

## **6 National Identity and its Representation in Naryn**

### **Introduction**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was not only a turning point in world history, but also led to a deep restructuring of the political and ideological landscape of the multi-ethnic Kyrgyz society, at a time when Kyrgyzstan was proclaimed an independent state for the first time. The transformation process facilitated political and economic change but also led to changes in terms of identity and national awareness. As Kyrgyzstan had never existed as a nation-state sharing the same boundaries or name as today, up until the Soviets founded the Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic in 1926, a national consciousness was poorly developed. In pre-Soviet times, people in today's Kyrgyzstan identified along the boundaries of clan and kinship structures and along the lines of nomadic or settled lifestyles. After independence, Kyrgyz elites tried to gain legitimation and stability for the new state by developing a shared Kyrgyz identity and a common narrative of history, which emphasized a specific Kyrgyz past and traditions. Consequently, a new semiology was created and placed in public space.

In our research, we dealt with the nation-building processes and the closely linked narrative of a Kyrgyz national identity and history. We tried to identify such nation-building processes and their traces in Naryn Oblast', which is considered as 'the real Kyrgyzstan'. The frame of analysis is built on theoretical approaches to national identity and nationality based on the works of Benedict Anderson and Stuart Hall. Nations and national identities are considered as mental constructs or rather culturally constructed categories.

Thus, the research questions to be answered in this paper are: In which contexts and conditions was the Kyrgyz nation and the idea of Kyrgyz national identity created? What are the traces of identity and nation-building processes and representations of national identity in Naryn?

In the first part of this article, the theoretical approach will be outlined. We will clarify our constructivist understanding of nation and national identity and discuss nations as systems of cultural representation. Following this, we will outline the foundation of the Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic under Soviet rule and clarify its significance for contemporary aspects of ethno-nationalist strategies and the Kyrgyz national identity, as there would be no Kyrgyz Republic today without the Soviet nationality policy. A brief look at our methodology will specify how we gained our results that will be discussed subsequently. We followed the traces and representations of national identity on-site in urban and rural public space and analyse them in context of the theoretical approach. Accordingly, five sections considering the diverse aspects of national identity in Naryn form the central part of the article: (1) the narrative of "2200 Years of Kyrgyz Nationhood", (2) Manas - the great Batyr, (3) traditions, symbols and semiotics, (4) Naryn - 'the real Kyrgyzstan', and (5) the impacts of the Soviet past and Islam on the challenged identities.

## Theoretical approach

Considering the controversial nature of the terms 'nation' and 'national identity', a closer examination of those concepts is warranted. We will clarify our understanding of nations as social constructs and subsequently present the concept of the cultural representation of nations as the analytical basis for our research.

### *The construction of nation and national identity*

In our research, we did not use the rather traditional essentialist approach to nation, nationality and national identity that considers a unitary nation as a primordial and natural category based on language, common genealogical origin or ethnicity, culture and religion. In this approach, nation is imagined as an objective, permanent, and measurable characteristic that constitutes certain group by establishing equalities and connections due to a shared national identity. This view on nation is challenged by a constructivist approach on nation and national identity which questions the naturalness of nations and highlights that nations are the results of historical and continuous cultural processes which emerged only in the modern era (Renner 2009: 250). In this sense, "the existence and coherence of a particular nation is (...) best understood as an ongoing product and not the primordial precursor of nationalism" (Sparke 2009: 488). That means that national identity is better viewed as a performance than faith. In our research, we followed the assumption that nations are not the natural or inevitable conditions, but the outcomes of very specific historical pathways. The specific historical processes that lead to the idea of a Kyrgyz nation and finally the Kyrgyz Republic will be outlined below.

Following Benedict Anderson, nations can be understood as mental constructs or as imagined political communities in which individuals are somehow connected by an abstract sense of solidarity and identification to a shared national territory. This national community imagines their nation as limited and sovereign (Anderson 1996: 15-17). This does not mean that nations are not real: "The idea of a specific national community becomes reality in the realm of convictions and beliefs" (De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak 1999: 153). The imagination of national identities is accompanied by constructions of uniqueness and difference that constitute in internal homogenisation and external distinction (De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak 1999: 153-154).

### *Nations as systems of cultural representation and narratives of history*

Following the assumption that nations or national identities are mental constructs, it can be assumed that they can be produced, reproduced and changed by means of language and other semiotics (De Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak 1999: 153). National identities are complexes of shared ideas, concepts and perceptual patterns that are conveyed or developed by a corresponding national socialisation. Stuart Hall puts it as follows:

"(...) in fact, national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation. (...) It follows that a nation is not a political entity but something which produces meanings - a system of cultural representation. People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture." (Hall 1994: 612)

One of the most important aspects of the discursive construction of nations and national identities is history, and the narrative of history of a certain nation. "History is an essential

ingredient in constructing and maintaining the imagined community of nationhood" (Liu & Hilton 2005: 239). History provides the community with narratives that tell a story of who they are, where they come from and where they should be going. The representation of history creates meanings and shared memories that connect the present with the past, and defines the social identity of peoples, and how peoples relate to other peoples (McLean 1998: 244; Liu & Hilton 2005: 537). Another crucial factor in the formation of a nation is the development of the daily language into the official state language of the respective nation (Anderson 1996: 82-84).

Hall suggests five main elements that are important for the narrative of a national history. The first element (I) is the narrative of a nation as it is told in national history, literature, media, etc.

