Samaat sought support in the Little Pamir among close kins. Whilst it is common for a woman to settle in the residence of her new husband, the reverse is much rarer and so far, only concerned the father of Najibullah, Rais e Shura in the Great Pamir, who came from Faizabad to settle in the upland camps.

In Afghanistan, patrilineal descent features as an important discriminatory factor of ethnic ascription, instrumental at times of political contestation. Monsutti explains, 'people are liable to change their identity by crossing the boundary of their social group and incorporating themselves into another group. In Afghanistan, ethnic groups tend to be seen as huge agnatic kinship groups; each tribal segment is supposed to stem from a common male ancestor, himself related to the ancestors of collateral branches. Such a segmentary system, based on interlocking structural oppositions, is an ideal representation and is far from exhausting the logic of alliances and conflicts nor the constant reframing of tribal genealogies' (2013, 153). Najibullah, son of a renowned commandant from Faizabad and a Kyrgyz mother, led administrative duties as *Rais e Shura* in the Great Pamir (as Community Development Council leader in the terminology of the past National Solidarity Program). Following disputes over livestock ownership, he returned to Faizabad under the pressure, as he later explained to me, of not being purportedly 'truly' Kyrgyz because his father was considered a foreigner (*hareji*). Disregarding the veracity of his account, the claim was confirmed by his eventual leave and preference to present his discrimination along ethnic lines instead of the politics that later antagonized his earlier relations to the Pamirs.

Many sources of political legitimacy often overlap within a descent line. Economic, religious or political expertise are unequally distributed among its members as the outcome of a common strategy to gather assets within a line or group. Hajji Rahman Kul Khan outstandingly owned more than seventy percent of the total livestock population in both Pamirs in distributing his assets to poorer households reinventing older notions of moralized lending, *amanat* or *sagun*, and hence mitigating risks bound to livestock growth. Abdul Rashid Khan married five times and had nineteen children. His attempt to convey Khanship to his son Rushan did not last long, as Callahan observed (2013, 215).

Still, his smaller descent line (Alapa) is considered powerful (*küchtöö*) in the Little Pamir and features in direct opposition to Hajji Butu's Khanship. Alliances among cross cousins within a line are common, as shown in Table 1. While Khanship was not necessarily directly linked with economic, religious or political resources, transmission never fell far from close relatives. The consistency with which a major descent line, Teit, dominates Khanship successions across major migratory events speaks first for sustained stability on the level of interactions with the state and its many instances – less for consistency in patrilineal transmission.

Ismailbekova's comment to the observation of norms supposed to govern the organization of Kyrgyz extended families (*üübülöölor*) prior to Soviet rule is illustrative of the allochronic tendency in the scholarship to discursively asserting the prevalence of blood ties as a norm which in turn was rarely effectively followed (2017, 22–37). If alliances are effectively contingent, how to account for the effective and discursive prevalence of 'blood ties'? The more distant the descent line, the greater the inclusion or exclusion frame, the less accurate its description, the reasoning goes. According to Roland Hardenberg, 'the most inclusive category, *uruu*, includes the most distant patrilineal relatives [...] Thus, an *uruu* may designate agnates descending from any ancestor who lived many generations ago' (2009, 11). Hence the mnemonic but also political prevalence of a limited number of 'big' descent lines (Ismailbekova 2017, 46–47). The classificatory distinction into groups (*chong uruu*) and sub-groups (*kichik uruu* or *uruk*) is used indifferently in Kyrgyzstan (Hardenberg 2012; Jacquesson 2010) while expressing further subdivisions in the Afghan Pamirs – 'though confusingly (from an emic perspective) they are still referred to as *kichik uruu* rather than *uruk*' (Callahan 2013, 109). The distinction between great (*chong*) and small (*kichik*) descent lines (*uruu*) further specifies genealogical ascriptions among close agnates.

In the Afghan Pamirs, four major descent lines form ascriptions that are further divided into smaller ones: Teit, Kesek, Naiman and Nooruz. While Shahrani, Dor and Callahan insisted on the consensual nature of the election of the Khan through an elders' (*aksakal* and *manap*) assembly, every Khan belonged without exception to the same major descent line (*chong uruu*), Teit. Current Khan, Abdulkhani Hajji Butu is the nephew (MFS) of Abu Bakr Khan.

