

Between Sart, Kalmak and Kyrgyz Identity Dynamics in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This article analyses the internal dynamics of identity in one particular settlement which is scrutinised with regard to the nation-building efforts of the Kyrgyz state. The inhabitants have a number of choices from ethnic concepts for their identification processes, depending on their actual situatedness. Jan Blommaert's approach focusing on "loaded words" and "intertextual asymmetries" has been used as a practical tool to organize the ethnography and to analyse conversations. The article shows how ethnic categories have been understood and used by villagers in everyday life, i.e. on the micro-scale, and how this understanding and usage has been shaped by the macro-scale (Kyrgyzstan). It also shows how identity discourses on the micro-scale may reflect cultural and ethnic notions of larger entities such as nation states.

Keywords

Identity, intertextuality, nationalism, Kalmak/Kalmyk, Kyrgyz, Sart, Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

The people of Chelpek are known as Kalmak or Sart-Kalmak to most of Kyrgyzstan, especially to the Kyrgyz-speaking population. Being a Kalmak or Sart-Kalmak is an ascription for everyone who is connected to this village. The first question asked by taxi drivers on the way from Karakol to Chelpek can thus be about the one's connection to the Kalmak/Sart-Kalmak.

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When a young man from Chelpek is called up for military service, he is first ascribed as a Kalmak. If a young man from elsewhere is going to marry someone from this village, the first note this person would receive from relatives is: “Are you going to marry to a Kalmak?!” There are a number of characteristics a person obtains under this ascription, both positive and negative.

This article presents an anthropological study that focuses on identification processes in Chelpek. Identity discourses in Chelpek will be analysed in order to reveal the contestation of identities shaped by the current nation-building processes in Kyrgyzstan. I examine the horizontal scale of various ethnic concepts that are operating in the village, such as “Sart-Kalmak”, “Kalmak”, and “Kyrgyz”, and show what each of these categories may mean. The questions arising are: When do the references to those categories become “loaded words” and what contexts do they reveal? What does this analysis of local contexts contribute to the understanding of processes within the current nation-building in Kyrgyzstan?

This paper looks at the influences of the current nation-building processes as transported through language, education and national ideology politics, and the nationalising discourses (Brubaker 2011) in Kyrgyzstan on the ethnic majority and minority relations. In examining how these processes are reflected in a particular settlement in northern Kyrgyzstan my focus is on the “nation-as-people” rather than on the “nation-as-state” (Billig 1995: 24). I consider the case of a small group with indistinct boundaries, whose members show a growing tendency to see themselves as part of the Kyrgyz nation.

Starting from an understanding of identity as “the manner in which people locate themselves in a larger social world” (Finke 2014: 234), this article shows how the current nationalising state ideology influences the way in which people locate themselves in a larger social world, the meanings that they retain from the past, and how these operated. It becomes apparent that it is not only the macro level which influences the micro level but also vice versa, i.e. Chelpeki villagers may choose and highlight particular aspects of their ethnic identity at varying points of time. The operation of these ethnic/cultural concepts are analysed at the discursive level, with the intention of showing the different forms of the villagers’ self-imaginings and how they reflect the national imagination (Anderson 1999).

To aid clarity, I have adopted Jan Blommaert’s (2006) theoretical framework for my analysis. Blommaert’s concept of “loaded words” is built on the assumption that “no word can mean the same to everyone” and that different words can “trigger different reactions” in particular contexts, depending on the “histories of evaluation” that allow for the opening of the intertextual asymmetries (Blommaert 2006: 7). The analysis of the meanings

of the ethnic concepts and their semantic fields operating in Chelpek opens up the dimensions of language and religion. These are fields where the identification with the larger groups may be stressed or, vice versa, differentiation may be sought for (Schlee 2004: 137).

The article is based on ethnographic material from my twelve months of field work in 2011–2012. I utilised participant observation and conducted interviews in Kyrgyz and Russian in the settlement of Chelpek and in Karakol and Bishkek. My article is divided into three sections. The first section offers an overview of the context of the study starting from some general comments on the post-Soviet Central Asian region as well as on Kyrgyzstani nation building. The main aim of this section is to set the broader scenario for sketching the macro-scale. Its first subsection introduces briefly the key cultural and ethnic concepts that operate in Chelpek. This is a prerequisite for understanding the identity dynamics of Chelpeki villagers as presented in the second subsection. In the third and fourth sections of this paper two ethnographic vignettes are analysed. The first example shows the process of self-stereotyping of the villagers through their understanding of what is “Kyrgyz” and what is “Kalmak”. The second example shows how religion and language differences have been brought into the process of identification. Further, it illustrates how particular cultural and ethnic differences are understood and applied on the everyday level in Chelpek village, and how they reflect the macro-scales.