"These provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences sorrows and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation." (Hall 1994: 613)

The second aspect (II) is the "emphasis on origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness" in which the nation is presented as primordial and natural while the "essentials of the national character remain unchanged through the vicissitudes of history" (Hall 1994: 614). The third element (III) is what Hobsbawm calls the invention of tradition:

"'Traditions' which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented (...) 'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices (...) of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour." (Hobsbawm 1983: 1)

The fourth (IV) aspect is the foundational myth of a nation - often a mythical story in which the origin of the nation, its people, and their national character is located. The fifth element (V) is the idea that national identity is rooted in a pure, original people that has lived on the particular territory since ancient times and is regarded with certain nostalgia (Hall 1994: 615).

Considering these elements of systems of representation of a nation, our aim is to show how this representational system is configured in the Kyrgyz narrative of national identity and history and what traces of this processes can be found in Naryn. The results will be put in context with the elements mentioned above and presented in the following sections.

## **Historical approach**

To understand the contemporary aspects of nationality in Kyrgyzstan, one has to take a look into the Soviet past where the foundations for the nations and national identities of the Central Asian states have been created: "Post-Soviet nationalism is the result of the Soviet nationalities policy with its institutionalisation of ethnicity, nationality and nationhood" (Haugen 2003: 110-111). In the following section, the Soviet-led creation of nations, their causes and contexts, and their consequences for the Kyrgyz national identity will be outlined briefly.

### *The foundation of the Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic*

Before the Soviet state literally created the Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic in the course of the national territorial division in 1926, there has not been a Kyrgyz named state or territory. Until 1876, most of the tribes that are today marked as Kyrgyz have been part of the Khanate of Kokand that eventually came under the dominion of the Russian Empire. The Eurocentric concepts of ethnicity, nation, and central state were mostly alien to the people living in this region. "This concept of ethnic group was largely invented post facto by Soviet theoreticians in order to justify an imposed territorial realignment" (Roy 2000: 3). Social relations and loyalties were not attached to alleged ethnic affiliation, but to family relations, clans and tribes. The important feature regarding group identity was the division between nomads and people living in sedentary structures (Lowe 2003: 108; Schmidt 2007: 210-212).

After the Bolshevik came into power in consequence of the October Revolution 1917 and the won civil war, plans for a great social restructuring according to the socialist model of society were made. Neither classes nor nations should exist in this vision of society. This meant deep-reaching changes for the Central Asian societies: Aside from the collectivisation and the accompanying settlement policy towards the previous nomadic society, this restructuring meant the delimitation of national republics along alleged ethnical and linguistic criteria (Martin 2001: 73). It might seem paradoxical from today's perspective that the Soviet Union, which stood for an internationalist attitude, founded and promoted the Central Asian nations, but this fact needs to be regarded in its historical context.

Following Terry Martin, Lenin and Stalin considered nations not only as by-products of capitalism but also as inevitable products of modernity and the historical progress: "national consciousness was an unavoidable historic phase that all peoples must pass through on the way to internationalism" (Martin 2001: 70). Since nations were in a teleological sense considered as necessary and natural stages of the social evolution, the goal of the Soviets was to accelerate this process. The Russian nation was claimed to be the most progressed whereas the Central Asian region - especially the Nomads - was considered 'backwards' and 'primitive' (Geiß 1995: 162 & 165; Dörre 2014: 87-88). Simultaneously, the Soviets distinguished between an offensive Great-Power chauvinism, which was associated with the Russian Tsarist Empire, and a defensive nationalism of suppressed nations, which was considered as a rightful reaction to the chauvinist nationalism. In this distinctive defensive nationalism, the Soviet leadership also saw opportunities for the emancipation from the capitalist bourgeois order of the Tsarist Empire (Martin 2001: 69-71). In addition to these ideological reasons, there were strategic considerations in the founding of nations as the Soviets intended to prevent the development of pan-Turkic or Islamic sentiments (Geiß 1995: 162, 165). The most important strategy in the promotion of nationality was the *korenizaciya* (rooting) which will be closer examined in the next chapter.

Precondition for the *korenizaciya* in Central Asia was the already mentioned division in national territories itself. The basis for this division were the views of Stalin who in his role as the commissioner of national issues defined a nation as follows:

„A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.“ (Stalin 1953: 307)

The national republics should be categorized by the means of 'objective' criteria. In 1923 and 1924 ethnographic and statistical investigations were conducted which were meant to be the basis for the following national territorial delimitation. But the partition along linguistic and ethnic features turned out to be a very complicated endeavour. There have been no clear linguistic borders, many people were bilingual or multilingual, and since ethnic affiliation has not been an important marker of identity, many people did not know to which ethnicity they should associate themselves (Geiß 1995: 82; Martin 2001: 73; Schmidt 2007: 212). Additionally, a lot of those alleged ethnic borders did not match with reasonable borders in an economic or administrative way (Geiß 1995: 82). In the course of this categorisation and according to the strategy of double assimilation, every Soviet citizen received the Soviet citizenship *graždanstvo* and a corresponding nationality, the *nacional'nost*. Those nationalities were hierarchically ordered and titular nations were founded. The titular nations and their members gained various political and cultural privileges - the language of the respective titular nation was to be spoken in the respective republic - in contrast to the minorities which had less rights and social representations (Martin 2001: 73; Dörre 2014: 89).

### ***Creation of national identity***

In 1936, Kyrgyzstan became a full-fledged Soviet republic. This was accompanied by a defined Kyrgyz territory, an own political leadership, a flag, and a national emblem as well as various administrative, economic and cultural institutions. The Kyrgyz language, the main criterion in the national division, was written down for the first time (Schmidt 2007: 212). "Language was seized upon as a key element of identity, and the under-developed tongue was given a script (...), an expanded vocabulary, grammar, dictionaries, literature, and other elements necessary to declare it formally" (Lowe 2003: 109). The daily language of the people became an official language.