**Table 1.** Khanship succession.

Khan	Khanship	Uruu	Kichik uruu	Migration
Toktosun	1930s	Teit	Alapa	
Sartbai	1937–43	Teit	Alapa	
Mamat Kerim	1943–45	Teit	Alapa	Forced to abdicate due to opium consumption.
Hajji Rahman Kul	1945–47	Teit	Kochkor	Fled to China in 1947 after skirmishes with Soviet troops.
Astanabek	1947–49	Teit	Kyzyl Bash	
Hajji Rahman Kul	1949–78	Teit	Kochkor	Fled to Pakistan in 1979.
Abu Bakr	1978–79	Teit	Shaiym	Returned to the Little Pamir after the move to Pakistan.
Abdul Rashid	1979–2009	Teit	Shaiym	Returned to the Little Pamir after the move to Pakistan.
Hajji Rushan	2010–2011	Teit	Shaiym	Forced to abdicate due to opium consumption, critics of his young age.
Er Aali Bai	2011–2018	Teit	Shaiym	
Hajji Butu	2018–present	Teit	Alapa	

Whilst reflecting the dominant pattern of patrilineal inclusion in the Afghan Pamirs, there are important limitations to tables like these. Those condensed sets of information on kin relations and migration remain partial. The impression of orderliness and classificatory cohesion they suggest is informed by a structuralist paradigm which undergirds early Soviet,<sup>25</sup> and post-Soviet,<sup>26</sup> documentations of the Kyrgyz lineage system. They do not reflect the fungibility, disorder and complexity of the practices, alliances or, here, political authority on migration, that they are intended to synthetically describe. With the exceptions of Astanabek, Hajji Rahman Kul and Er Aali Bai, Khans are not necessarily the wealthiest owners (Callahan 2013, 215). The singular authority of the Khan is a matter of direct and quasi constant contestation amidst a plurality of competing positions. In this regard, an account of khanship succession in a singular line dismisses the relevance of other competing sources of political legitimacy. Mullah Abdyl Hak, son of Abu Bakr and cousin (*jeen*) of Hajji Butu, is a known religious expert who led important discussions in travels and speeches towards the 'repatriation', whilst Hajji Butu, who became Khan after Er Aali Bai's passing, explained to me being lesser interested in pursuing any outmigration. Hajji Turdiakhun, the only representative to the Afghan parliament (Meshrano Jylga), is not represented in the table although he convened initial agreements of the 'repatriation' with the programme responsible of the time, Saltanat Barakanova. Coming from the Great Pamir, he was also referred to as Hajji Wakhil in distinction from the status of Khan already attributed at the time and in recognition of his political contribution. His younger sister (*karyndash*) married Sopu Abdilwahid, further establishing ties across both Great and Little Pamirs. Together, Sopu, his wife and Turdiakhun's sons eventually moved to Kyrgyzstan in 2018.

## Conclusion

While the repatriation programme afforded a few beneficiaries, to the like of Hajji Turdiakhun's initiating travels, opportunities to visit the homes and monuments of distant kins, and while a dozen families even established initial steps towards more durable investments in Kyrgyzstan, most of the population remained in the Afghan Pamirs. Initially undifferentiated from a Kyrgyz state perspective – 'we've never eaten with them and would not even conceive this back in the Pamirs' as an elder woman raised to me during a dinner organized by the programme's responsible in Naryn. The repatriation quickly reinforced inequalities as wealthy owners, and their sons, were able to secure work or education, and poorer families started herding in the government funded village of Taldy Suu in the Alai. Young men occupied their time with the works or studies they were able to afford, paying regular visits to the Mosque, stressing their hesitations to me as to which educational path (in school or at the Medresse) to choose.

The prospect of a last migration, as Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov promised to 'repatriate every remaining Kyrgyz from Afghanistan' during his visit of the village of Taldy Suu, reinstates a trope which displaces in time a banal conception of people's existence in movement. Still, migrants afforded (often with the financial support of their kins in the Afghan Pamirs) the possibility to rewrite and reframe in movements their own imaginary location and the asymmetry assumed by government assistance and resettlement policy. Their sparse but connected movements established a transnational space of circulation in a landscape connoted by migrants' contingent mobilisations of kinship, ethnic, religious and



political registers. The ‘repatriation’ became thus an important vector for creative mobilisations of tropes of remoteness and alterity or proximity and affinity as well.

In projecting distance and difference, both in documents and actual practices, migrants’ movements upset and redraw static frames and tropes of remoteness. The ontological rupture assumed between a ‘now’ and ‘then’, spatially distributed between a ‘modern’ Kyrgyzstan and the ‘remote’ Afghan Pamirs is a powerful and compelling but partial trope. The association of spatial distance with cultural alterity – which Afghan Kyrgyz migrants at times endorsed, at others simply dismissed, subverted or ignored – ambivalently featured as parameters of documentation and classification (especially through the register of genealogy and local history as a popular writing genre and resource for examining contemporary relationships). Tropes of cultural endangerment instanced by supposedly lost genealogies feature as a meeting point for genealogists and migrants to redraw ties in the form of genealogical charts (*sanjyra*) as an already popular travel writing genre. Genealogy and local history writing can be conceived as a practice to locate personal memories, genealogical ascriptions and their ongoing reformulations. Migrant’s and experts’ respective documentation and objectification practices situate the allochronic dislocation of Afghan Kyrgyz in texts moving across a wider Central Asian landscape.