Setting the research site and the “object” of study: From national to local scales

Kyrgyzstan is one of five post-Soviet Central Asian republics. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan share pre-Soviet and Soviet history. Their populations are largely Sunni Muslims plus some Christians. The Soviet epoch bound Central Asian countries economically, politically and socially, and together made this region an important part of the Soviet structure: though each country had its specificity in production and industry, it was defined and ruled by the central system in Moscow. These Central Asian states experienced the collapse of the Soviet economic system in 1991 differently, each of the republics going in a different political direction when independence came. Currently they have different levels of development resulting from inherited Soviet infrastructure, political literacy, natural resources, and local cultural characteristics. Nevertheless, they still depend economically and politically on one another despite having been independent for more than two decades.

The internal nation-building processes in Central Asia took different directions, although the nationality policies inherited from the Soviet Union had left primordialised approaches to nationalism with nations and ethnic groups taken for granted as fixed entities. With regard to the nation-building processes in the post-Soviet states as a “nationalising” of the “core” nations after the Soviet era, Brubaker suggests two main tendencies: culturalist and assimilationist versus ethnicist and differentialist. The ethnicist direction of nationalising discourses and policies understands the boundaries between the “core” nation and the minorities as “sharp, socially significant and understood in primordialist and ethnoracial terms as fixed and given” (Brubaker 2011: 1805). This approach can be observed in Kyrgyzstan (e.g. Wilkinson 2014, Gullette / Heathershaw 2015).

The nationalising processes in Kyrgyzstan, in Brubaker’s terminology, are indeed based on the idea of a “core nation”, which is the Kyrgyz, and its claim to a “*primacy*” with an understanding that the state is “*of and for the core nation*”. Further, nationalising discourses “claim that *state action* is needed to strengthen the core nation, to promote its language, cultural flourishing” and “political hegemony” (Brubaker 2011: 1786, italics in original). The nation-building of Kyrgyzstan can be formulated schematically as follows: The Kyrgyz state is the Kyrgyz nation.¹ It is in the process of “filling the national content” with the material that has been perceived as exclusively or purely Kyrgyz, and bringing genealogies and folklore into national discourses.

One of the active processes is bringing the epic poem “Manas” into the national ideology, by making its study obligatory in educational institutions. “Manas” is represented as the longest epic poem in the world. It was transmitted orally over centuries and started to be recorded in the nineteenth century. The core plot is about the Kyrgyz hero Manas who united the Kyrgyz and fought against enemies that are today commonly represented with the single term “Kalmaks”. A number of studies have found different historical layers in the text reflecting many social changes.² Folklore, as a tool of reproduction and transmission of the knowledge of the past, embodies memories of different historical epochs, and often keeps alive

¹ Kyrgyzstan is not unique in this form of nationalising. Brubaker (2011) and Hierman / Nebakhtshoev (2014) give extensive examples of other nationalising processes in post-Soviet space. See also see Gullette / Heathershaw 2015.

² One of the best anthropological studies is the book by Ninke van der Heide (2008). She not only analyses the oral and published versions of the epic but also looks at its role in the politics in Kyrgyzstan. Another topic that cannot be raised here is the way in which “Manas” was constructed as an exclusively Kyrgyz epic poem.

memories of the most challenging events for a particular group of people. Different institutional and political frameworks may select and emphasise particular events and heroes according to the political needs of the time, as is the case with “Manas” in Kyrgyzstan today.

Ethnic concepts and their “textualities”

The main ethnic and cultural concepts central to this study include “Kalmyk”, “Kalmak”, “Sart”, and “Kyrgyz”. All these terms reflect the history of Buddhist Mongol-speaking vs. Muslim Turkic-speaking worlds and nomadic vs. settled ways of life in Central Asia. Here, only the meanings relevant to the study will be considered, as each of these terms has a long history of use and many possible interpretations.

The word “Kalmyk” derives from the Turkic word “Kalmak” (Ochirov 2010: 36).³ The Russian Kalmyks, as the Sart-Kalmaks are commonly referred to, are the descendants of the Western Mongols or Oirats who migrated from Zhungaria into the Russian Volga region in the seventeenth century under the Russian allegiance (Khodarkovsky 2010: 13–14, Ochirov 2010: 37–47). They are Lamaist Buddhists. In the Manas epic mentioned above the Oirats are one of the arch enemies of the Kyrgyz and in the more recent versions of the text they are mainly called “Kalmaks”. According to the epic the chief Kyrgyz hero Manas was killed by the Oirat hero Kongurbay. This is how the last stage of long-existing hostile relations between the Muslim Turkic peoples and Oirats/Kalmyks in Central Asia was reflected in the Manas poem. Its last period is known as the Zhungar invasion when western Oirats or Zhungars invaded territories of modern Kyrgyzstan in the seventeenth and the first half of eighteenth centuries.⁴

The term “Kalmak” in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is related to the memories of the Zhungar invasion. It is also the name of a few Kyrgyz lineages that could be descendants of Oirat captives in the past (Wixman 1984: 90). Both the terms “Kalmak” and “Kalmyk” are in use in Chelpek.⁵

³ There are different versions of the meaning of the word *kalmak*, the most popular being that it derives from a Turkic word for “something that was left”.