The *korenizaciya* was supposed to lead to a social evolutionary catch up of the 'backward' nations and simultaneously promote the socialistic ideas and ideology - which was now receivable in their own languages - by targeted support of the respective national elites. Terry Martin described this as an "affirmative action empire":

"Soviet policy systematically promoted distinctive national identity and national self-consciousness of its non-Russian populations. It did this not only through the formation of national territories staffed by national elites using their own language but also through the aggressive promotion of symbolic markers of national identity: national folklore, museums, dress, food, costumes, opera, poets, progressive historical events, and classy literary work. The long-term goal was that distinctive national identities would co-exist peacefully with an emerging all-union socialist culture that would supersede the pre-existing national cultures." (2001: 74)

The designed long-term goal of a common Soviet identity could not be reached in the course of history. Instead, the measures of the Soviet leadership caused a strengthening of the

ethnic national consciousness. Even if the Soviet ideology followed national targets in principle, the Soviet nationality policy and its administrative implementation including the distribution of passes and censuses promoted national identities in Central Asia. Accompanying this, labels of self-consciousness, identity and belonging were created which not only contain a sense of inclusiveness but also a conception of exclusiveness and 'the other' (Schmidt 2013: 171). Nationality gained importance and became a fundamental feature of identity - one could also say that the performance of nationality adapted its constructed category. In the following decades, the Kyrgyz society was reconstructed. The influence of Islam was limited and social traditions which were not in line with the Soviet ideology were replaced (Roy 2000: 79). Even though the Kyrgyz language got constituted under Soviet rule, soon, the Russian language became dominant in the urban centres of Central Asia since Sovietisation became strongly connected to Russification and Russian served as language of inter-ethnic communication (Lowe 2003: 110).

The result of the nationality policy of the Soviet leaders outlined in the previous section was a multi-ethnic republic under the leadership of the Kyrgyz titular nation. Ethnicities or nationalities were artificially separated due to similar languages and lifestyles. This multi-ethnic character of Kyrgyzstan not only remains after the end of the Soviet Union, but it comes along with a growing sense of ethnic awareness and national affiliation - and going with this: a growing sense of differentness (Lowe 2003: 112). Today, Kyrgyzstan is home to more than 90 ethnic groups (with Uzbeks and Russians as the biggest non-Kyrgyz groups) which make up for more than 30 percent of the population of Kyrgyzstan (Schmidt 2007: 218; Beyer 2010: 13-15). In regard to this diverse composition of the population of Kyrgyzstan, the ethno-centric and exclusive nation-building processes, which we will outline in the following sections of this paper, are highly problematic and are likely to facilitate discrimination and marginalisation of non-Kyrgyz groups.

## **Methodology**

A deepened discussion using existing literature on nation-building, cultural aspects of nations, and Kyrgyz history allowed the approach to our central research questions. We tried to reach the research goal primarily via the conduction of interviews and via observations on site.

For the undertaken observations, the work has been aligned strongly to existing literature. Fiona McLean for example provides her readers with steps to explore national identity through observations which includes the consideration of monuments in public space, visits of museums and sites of representation as well as the consideration of art and traditions in daily life. She "develop[ed] a deeper understanding of the way in which museums negotiate and construct meanings of national identity" (McLean 1998: 244). Further, she "concludes that museums (...) have a significant contribution to make in developing our understanding of national identity" (McLean 1998: 244). A few days in the Kyrgyz capital allowed an impression to be held in mind. Further research took us in an area which might represent the traditional Kyrgyz life, as Naryn Oblast' is considered as a typical Kyrgyz region - a topic that will be discussed in the next section.

In Naryn Town itself, the presence of the National State University allows access to teaching staff and experts on different subjects. Research about Manas and the history behind the myth had been facilitated thereby and museums (Naryn Historical Museum of Ethnography, Art Gallery, Koshoi Korgon Museum) could serve for information on history and awareness in and about Naryn as well as for identifying potential interview partner. The visitation of monumental sites and the environment of Naryn Town and neighbouring districts (Koshoi Korgon, Tash Rabat, Kara Suu) as well as given festivities allowed an insight in Kyrgyz traditions (arts, omnipresence of Manas, attachment to rural country) and of how the country is presented in tourism.

The interviews were conducted guideline-based in formal as well as in informal ways using the help of an interpreter. The questions we asked were about the epic of Manas (an important Kyrgyz epic that tells the story of Manas), its role and representation in public and daily life, about Kyrgyz traditions (festivities, food, music, in family, etc.) and their significance as well as about the shift from Soviet times to today in relation to identity and affiliation. Discussions were undertaken with experts on contemporary history as biographical and narrative interviews as well as in more intimate circles with relatives of the Kyrgyz' research team. The work with locals allowed us to get an authentic impression of how households are organized and to get an insight of how Kyrgyz people in Naryn think about their and the country's past as well as about their feelings facing questions of national identity today and before. Thoughts on the topic of the shift from Soviet to Kyrgyz identity could best be gathered by conducting interviews.

However, we would like to add that representations of national heritages often come along with touristic representations and imageries - Nicola Palmer calls these "processes by which the projected identities are selected for tourism promotion" (2007: 647). Due to this and our lack of language we faced difficulties in assessing traditions and representations of Kyrgyz culture as they might be performed with us as a touristic audience in mind. This, for example, applies for the *Shyrdak* Festival discussed later where one might get the feeling that certain traditions are performed to meet the (supposed) expectations of tourists or consumers.