To conclude, migrants’ iterations complicate the linear conception of their ‘repatriation’ in the way formulated by the Kyrgyz government. Their movements better fit a back and forth (*kelgen-ketken* in Kyrgyz) pattern than the idea of a definitive exodus (*ürkün*) where the population is expected to move out of the Afghan Pamirs for the last time. Yet if the topological register of the ‘repatriation’ programme as distant parents in space and ancestry meets migrants’ words, their aspirations and concrete movements upset the linearity and definitive nature of their expected resettlement.

## Notes

1. Finke, Sanders, and Zanca 2013.
2. Personal communication, Bishkek June 2018.
3. Adelhah 2015, 2017; Adlparvar 2015; Barfield 2011; Centlivres 1991; Simonsen 2004; Tapper 1988.
4. The paper builds upon observations and interviews collected in both Afghan Pamirs and the hamlets of Sultan Ishkoshim, Qala e Panja, Khandud, Sarhad e Baroghil and Bozai gonbad in Afghanistan, the towns of Murghab, Ishkoshim, Madyian, Shaymak and Alichur in Tajikistan, Bishkek, Naryn, Osh and Taldy Suu in Kyrgyzstan as well as key government sites and in continued correspondences with interlocutors on social media since August 2015.
5. Personal communication, Saltanat Barakanova, representative to the Kyrgyz parliament and repatriation programme responsible, Bishkek 2018.
6. Abashin 2013; Isabaeva 2011; Reeves 2011a.
7. Bonnenfant 2008, 2012; Buri and Finke 2013; Sancak and Finke 2005; Oka 2013; Werner and Barcus 2015; Werner, Emmelhainz, and Barcus 2017.
8. Callahan 2013; Denker 1983; Dor and Naumann 1978; Kreutzmann 2003; Levi-Sanchez 2017; Shahrani 2002.
9. As I was told by migrants from Tajikistan, the provision of certificates of residency and of absence of criminal record from the country of departure is a mandatory prerequisite to the obtention of Kyrgyz citizenship.
10. Samaat, Seki Kalon, Little Pamir, Mai 2017.
11. Personal translation. Original quote, ‘bizge jol jok, mektep jok, doktor jok, ökmöt jok, jardam az Pamirga, jashoo kiin oshunda. Biz ong jetinshiden kylym turabyz, jetpeibiz’ (September 2016, Seki Kalon, Little Pamir).

12. Personal translation. Original quote, 'ish, jol, doktor, mektep bolot, el jakty' (Abduwali, September 2016, Kara Jylga, Little Pamir).
13. A migrant complained to me to have once to pay a four hundred US dollars fee at the Tajik Embassy in Kabul.
14. De Genova 2013; Fassin 2011; Graw and Schielke 2012; Willen 2007.
15. A sacred site.
16. A mausoleum.
17. Beyer 2011; Mostowlansky 2011.
18. Ismailbekova 2017, 13; Callahan 2013, 112; Shahrani 2002.
19. See also Abashin 1999; Bromley 1983; Roy 2000.
20. Ismailbekova also notes that in her case 'accounts between sources were inconsistent, and people made sense of the inconsistencies in making or refuting their own claims' (2017, 53).
21. An argument raised by Weber (2012).
22. Leach 2014; Tapper 1979.
23. I use the term in reference to Callahan's earlier observation that a significant portion of the population in the Pamirs grew in livestock wealth and autonomy compared to Shahrani's report of extreme inequalities within the group where the Khan owned more than seventy percent of the total livestock population and only a small number of households. Whilst I noticed important economic disparities during the time of my ethnographic inquiry, signs of relative distribution were many – the absence of Kyrgyz herders in almost any Kyrgyz camps, most notably. Young Wakhi men work instead in pastures for an average of one sheep per month.
24. *Amanat* is a form of lending which past Rahmankul Khan introduced in the 1950s. It allows poor households to tend for livestock of a wealthier owner and use secondary products. In turn, the owner may distribute his livestock to different valleys, thereby reducing the risk of losses induced by their concentration in an area exposed to the same range of epizootic, climatic and theft threats.
25. Abramzon 1960; Hudson 1964; Khazanov 1994; Pogorelskyi and Batrakov 1930, 108–109; Valikhanov 1985; Vinnikov 1956.
26. Dragadze 1984; Gullette 2010; Jacquesson 2010; Pulleyblank 1990; Shahrani 2013.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Ethics

The persons involved in the research for this article consented to their participation and agreed to their nominal designation. The persons who refused to be named in this article and other publications arising from the research were systematically anonymised.

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