⁴ See also Somfai Kara (2010) who analyses the image of Kalmaks as enemies in Kazakh and Kyrgyz epics; and Khodarkovsky (2010: 13–14) on the Oirats’ movements in Central Asia.

⁵ Olga Sukhareva wrote about the differentiated use of “Kalmak” and “Kalmyk” in Bukhara at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. “Kalmak” was the name of an Uzbek lineage that was “fully assimilated [into local culture, today known as Uzbek culture] holding only a memory of their origin in their name”. “Kalmyk” was also understood as a term for people of Mongol origin who “resided originally between Siberia and Kashghar, sandwiched between Altay and the Ili river” (Sukhareva 1966: 134–135).

The first mainly refers to Chelpek's population, the second to the Kalmyk Republic of Russia. In a wider, Kyrgyzstani context, "Kalmak/Kalmyk" in general is depicted as inimical to the Kyrgyz. In fact the media have cast aspersions on the origins of some politicians along these lines (e.g. Asanov 2014).

"Sart" is one of the most complex notions in Central Asia and commonly refers to sedentary Muslim populations such as ancestors of modern Uzbeks and Tajiks (Rezvani 2013: 264).⁶ "The name 'Sarts' was frequently used as a designation of cultural (but not linguistic) features and the way of life of the whole settled population of the Fergana Valley – and always placed in contrast to nomads and semi-nomads" (Abashin 2007: 43–44). Abashin notes that the term "Sart" was "used not so much as a term of self-determination, but more as an outsider designation for a settled population", and that nomads and semi-nomads could use it as a pejorative term towards settled people (ibid.). Nowadays the Kyrgyz people, especially in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan, use the term "Sart" to refer to modern Uzbeks and Uighurs, and even those inhabitants of the southern parts who may identify themselves as Kyrgyz. In its textuality this term comprises references to features that are connected to settled ways of life such as farming and gardening; it can also be related to trading abilities, and to being a "better Muslim". But the term may still be used in a pejorative sense by some Kyrgyzs towards the southern population of the country.

The Sunni Muslim Kyrgyz-speaking (one of the Turkic languages) population that makes up the majority of Kyrgyzstan today is called "Kyrgyz". This is about 70 per cent of the total population according to the 2009 census (Abdykalykov 2010: 91). One of the core uniting elements for the idea of Kyrgyz has always been membership of one of the three main unions (*kanat*, Kyrgyz for "wing") of the lineages (*uruu*) and sub-lineages (*uruk*).⁷ This structure reflected the nomadic administrative and military system that was known by the name "Kyrgyz", which united Kyrgyz and Mongol tribes in the territory of the Tien Shan at the turn of the sixteenth century (Voropaeva et al. 2005: 68).⁸ Genealogies or the tradition of *zheti ata* ("seven

⁶ A literal meaning of this word is not agreed on. A comprehensive study of the meanings and history of the word *sart* is given by Alikhan Aman (2013).

⁷ In literature there are three terms – clan, tribe, and lineage – that have been used interchangeably for studying "kinship based divisions" (Schatz 2004: xxii). I prefer to use "lineage" and "sub-lineage" instead of the two other terms.

⁸ Memories of Mongol roots of the lineages can be forgotten, avoided or highlighted depending on the specific and changing context. Sart-Kalmaks are not included yet in these three main lineage branches, maybe because they came much later to the current territory.

fathers”) requires every Kyrgyz man (as the Kyrgyz is a patrilineal society) to know his seven forefathers (generations). This tradition is widely promoted as one of the core markers of defining “Kyrgyz”. With this tool a linkage can be made with the main three “Kyrgyz” lineage unions and a connection or membership of the Kyrgyz nation can be asserted. Thus, Kyrgyz can be called “the genealogically imagined community” (Gullette 2010: 4).

Identity dynamics in Chelpek⁹

Publications on minorities of Central Asia mainly focus on how differences amongst the minority groups are manifested in their search for political recognition and economic status, assuming changes in their relative status after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Another range of literature focuses on historical or ethnographic descriptions of various “salient” minorities (see e.g. Khan / Sim 2014).