## Results

After the break-down of the Soviet Union and the accompanying independence (that was not really desired by most people living in Kyrgyzstan since it did not have the infrastructural and institutional requirements nor the ideological desire for an independent state), far-reaching transformations followed - not only in politics and economics, but also in categories of culture, history and national identity (Schmidt 2013: 240). With the demise of the Soviet Union an ideological vacuum was left that the Kyrgyz elites and the Kyrgyz government needed to fill by developing a shared and unifying identity to equip the new state with legitimacy, stability and credibility (Lowe 2003: 114). The goal of this strategy was, inter alia, to counter sub-national loyalties and supra-regional identities like Pan-Turkism or Islam as well as strengthening their own political and economic power (Schmidt 2007: 220-221; Marat 2008a: 12). In this course instruments like the creation of a century-long Kyrgyz

history, stories of pre-Soviet heroes - especially the epic of Manas -, the recourse of perceived traditions, a new semiology, and the reinterpretation of symbols were used. The goal in this research project was to identify such nation-building processes and their traces in Naryn Town and oblast'.

In this section we are going to present the results of our research and assign them to specific categories which we characterized as principal issues or challenges of the Kyrgyz nation-building process: The Kyrgyz historical narrative of "2200 Years of Kyrgyz Nationhood", the significance of Manas, traditions, symbols, and semiotics, the perception of Naryn as "the real Kyrgyzstan" and the impact of the Soviet-past and Islam on the challenged identities. Those results and their meanings will be put into context to the theoretical approach outlined above with special consideration of the construction of the nation by the creation of historical narratives and the elements of cultural representation stated by Stuart Hall.

### *The narrative of "2200 Years of Kyrgyz Nationhood"*

One of the most important aspects of this nation-building process is, as we pointed out, the narrative of a connecting history, as "perceptions of the past are essential for the creation of a national self-consciousness" (Lowe 2003: 121). Following that, the Kyrgyz elites had to find a suitable narrative of history that, for obvious reasons, reached out further into the past than Soviet times - in which the formation of the Kyrgyz state took place - and connected today's Kyrgyzstan to pre-Soviet traditions. In doing so, they followed an essentialist understanding of nation in which the congruence of nation and state is desired - every nation should naturally possess its own state (Schmidt 2007: 215-217; Dörre 2014: 91). The history of the Kyrgyz people is not presented as the product of Soviet national policies but as the re-emergence of an ancient nation which has always lived on Kyrgyz lands: "Like its neighbours, the post-Soviet Kyrgyz historiography is built on a teleological logic: it is the history of a nation marching towards its independence" (Laruelle 2012: 40). Gaps and contradictions are more or less ignored as "Kyrgyz history is not particularly well equipped to provide the basis for a sense of national awareness" (Lowe 2003: 121). In the nation-building process the Kyrgyz history promotes an idealized version of 'Kyrgyzness' and presents the Kyrgyz as an ancient people with a proud and successful history (Lowe 2003: 121).

This construction becomes very evident in the festivities of "2200 Years of Kyrgyz Nationhood" introduced by former President Askar Akayev, who played an important role in telling the story of the Kyrgyz and published several books regarding this topic, in 2004 (Marat 2008a: 15-16). This event has its manifestation on the outside wall of the National Art Gallery in the very centre of Naryn. The gallery itself was funded by the local patron Askar Salynbekov in 2001 for the purpose of conveying the Kyrgyz their national heritage. The wall shows identifying symbols like the *boz ui* (yurt), *tunduk* (typical roof bars in yurts seen from the inside), the Kyrgyz flag, and the state seal as well as places that are important in Kyrgyz history like the Tash Rabat and Koshoi Korgon, which also can be found on Kyrgyz bank notes, and also crucial historical figures of different historical eras like Kurmanjan Datca, a stateswoman (!), who reigned in the 19th century, the local hero Koshoi and of course Manas (see following section). Here, the Kyrgyz history is presented in a teleological,



coherent manner: an ancient nation on its way to a developed and industrialized country that still holds its traditions (Fig. 1).



Fig.1: Wall painting “2,200 Years of Kyrgyz Nationhood” at the Art Gallery, Naryn Town.  
Photography: Hertlein, 2016

Quite a few of the statues and monuments we found in Naryn Town and Naryn Oblast’ have been built after the independence and often relate to pre-Soviet heroes. Most of them are independence fighters, warriors that defended the Kyrgyz or strong rulers (Lowe 2003: 116). An example is the statue of Aibek Batyr in At-Bashy, which was also set up in the course of the “2,200 Years of Kyrgyz Nationhood” festivities (Fig. 2).

In the context of the creation of shared narratives of history, it is also remarkable that the year 2016 is officially branded as the “Year of Kyrgyz culture and history” as you can see on the poster (Fig. 3). For example, this meant that the local TV station made productions and news regarding this topic. Under the same label the 220th anniversary festivities for the local hero Tailak Batyr, also known as Song-Kol festival, took place at the end of July, including several traditional sports and folklore. Two ways of contributing to telling the story of a Kyrgyz nation.

Besides the Art Gallery, the Regional Museum in Naryn and the museum at the ancient fortification Koshoi Korgon are to be mentioned in this context of narrating a national history as they are placed where local and national history and historical events are presented. The museums set their focuses on different Kyrgyz heroes, local personalities, traditions, art, and folklore. In this way they produce meanings of the nation which are pivotal to the construction of identities (McLean 1998: 244). Also to be mentioned, and this might be put in context of the ‘invention of tradition’, is the Naryn-born ethnographer Amantour Akmatalliev (1934-2009) who is honoured with his own section in the Regional Museum and who “wrote down a lot of Kyrgyz traditions” and “found out a lot about Kyrgyz instruments, food and national clothing” as we learned from a museum employee.



Fig. 2: Statue of Aibek Batyr in At-Bashy.  
Photography: Hertlein, 2016



Fig. 3: Posters of the “Year of Kyrgyz culture and history” and the 220th anniversary festivities of Tailak Batyr in Naryn Town.  
Photography: Hertlein, 2016

In this chapter, one can see how present ideologies and nation-building processes determine the perceptions of the past. The past is interpreted and can be instrumentalized by the needs of the presence - here, this means the presentation of a shared narrative of experiences and history of a Kyrgyz people living in Kyrgyz territory since ancient times (element I and V following Stuart Hall). Essential characteristics and values which represent the national culture provide feelings of continuity and belongingness (element II). It is very important to note that these narratives are extremely ethnic-centred around the Kyrgyz - the “Year of Kyrgyz culture and history” is about the Kyrgyz history and not the history of Kyrgyzstan and all its ethnic groups.