The Sart-Kalmaks’ struggle is about “survival” identity politics (Diamond 2012), given the growing tendency towards becoming part of the larger entity, namely the Kyrgyz. There is a salient minority group in Kyrgyzstan – the Uzbeks – with which Sart-Kalmaks may be compared. It should be stated here that along with the influence of a nationalising political framework there are other important factors. One such factor is the size of a group: according to the census 2009 Uzbeks make up 14.3 per cent of the population of Kyrgyzstan (Abdykalykov 2010: 91). To speak about number of Sart-Kalmaks is a problematic issue because of multiple options associated with the idea of Sart-Kalmak. In the official censuses the number of “Kalmyks” is given as 0.08 per cent in the list of nationalities of Kyrgyzstan and this largely refers to the population of Chelpek (ibid.). Another factor is the existence of a state in which an ethnic group can constitute a majority: there is Uzbekistan to which the Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks can refer with different degrees of attachment, but the Sart-Kalmaks cannot refer themselves to any other state so unequivocally, although they have been commonly referred to as the Russian Kalmyks. Thus Sart-Kalmaks are not a “large, alienated, and putatively dangerous national minority”; they have no clear “neighbouring ethnonational kin” or “patron states” across the border (Brubaker 2011: 1786). Despite the long-term contestation of their ethnic boundaries nowadays the majority of Sart-Kalmaks see their future in Kyrgyzstan as being part of the Kyrgyz.

⁹ This section overlaps with my paper: Aida Alymbaeva (2014): Mezhdú “sartom” i “kal-makom”: politika identichnosti v Kyrgyzstane. *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4, pp. 45–55.

¹⁰ See e.g. Alles 2005, Kosmarskaya 2006, Fumagalli 2007, Peyrouse 2007, Tovar 2014.

The “Kyrgyz majority” could be represented by the Kyrgyz from neighbouring villages of Chelpek, whom I met in various situations, as well as by larger institutional actors, language policy makers, the media, the Kyrgyz state with its nationalising ideology, a crucial element of which is embedding the epic poem “Manas”. This epic at present represents the (self-constructed) opposition of the “Kyrgyz” and the “Kalmak” worlds. In addition to home-made minoritisations and majoritisations, visits from “outside” by folklorists, sociologists, journalists etc. from Kalmykia and Buryatia of the Russian Federation, and Mongolia nurture the perception of ethnic diversity. These visitors regularly poke Chelpek with their visits in search of the remains of Kalmakness. Along with Kyrgyz scholars and journalists, I have also taken part in poking the people of Chelpek into revealing their “Kalmakness”.

The Chelpek settlement is located near the town of Karakol on the east shore of the Yssyk-Kul Lake in Kyrgyzstan. It is an administrative unit of three villages, namely Tash-Kyia in the east, Chelpek at the center, and Burma-Suu in the west. The territory of each of the villages has grown extensively during the last few decades, so an outsider would not be able to distinguish the borders between them. Furthermore, the settlement’s eastern edge has almost merged with Karakol, with the unmarked boundary between Chelpek and Karakol hard to identify.

Chelpek is known as a settlement of Kalmaks or Sart-Kalmaks. At least in the Kyrgyz-speaking population there, “Kalmak” and “Sart-Kalmak” as ethnic categories have been generally adopted into the everyday language of the villagers.¹¹ Outsiders usually refer to this community simply as the Kalmaks, but in some contexts as Sart-Kalmaks. In general, I use the term “Sart-Kalmak” when writing about the Chelpek community, as it is used by informants and is established in the literature. In some cases I have to use both terms with a slash in between, when both “Kalmak” and “Sart-Kalmak” may interplay and cannot be clearly separated.

Both of the categories mentioned above are in active use in Chelpek, sometimes with overlapping and sometimes with contrastive meanings. With regard to data collected in the field, the concepts of “Kalmyk”, “Kalmak” and “Sart-Kalmak” overlapped most of the time and referred to a group of Western Mongol or Oirat origin that migrated from the territory of modern

¹¹ There is another village Bōrū-Bash in the area that is also known as a Sart-Kalmak village. Since my field work was done only in Chelpek I am only writing about this settlement.

Xinjiang, particularly from the Tekes area, approximately in the 1880s.¹² These terms are mainly used to refer to Chelpek inhabitants.

The majority of publications¹³ specify this village as Kalmak/Sart-Kalmak. Censuses contain the entry “Kalmyks” in the list of ethnic groups. In the first Soviet census of 1926 “Sart-Kalmyks” appeared on the list. However, by the second census, in 1937, the prefix “Sart” had disappeared, leaving only the term “Kalmyks”. There was no information on how many of the people who came and settled near Karakol were known as Sart-Kalmaks. In one folder in the Kyrgyz State Archive dated 1918 there is a list of voters from Sart-Kalmak *aul* (“village”) with 1,255 names in (CSA 1918). The local village administration informed me in 2012 that there were about 7,700 inhabitants in Chelpek. There are more than ten lineages in Chelpek. The two biggest – Baiyn-Bakhy and Kara-Batyr – are considered to be Sart-Kalmak in origin. Others, including Solto and Zhediger, are known to be Kyrgyz, thus their representatives can claim their Kyrgyzness according to the Kyrgyz genealogical structure mentioned above.

Being a Kalmak/Sart-Kalmak is an ascription for everyone who is connected to this village and Chelpek inhabitants themselves are used to this appellation. Many of Chelpek’s inhabitants could say they either were Kalmaks, or Sart-Kalmaks, and/or Kyrgyz depending on the context. The huge number of intermarriages of Chelpeki villagers with the Kyrgyz is one of the main factors for a diffusion of the “Kalmak” identity.

However, villagers represent their village publicly as a Kyrgyz village by wearing Kyrgyz national costumes during official events such as the celebration of the 20th Kyrgyz Independence Day on 28 August 2011 at the district level. The main language spoken in the village is Kyrgyz. Many speak Russian, and just a few elders have retained some Kalmyk. Some elderly women told me, however that when they married Chelpek men years ago, many people still spoke Kalmyk. Some others recalled how they had used Kalmyk language as a secret language some decades ago. People perceive a Kalmak accent (which will be considered later in this article) that they attribute to Chelpek villagers to distinguish them from outsiders in the

¹² See Burdukov 1935, Tolstov 1963, Zhukovskaia 1980, Reshetov 1983, Bekmakhanova 2010, Nanzatov / Sodnompilova 2012. Anvar Mokeev (2013) expressed another hypothesis for the ethnic roots of Sart-Kalmaks linking these to the Muslim agricultural local group of Xinjiang, but not the Oirats, back to the seventeenth century.

¹³ See, for example, Burdukov 1935, Alymbaeva 1966, Zhukovskaya 1980, Lidzhiev 2008, Nanzatov / Sodnompilova 2012 or Mokeev 2013.

Karakol area. This fact together with the memory of the Kalmyk past and published academic works were the resources for claiming Kalmakness by the villagers themselves and by outsiders towards the villagers.

FIGURE 1: Chelpeki villagers celebrating the 20th anniversary of Kyrgyzstan's Independence, 28 August 2011, Ak-Suu district, Kyrgyzstan



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The passport system has been inherited from the Soviet era and each individual had to choose one “nationality” of a father or a mother to be registered.¹⁴ The majority of Chelpek inhabitants registered themselves as Kyrgyz in their passports.¹⁵ They explained their choice with reference to

¹⁴ Mervyn Matthews's book (1993) is an extensive and exciting study of the development of the institution of the passport that was used in the Soviet Union. It shows the Soviet “strictness” towards the changing of the nationality of a citizen. Albert Baiburing (2012) gives an interesting analysis of the introduction of the Soviet system of passports and its ritualization to show the significance that the passport gained during the Soviet time for the citizens. Moreover, he also mentions how the post-Soviet states inherited the Soviet system of passports along with each of the entries that include (ethnic) nationality.

¹⁵ Kyrgyzstan's internal Identification Card has a “nationality” entry among the other identification marks.

difficulties in gaining access to higher education and better jobs if they had a “Kalmak” entry in their passports.

Thus, Chelpek is a place where different ethnic concepts are in active use. What appears to be a conglomeration of ethnic categories breaks down in different situations into different and varying usage of the terms. In the next two sections I analyse two conversations of people from Chelpek using Blommaert’s approach. This is to show how local differences, many of which are imagined, are used in practice, or how the ethnic concepts work.

Ethnographic example I: Cultural (self-)stereotyping

On a day in August 2011 when Chelpek was still a new place for me, my first host Marat gave me a panoramic guided tour through the settlement on his old, Soviet style car.¹⁶ Marat had shown me the main part of the settlement and on the way to the other side towards the mountains of the south east we picked up his wife Gulipa and their grandchildren, two little girls who were visiting at the time.

Marat took us into the wooded foothills, to visit a forester in his very old and run-down wooden house. A huge satellite dish stood out with its metallic glimmer in the back yard. Two women, a mother and a daughter with her little son, met us. They offered us a cup of black tea which was served on a low table in the old open terrace that is typical of Central Asia. There was also homemade bread and sugar, laid out on much-worn plates and dishes. After Marat and Gulipa had a brief conversation with the women whom they had known for years, we left the house.

Travelling on in the car we had a conversation with Gulipa. She talked about these two women, indicating that they were lazy, did not work and only sat at home watching TV all day. She identified them as ethnically Kyrgyz. She concluded that, “Kyrgyz are lazy people; they live for the day”.¹⁷ One of the granddaughters, a six-year-old girl, who had not seemed to be paying attention to our talk while looking at the passing landscape through the car window, suddenly asked, “Grandpa, why does grandma call the Kyrgyz people lazy? She herself is not a lazy one, right? She maintains her vegetable garden quite well.”¹⁸ Marat laughed and replied, “Your grandma has

¹⁶ Names of all my informants have been changed in the text to maintain confidentiality.