### ***Manas - the great Batyr***

The most important figure that stands in the very centre of the Kyrgyz historical awareness is the mythical warrior Manas whose story is told in world’s longest epic that was orally transmitted (as well as changed and interpreted) over hundreds of years and written down at the end of the 19th century. Manas united the 40 Kyrgyz tribes - represented in the 40 rays of the sun in the Kyrgyz flag - and defended the nation against all kinds of dangers and foreign enemies. His story applies as the foundational myth of the Kyrgyz nation and Manas himself is generally considered as the ‘Father of the Nation’ as an interviewed student told us: “In Naryn, every child says Manas is my ata [father]”.



Fig.4: The seven maxims of Manas in Naryn State University: Unity and solidarity of the nation; International harmony, friendship and cooperation; National dignity and patriotism; Prosperity and welfare through painstaking and tireless labor; Humanism, generosity, tolerance; Harmony with nature; Strengthening and protection of Kyrgyz statehood.

Photography: Hertlein, 2016

In search for a unifying narrative, the interest in Manas increased significantly at the beginning of the 1990s: "For the Kyrgyz government, the Manas epic represented a comfortable option for a national framework" (Marat 2008b: 35). The administration under Akayev promoted the epic and its significance for the Kyrgyz foundation and cultural heritage:

"Akayev argued that every nation has its own 'genetic code' that was formed thousands of years ago. The epic, he explained, was a physical representation of this code for the Kyrgyz." (Marat 2008b: 36; following Akayev 2002: 177)

In this course, the "International Year of Manas" which celebrates the 1000th anniversary of Manas took place in 1995. Places like the airport of the capital Bishkek, streets, and organisations were named after Manas and a governmental committee extracted seven maxims mentioned in the epic and included them in the official state ideology (Marat 2008b: 34). Those seven maxims, are popularly placed in schools and universities and are largely known, as a student told us: "There are seven virtues and we had to learn it and to remember it by heart. When we were woken up at night, we could tell them". As you can see in Figure 4, these maxims are clear instructions and emphasize what it means to be Kyrgyz. The Manas epic is also an important instrument in the national education as Manas is regarded as a moral role model. A whole academic discipline, called Manasology, is dedicated to the studies of the Manas epic and Manas' deeds. In an interview on the significance of Manas, a doctor in Philology, who wrote her dissertation on the etymology in the Manas epic, told us that "Manas was a very smart and strong person (...) and plays a very important role in education. He is a teacher for the Kyrgyz people because he was very wise". This is also

interesting because schools and universities generally play a major role in establishing a common national identity in centralized nation states due to the coherent universes of experience created by uniform curricula and standardized diplomas (Anderson 1996: 122).

The often referred-to “Manas-times” are surrounded by a certain nostalgia. The Manas epic contains a variety of cultural and geographical information about the Kyrgyz and their neighbours (Köçümkulkizi 2005: 2). In this “Manas-times”, imaginations about an idealized pure, original people found its projection screen: In those times, every person allegedly followed the rituals which currently are perceived as Kyrgyz traditions, simultaneously “freedom and justice reigned”. These nostalgic ideals are in some sense also the goals for the future, as we



Fig.5: Poster with Manas-poem in Naryn Town. Photography: Hertlein, 2016

heard in interviews that many Kyrgyz wish for a strengthening and following of Kyrgyz traditions and connect their hopes with that. Following Erica Marat, “the ideology based on Manas encouraged the use of Kyrgyz language and the return of national traditions” (2008b: 39). In our research, we found that in today’s Kyrgyzstan and Naryn, Manas’ heritage is omnipresent in the form of paintings and monuments or in theaters and cinemas. In Figure 5 a poster is displayed with a poem about Manas, Kyrgyz ancestors and their heritage and connections to today’s Kyrgyzstan.

Manas and the epic come along with a specific significance for ‘Kyrgyzness’ (element II). They are pivotal in the system of cultural representation and form the base for a shared descendant myth (element IV). As one interviewed student of Manasology put it: “Identity and Manas go together. Without Manas, there would be no Kyrgyz nation today”.

### *Traditions, symbols and semiotics*

An important aspect of nation-building processes in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan is the recourse on traditions and symbols, as well as the redefinition of identity-forming semiotics. Some of the aspects we found on this matter will be presented in the following section.

Our findings demonstrate that the omnipresence of the Manas epic serves as base for many traditions. Sets of Kyrgyz traditions related to the epic are placed at prominent places in universities and schools. As we have learned in interviews and informal conversations, the description of many parts of the daily life find entrance in the current Kyrgyz way of life. The already mentioned value of the nomadic life in yurts (Fig. 6) seems to be an integral part: An interviewee claimed that every family in Naryn has at least relatives living seasonally in yurts, herding animals, and maintaining parts of their ancestors’ lifestyle. It is also worth noting that strong differences to other nations and their traditions are drawn. Yurts serve as good examples: We were told that Kyrgyz yurts follow a given construction, consist of certain materials and differ strongly in these points from those of their neighbours (as Chinese yurts which are built with metal bars). This shows how a certain national

uniqueness is constructed. The mentioned Manasologist referred that the production of handcraft arts and *shyrdaks* (traditional felted carpets) are described in detail in the epic of Manas as well. Traditional music and arts as playing *komuz* (traditional Kyrgyz stringed instrument) or the now again popular traditional dance *Kara Jorgo* which celebrates horse-riding, the 'Kyrgyz way of living' and the Kyrgyz landscape (Fig. 7) can allegedly be traced back to Manas-times and are still taught that way. On site it became clear how strongly these traditions determine the public image. Just to name a few examples: famous *Manaschi* (singer of the epic of Manas), *komuz*-players and other artists are present in everyday life in Naryn in form of small monuments, busts or images.