¹⁷ Kyrg.: *Kyrgyzdar zhalkoo, bir künü menen zhashap atyshat.*

¹⁸ Kyrg.: *Ata, emnege ene kyrgyzdardy zhalko dep atat? Ene özü zhalkoo emes go? Ogorodu zhakshy.*

become a Kalmak living with me, unless she turned back into a Kyrgyz.”¹⁹ Gulipa smiled in return at this joke.

In this small scene the word “lazy” was key. In Blommaert’s language, it is a “loaded word” that revealed the intertextual asymmetry in which the two concepts “Kalmak” and “Kyrgyz” had been compared. Yet, what did this word particularly reveal in the context of Chelpek? To answer this question, I need to give more details about the couple and the imaginative ideas that arose in dialogues that are also common in the village. To facilitate understanding I will repeat the exchange here in dialogue form:

- Gulipa: The Kyrgyz are *lazy* people; they live for the day.
 Granddaughter: Grandpa, why does grandma call the Kyrgyz people lazy? She herself is not a lazy one, right? She *maintains* her vegetable *garden* quite well.
 Marat: Your grandma has become a *Kalmak* living with me, unless she turned back into a *Kyrgyz*.

The first sentence was expressed by Gulipa, a woman in her fifties, who was originally from a Kyrgyz village and considered herself to be a Kyrgyz. She was thinking out loud about Kyrgyz people, whom she identified herself with and she believed that she had the right to be critical towards her own community – “ourselves”, as she called it. The main point of her critique was the idea of being lazy and spending time improvidently in life.

The little girl brought another dimension to the idea of laziness by sharpening its linkage to the ideas of ethnicity, in this case “Kyrgyz”. This was a “jump” from the imagination of ethnic difference to the scale of everyday life: the idea of being lazy (Kyrg. *zhalkoo*), and in opposition to it that of being hard-working or diligent (Kyrg. *emgekchil*), which was in turn understood through its practical connection with gardening. Good care of gardens, the household plots, called *orogod* (a Russian word used in Kyrgyz), which were used to plant vegetables and fruit trees, as I learned later, was one of the characteristics contributing to the idea of diligence for Chelpek villagers. This idea was widely expressed both by insiders as well as by those who were outsiders to the village. It figured as a part of an imaginary of the “Kalmaks” as people who work hard in their gardens. The girl asked her grandfather, who directly or indirectly had provided the children with those ideas of good gardening in connection with the imaginary of “Kalmaks”.

The joking answer of the grandfather Marat opened up the idea of laziness/diligence within the ethnic imaginative scale itself by highlighting its opposite. With his teasing Marat claimed that his wife, ethnically Kyrgyz,

¹⁹ Kyrg.: *Enenger meni menen kalmak bolup kalgan, azyr kaira kyrgyz bolup kalbasa.*

through living with him, a Kalmak, had learned to be more hard-working and therefore had become “a Kalmak”.

Marat was in his sixties. He was born in Chelpek and he belonged to the Baiyn-Bakhy lineage – one of those regarded as Kalmak (or Sart-Kalmak, depending on the situation) in Chelpek. In his opinion, Kalmaks are hard-working and this is evidenced in their vegetable gardens. Imagination of the construct of “hard-working” in Chelpek includes not only garden care, but also diligence in other spheres of life such as cleaning, cooking, cultivating land and breeding cattle. In addition to this, in most of the conversations with me Marat reiterated his Kalmakness, by telling me how Kalmaks were punctual and precise in comparison to the Kyrgyz people.

The above exchange in Marat’s car is an illustrative one as it was not addressed directly towards me, someone from the outside, but towards his wife, whom he teased in this instance. This dialogue showed one of the ways in which the ideas of Kalmakness that Marat had been expressing during the past few days work in a very brief conversation that occurred in a routine context in Chelpek. I heard such dialogues repeatedly in varying situations and conversations during my year of fieldwork. However, there was considerable difference in the degree to which the stereotypes were delineated, some sharply, some less so.

This conversation also shows how children in a family learn to use ethnic and cultural categories, in this case – Kalmak and Kyrgyz in order to classify people according to already existing stereotypes in the village. Furthermore, the children had learned, internalized and repeated by themselves the different characteristics that their grandparents attributed to members of the two categories – “lazy Kyrgyz” and “diligent Kalmaks”.

The above example shows the linkages or “jumps” that have been made between the scales of everyday practices (garden care) that are normally associated with the “Sarts” and an ethnic imagination of a personality trait that a certain ethnic group may have. In the system of Chelpek stereotypes, being Sart, with the attributes of being settled (and thus involved in farming and diligent garden care) is placed in contrast to being Kalmak and Kyrgyz i.e. originally nomadic (with the attributes of improvidence and laziness). At the same time, a contrast is made between diligence (Kalmak) and laziness (Kyrgyz). Thus several pairs of contrasts, at time mutually inconsistent, appear to be operating. The “loaded words” such as “lazy” and “diligent” are parts of binary stereotypical characteristics and their corresponding concepts.

Ethnographic example II: Involving language and religion

This example is from a feast that followed a marriage in Chelpek. I accompanied my neighbour to the feast on a cold day in November 2011. This was the first day after the groom brought his bride to his house. As is usually the case in Kyrgyz villages, relatives and neighbours came to the house turn by turn, one wave after another, so that the house was never empty. Such feasts can continue for several days until the final wave of guests has left. During the feasting the tablecloth called *dastorkon* is normally laid out on the floors (or tables, if there are any).²⁰ When I entered the groom's house, we were invited into the biggest room which was half-full of guests. We sat on the side left of the entrance, where the women took their places. The other side was reserved for men, despite their absence from the room at that moment. I was introduced by my neighbour as the one who had come to the village "to write the history of Sart-Kalmaks". I was usually perceived by the villagers in this manner. Some of the women in the room had heard about me and I had already met some of them before while conducting interviews in the village.

A woman next to me said: "We have become almost Kyrgyz."²¹ The women started talking, repeating, interrupting and shouting each other down: "Yes, there is nothing Kalmak left. [...] We are almost Kyrgyz."²² One middle-aged woman said: "We have our Kalmyk language."²³ There was an old lady, sitting queen-like in a place of honour in the room. I was told she was in her early nineties and was the oldest in the lineage of the host. As the oldest and most respected person, she was invited to every festivity within the lineage. The old woman interrupted the voices unexpectedly loudly: "We have become almost Kyrgyz. I am the only one who speaks Kalmyk, no one else [...] none of them speaks Kalmyk, we speak the Kyrgyz language."²⁴ When I started telling them about my visit to Elista, the central city of the Republic of Kalmykia in Russia, where I took part in a conference, I was interrupted and told not to mix things up as those Kalmaks were

²⁰ Usually a tablecloth on a floor helps accommodate the maximum number of guests. During first days of the feast there can be several rooms to provide for guests.

²¹ Kyrg.: *Biz Kyrgyz ele bolup kaldyk.*

²² Kyrg.: *Ooba, ech nerse Kalmakcha kalgan zhok [...] Kyrgyz ele bolup kaldyk.*

²³ Kyrg.: *Kalmak tilibiz bar.*

²⁴ Kyrg.: *Biz Kyrgyz ele bolup kaldyk. Men ele kalmakcha suiloim, kalgandar ech kim [...] mobular bilbeit, kyrgyzcha ele suilop kaldyk.*

different from themselves as Kalmaks.²⁵ And the old woman said: “The Kalmaks are divided into two groups. Some are pork-eating Kalmaks, and some – like us – are lamb-eating Kalmaks.”²⁶

Here is the whole conversation in dialogue form in order to show the jumps and asymmetries opened up:

Woman 1: We have become *almost* Kyrgyz.

Woman 2: Yes, there is *nothing* Kalmak left. [...] We are almost Kyrgyz.

Woman 3: We have *our* Kalmak *language*.

Old woman: We have become almost Kyrgyz. I am the *only one* who speaks Kalmyk, no one else [...] none of them speak Kalmyk, we speak the Kyrgyz language.

Me: (talking about my visit to Elista).

Women: Hey, do not mix us up with *those* Kalmaks. [...] They are *different*, we are different Kalmaks.

Old woman: The Kalmaks are divided into two groups. Some are *pork*-eating Kalmaks, and some – like us – are *lamb*-eating Kalmaks.

In the first sentence of the original version the Kyrgyz grammatical particle *ele* meant something that was not yet complete, but this can not be translated directly. Therefore, I have used an English adverb to indicate a degree, i.e. “almost”. This word *ele* or “almost” in the first sentence introduced the typical, i.e. the most pronounced, collective expression of identity in Chelpek I heard during my fieldwork. It showed that there is a strong tendency towards identification with Kyrgyz and at the same time the preservation of a little gap that is “still there” before the people of the village become “fully” identified as Kyrgyz. This little gap is an indication of a transition that is not yet complete, and it is evidence of “the Sart-Kalmaks” remembrance of their differences which set them apart from others. At the same time, they are being drawn into becoming “Kyrgyz” by the institutions at higher and wider scales mentioned earlier in this paper.

The second sentence with an index of “nothing Kalmak left” supported the previous context of the tendency towards Kyrgyzness, stressing it even further. Yet, the following third sentence suddenly “jumped” to language as a scale for marking difference. The next, fourth sentence of the old woman

²⁵ Kyrg.: *Hey, sen bizdi al kalmaktar menen koshpo, alar bachka, biz bashka kalmaktarbyz.* (“Hey, do not mix us up with those Kalmaks. [...] They are different, we are different Kalmaks.”)