Fig.6: *Boz ui* placed in the center of the Art Gallery, Naryn Town.

Photography: Hertlein, 2016



Fig.7: Kyrgyz girls dancing the traditional *Kara Jorgo*.

Photography: Hertlein, 2016

Furthermore, the *Shyrdak* Festival was held in At-Bashy to promote and present the Kyrgyz national identity, although, at the same time, it serves as promotional event for the country in the matters of tourism and rural development as it was promoted by the German Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit. In this case, it is interesting "how tourism and nationalist policies are often complementary, especially in promoting a sense of historical past and reviving cultural heritages" (Palmer 2007: 647) and it remains unclear to what extent the festival was solely meant to celebrate Kyrgyz culture or to commercialize it as an activity for economic development. However, since it was only the 6th traditional *Shyrdak* Festival, Hobsbawm's notion of the invention of tradition comes into mind.

Another example of the promotion of traditions is the field of clothing. Kyrgyz people - or at least the ones who are affiliated to traditions and the 'Kyrgyz way of life' - traditionally wear a head cover: the *kalpak* (felted hat) for men and the *joluk* (headscarf) for women. In 2011, the former president Atambaev invented therefore a new holiday. On May 3, the whole country now celebrates the official *kalpak*-day. Again, traditions are singularly emphasized and the constructive character of identity-building is obvious. The response of those kinds of invented traditions differs in rural and urban areas. In rural areas, the perception of lived traditions was much higher.

Not only traditions represent the Kyrgyz identity. The public space is full of symbols that refer to the traditional Kyrgyzstan, but also demonstrate the constructivist character of this whole nation-building process. As Schmidt (2007: 216) has pointed out, in many places

attempts were made to construct Kyrgyz identity. The already mentioned Kyrgyz flag is a good example. The flag and its color reinterpret old Soviet symbols. Lowe states that the red background of the flag, the former communist color, today represents the color of Manas (Lowe 2003: 116) or as an interviewee told us the color stands for the braveness of the people. Furthermore, a Tunduk (roof bars in yurts) is in the center of the flag to symbolize the nomadic lifestyle of the 'real' Kyrgyz people (Schmidt 2007: 216). The flag's 40 sunrays represent the 40 mythical Kyrgyz tribes Manas unified. These symbols are mainly representative and inclusive for the Kyrgyz people, but exclusive for the non-Kyrgyz populations of Kyrgyzstan (Lowe 2003: 216; Schmidt 2007: 215-216). The seal and the hymn of Naryn as further symbolic elements will be discussed in the following section.

The use of the Kyrgyz language is a critical issue in this context as it is a significant marker of identity and one of the main criteria in the construction of nationality. The Kyrgyz intelligentsia already started to challenge the dominance of the Russian language in the 1980s (Lowe 2003: 118). In 1993, the Kyrgyz government further promoted the Kyrgyz language and established it as the only state language to be used in political institutions, although Russian was reintroduced as a second state language in 2001 (Schmidt 2007: 218; Dörre 2014: 92). "The Kyrgyz language (...) should be supported as necessary to the enhancement of independent sovereignty and the fortification of Kyrgyz national feeling" (Lowe 2003: 118). This ethno-nationalist language policy contributed to the discrimination and disintegration of non-Kyrgyz who partially did not speak Kyrgyz. In Naryn, we found out, schools shifted from Russian to Kyrgyz as the first language to be taught in last decades. Although people in the city are mostly bilingual, the Kyrgyz language is prevalent; in the rural areas most people only speak Kyrgyz. This is due to the ethnic homogeneity and the rural character of Naryn Oblast' which also led to the impression of Naryn as the 'real Kyrgyzstan'.

Finally, the 'Kyrgyzification' in terms of symbols and semiotics becomes obvious when looking at the public space, its places, letterings, and signs. The governments of the past years have vehemently tried to push the Russian part of Kyrgyz history into the background (Schmidt 2007: 217). Formerly prominently placed (Lenin-)statues were relocated to quieter areas and substituted by new monuments (of Manas). Also the renaming of streets is a popular means of reorientation. It should be pointed out, however, that these proceedings are, above all, measures from the public side. This 'kyrgyzification' (of public space, semiology, toponymy) from official side is a further mechanism of producing a collective sense of national identity (Dörre 2014: 94). Although, in a lot of cases the people we met were still familiar with the old names and used them. Therefore, in public space and in public life, clear references are made to the government's desired and promoted identity, in which the twentieth century is particularly reinterpreted.

Also on banknotes - as indicated above - particularly Kyrgyz localities are taken up, so that the Soviet past is pushed back by the daily facing of actual history. The variety on banknotes is far-reaching: it stretches from the so-called beginnings of Kyrgyz history, with Manas and its followers, to modern buildings which represent the contemporary progress of the country - under omission or reinterpretation of the years under Russian dominance (Schmidt 2007: 216-217).

Following Hall and Hobsbawm we could identify invented traditions (element III) which affirm to be old ones but are in fact newly placed and promoted ones. The goal of this placement of ritual proceedings is the indoctrination of specific behavioral practices leading to a unified people with same principles and customs. The mentioned measures should strengthen and especially encourage this procedure.

### *Naryn - 'the real Kyrgyzstan'*

In addition to the oblast' Talas, Naryn is considered 'the one real Kyrgyz area' within the country. More than 99 % of the population of the oblast' is considered ethnic Kyrgyz (Datenbank des Statistischen Komitees der KG 2013: 6). That "in Naryn everyone speaks Kyrgyz", as an interviewee told us, is one further reason for this perception. Other parts of the country are much more multilingual and ethnically mixed. In Naryn's villages other languages than Kyrgyz are partly not even understood. In our research we found several examples for this back-to-the-roots character of the local identity when informally interviewed people emphasized the value of nature and traditions for being Kyrgyz. A primordial understanding of ethnicity and nation is underlined for instance by the seal and the hymn of Naryn as official representations of local identity.

"[They] can be seen as linking the modern Kyrgyz Republic to the physical landscape and a simplistic and comforting nomadic past. Both are essentially exclusive and glorify the Kyrgyz people rather than the inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan." (Lowe 2003: 216)

The emphasize of the nature and its beauty, the people, and their traditional and guest-friendly mind-set as well as the ancient roots in the region are fitting into Hall's understanding of primordality.

Besides the already mentioned museums, Naryn Oblast' holds important historical sites which have high influence on the national perception of identity and play an important role in the national narrative. Places like the ancient caravanserai Tash Rabat (Fig. 8), the fortification Koshoi Korgon and the lake Song Kul are anchored in the Kyrgyz collective memory. These sites of ancient buildings, defending fortresses and huge battles are linked to scenes of union, freedom and peace. In this way, today's claim for those places is underlined through historical events and a continuity of Kyrgyzness is presented (Dörre 2014: 93). Furthermore, a lot of idealized monuments can be found in Naryn Oblast'. Lots of hero statues - the Batyrs (heroes) of ancient times - are represented in public space such as Koshoi and AibeK Batyr in At-Bashy and the Naryn-born hero Tailak Batyr in the West of Naryn Town (Fig. 9). But Naryn is also home for younger symbols of history and identity. The At-Bashy water reservoir near Dostuk - a national symbol of modernisation and technology - represents Kyrgyz development and progress.

But the latest past is also taken up in detail. Well-known (local) people - Manaschi, musicians, writers, dancer, actors, teachers and scientists - are placed in public space on images or busts and function as role models. It can be stated that the whole Naryn Oblast' represents the Kyrgyz identity. However, Naryn Town shows less aspects of 'real' perceived Kyrgyzness than the villages do. A look at Kyrgyz banknotes underlines this perception of emphasis on Naryn within the national narrative. In the previous sections, it was already indicated that some places entered public consciousness by being placed on several

banknotes. The mentioned places are thereby pushed into the official awareness. The ancient caravanserai Tash Rabat is placed on the 20 Som note, the Dostuk Dam on the 100 Som note and the fortification of Koshoi Korgon on the 200 Som note.



Fig. 8: Entrance of the ancient building of Tash Rabat.

Photography: Hertlein, 2016



Fig. 9: Statue of Tailak Batyr in Naryn Town.

Photography: Hertlein, 2016

It is undeniable that most of the historical sites and symbols are again focusing on especially Kyrgyz events and emphasize the Kyrgyz narrative of history and identity and not a narrative of all ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan. This emphasizes the continuity and timelessness of the national identity (element II), “the essential of the national character remain unchanged through the vicissitudes of history” (Hall 1994: 614). Furthermore, we could again identify traces of Hall’s fifth element of national identity construction: the idea of a pure and original people living on its ancestral territory. This element (V) includes as stated above a certain nostalgia by emphasizing on Kyrgyz people (and thus Kyrgyz identity including elements of religion and the past) which is fully taken up when considering the correlation of Kyrgyz people with their surroundings. But furthermore, this aspect as a nation-building element leads in parallel to an exclusion of minorities. We could not identify a lot of efforts undertaken to integrate further ethnic groups into the one big Kyrgyz narrative.

In this context, it should also be added that the official revision of the riots in 2010 follows a clear line. The design of the riots’ monuments is very similar in different places that we explored in Naryn, At-Bashy and Bishkek (as far as this could be explored in the capital city): Dark pillars breaking in two, threaten to crush the (Kyrgyz) people and to split the country. The design shapes again the collective memory and tells an official version of the riots - which was not explored deep enough within this field research. However, here again, we assume an exclusive character of the riots' narrative excluding non-Kyrgyz minorities’ perceptions, wants and needs.

### ***Challenged identities?***

Although the breakdown of the Soviet Union was more than twenty years ago and the above mentioned strong promotion of national identity, a lot of testimonies of the Soviet past can be found in Naryn. Every visited town showed monuments of the former hegemony. Important historical events with a great significance in creating Soviet identity such as the



Second World War - "the Great Patriotic War" - and the Afghanistan War are represented in monuments, park names and public space in general.

The perception of the Soviet past is ambivalent. Positive aspects of the past are integrated in the peoples' mindset - as following sentence which we heard quite often shows: "We had a good economy, but we were not free." Today a big amount of negative aspects are reinterpreted and linked to positive feelings. For this reason, the past can even be reinterpreted if needed. A very catchy example is the "Welcome to Naryn" sign - a former Soviet testimony with hammer and sickle - which now is interpreted as follows: "everybody in Naryn will go to work and work hard".

The Soviet past should be overcome and maintained at the same time. The past is perceived as value creating and is associated with equality between people. In Naryn's Art Gallery a *shyrdak* (Fig. 10) representing the fifteen former Soviet Republics and their friendship is exhibited. The local Soviet representative Jukeev Pudovkin is still regarded as an important part of local history as an exhibition in the local museum shows. This indicates that the Soviet-past is also perceived as national legacy. On the contrary, the already mentioned renaming of streets is one of the measures to overcome the Soviet past. The government tries to emphasize on new values and national heroes. Lowe describes this process as follows:

"Unlike the experience in the other Central Asian states, a measured acceptance of the immediate past and not an attempt to erase it, has been a subtle element of the nation-building process." (2003: 122)

Not only the Soviet past is challenging Kyrgyz identity: The role of Islam cannot be ignored but should be considered as secondary important as following quotation shows: "We are Muslims, but we are Kyrgyz." It is tried to integrate beliefs and ritual practices into a new combined Kyrgyz identity which is rooted in a traditional Kyrgyz understanding and integrating further identifying elements. Lowe says in other words: "Islam is an important means for ethnic Kyrgyz to identify with their nation and history, but it is only one element in a complex mesh of identities" (Lowe 2003: 122). Additionally, Islam is not really a fitting element for the construction of a delimiting national identity as the neighboring countries follow Islamic beliefs as well (Schmidt 2007: 221).

In the center of Naryn Town the value of Islam's role can be seen on several posters which are presented at prominent places in the city. One poster (Fig. 11) shows different states of women's clothing and covering and asks: "Oh my Kyrgyzstan, where are you going?" This leads to the impression that Islam gains in importance although the government does not intend that the influence becomes too strong. This is also supported by the fact that the government encourages the Islamic heritage by promoting the construction of mosques and the introduction of Islamic holidays (Schmidt 2007: 221). Also, Manas is pictured as a Muslim, as he was allegedly murdered while reading Namas (praying). Kyrgyz constructed history and religion are influencing each other.



Fig. 10: Shyrdak representing the 15 former Soviet Republics, Art Gallery, Naryn Town. Photography: Hertlein, 2016



Fig. 11: Poster in Naryn Town center questioning: "Oh my Kyrgyzstan, where are you going?" Photography: Hertlein, 2016

Kyrgyz culture is regardless of all those emphases on ancient Kyrgyz traditions not an isolated body. In contrast, Kyrgyz culture is quite successful in combining diverse influences. In public space, the diverse aspects can be well seen from one single point in Naryn: Vis-à-vis of the newly built mosque, which has a Tunduk painted in its dome, one finds the Pudovkin-Park (a monument honoring the local Soviet representative Jukeev Pudovkin). Here we have a good example of three aspects of Kyrgyz identity directly facing each other. This underlines the creativity of the Kyrgyz nation-building process as various aspects from different eras can be mixed, reinterpreted and contextualized in the way they are needed for today's political agenda.

## Conclusion

In this paper we presented the results of our research and discussed the historical contexts of the creation of the Kyrgyz nation as well as the post-Soviet nation-building processes that are accompanied by an ethnocentric narrative of history. As shown above, the existence of the Kyrgyz Republic is based on the nationality policy of the Soviet Union and not on the primordial presence of a Kyrgyz people. The concept of national identity was largely unknown in Central Asia as identities were mainly constituted by kinship and clan relations or the way of living. The formation of the Kyrgyz nation and the following development of a Kyrgyz identity have to be viewed in context of the Soviet ideology and its strategies of double assimilation and *korenizaciya*.

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union an ideological vacuum emerged, the superordinate identity ceased and ethno-nationalist tendencies gained importance. Kyrgyz elites tried to gain legitimacy and stability for the newly independent state and therefore promoted ethnocentric nation-building processes. As we pointed out, nations and nationalities are not only political units or concepts, but also ways and systems of representation and mental constructs. These characteristics of representation and construction are pointed out in our results.

We pointed out these characteristics of representation and construction and their traces in Naryn in the results and tried to connect them with the elements of narrating a nation described by Hall. Hall suggests five constructing elements for national identity building: A common pool of shared knowledge and narratives of history (I); followed by an emphasis on origins and traditions (II); the invention of traditions as Hobsbawm notes it (III); the need of a foundational myth (IV); and the idea of a pure and original people rooted in its ancient territories (V). Traces of all of these elements were found during our research in Naryn. A new narrative of history emphasizing pre-Soviet 'Kyrgyzness' was promoted. This reflects an essentialist understanding of nation and constructs an imagination about a primordial Kyrgyz people living in today's Kyrgyz territory since ancient times - this can be seen well in the festivities of "2200 Years of Kyrgyz Nationhood". Symbols, semiotics and traditions that focus on a distinct Kyrgyz culture were promoted in the process of nation-building and can be found in Naryn in many various cases. Especially the Manas-epic, which functions as a foundation myth for the Kyrgyz people, is pivotal for the identity discourse. The epic offers an ideological opportunity for the return of perceived national Kyrgyz traditions and the strengthening of the Kyrgyz language. The perception of Naryn Oblast' as 'the real Kyrgyzstan' is mostly justified by the ethnic homogeneity and widespread usage of the Kyrgyz language. It was claimed that people in Naryn follow Kyrgyz traditions more strictly and additionally, various monuments and historical sites witnessing the Kyrgyz history can be found in Naryn Oblast'. Nonetheless, the significance of the Soviet-past and Islam for the Kyrgyz identity in Naryn should not be ignored. Both aspects, the Soviet-past and the role of Islam, show the hybrid and dynamic character of national identity. Kyrgyz culture is despite all those emphases on Kyrgyz traditions not an enclosed body, but, in contrast, quite successful in integrating other influences as it seems.

To sum it up, many ethnocentric representations of the nation-building process and the narration of the Kyrgyz nation and its history left their traces in Naryn. It should also be mentioned that this ethno-nationalist telling of a Kyrgyz story excludes non-Kyrgyz groups living in the multi-ethnic Kyrgyzstan who make up for more than 30 % of the total population (following the categories introduced by Soviet ethnographers). This is highly problematic: symbolic underrepresentation is closely linked to discrimination and political marginalisation. Ethnic affiliations can be instrumentalized which results in the further acceleration of existing conflicts.

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