²⁶ Kyrg.: *Kalmaktar bolso ekige bölünöt eken, biröölör chochko-kalmaktar, biröölör koi etin zhegen kalmaktar, al bizbiz.*

strengthened the assertion of Kyrgyzzness and opened the linguistic context. All Chelpek villagers speak the Kyrgyz language and many of them speak Russian as well. During my stay in the village, I met a few older people such as the old lady from the feast, who have kept some use of the Kalmyk language, although I did not hear how she could speak it. The idea of the Kalmyk language serves as one of the key distinction markers that is mainly imagined based on remembrance. There are two schools in the village, one of which employs the Kyrgyz language as a medium of instruction and another that uses both Russian and Kyrgyz languages for teaching. In Chelpek, Kyrgyz is the language of everyday life at all the levels, from the family up to the local administration.

At the same time, in the context of Chelpek and its neighbourhood, the idea of the Kalmyk “accent” is strong and widely used by the villagers and outsiders. There is a specific articulation of the [k] sound when speaking in Kyrgyz. In this part of northern Kyrgyzstan, the voiceless consonant [k] in the Kyrgyz language is normally vocalised to [g], especially at the beginning of words. For example, *kelin* (“daughter-in-law”) is normally articulated as “gelin” by the northern Kyrgyz. Chelpeki villagers, however, pronounce a clear voiceless [k], exactly like the officially accepted written versions of such words as *kelin*. They argue that their pronunciation is the really correct one, according to the official spelling. Many of my interlocutors in Chelpek, as well as many from its surroundings, told me that they have usually been recognised by their “accent”. Despite the absence of any direct linkages, this articulative peculiarity has come to be attached to the Kalmyk language and is seen as a feature indicating the Kalmakness of Chelpek villagers.

The old woman concluded her fourth sentence by returning to the Kyrgyz language as the main if not the only language of communication in the village. The linkage to Kyrgyzzness was made implicitly, supporting again the first assertion.

The fifth line in the dialog, as indicated, was mine, when I started telling the women about my visit to Elista in September 2011. It opened up the linkage with the larger scale of Kalmakness – the Kalmykness related to the Russian Buddhist Kalmyks and memories of the Oirat/Zhunars.

Thus Chelpeki villagers are commonly associated with the Kalmyks by themselves and by others as well. But there is a common understanding among the villagers to distinguish themselves from the Russian Kalmyks on the grounds of religion. Therefore, the sixth and seventh lines of the given conversation did not support the “jump” into the Kalmykness or to “those Kalmaks”. The last, seventh sentence of the old woman clarified the comparative scale that separates different Kalmyks from one another, the main index of which is food preference and religion. The “other” or “those” Kal-

maks, or Kalmyks, were seen as different because they eat pork. The Kalmaks of Chelpek do not eat pork, but they eat mutton, because they are Muslim.²⁷ Religion, expressed in terms of meat preferences, was a key element differentiating the Russian Kalmyks, according to each of my interlocutors in Chelpek.

The “jump” to a religious context offers a perspective for understanding the category “Sart” by the villagers. Commonly, the villagers across age and gender understand a “Sart” as a Muslim and a nomadic trader. Memories of the past in Chelpek reproduced the story of two men from somewhere in Namangan (of Fergana Valley). They were supposedly Sarts and nomadic traders who had lived for a long time among the Buddhist Kalmyks in Tekes of Xinjiang and married Kalmyk women there. These two men together with two “Kyrgyz” men became progenitors of Sart-Kalmaks according to this narrative, gathering Muslims of other origins around themselves and becoming settled. This version was recorded in Chelpek in 1929 and later published by Aleksey Burdukov (Burdukov 1935). It was later “confirmed” by local enthusiast Bektur Mansurov, who initiated the recording and publishing of memories of an old woman who migrated from Tekes at the end of the nineteenth century (Egemberdiev / Mansurov 2006).

Conclusion

The two examples discussed above show the meanings and contexts behind different words in particular situations in Chelpek. The boundaries of the different ethnic concepts are indistinct, the meanings associated with them widely penetrate and play out at the everyday level, and they largely reside in people’s minds as imaginations. Switching from one identity to another happens frequently during a single conversation. Both cases illustrate how local identity politics are expressed in the particular village of Chelpek. Current nationalising ideology influence the identity politics of this small group with indistinct boundaries. The case of Sart-Kalmaks shows that ethnicist/differentialist discourses tend to conflate otherwise distinct categories such as “nation-as-(Kyrgyz-)people”. However, the large number of marriages of the Kyrgyz with Chelpek people and the absence of particular national policies towards Sart-Kalmaks show a more assimilationist and inclusionist tendency of the “nation-as-state”. This is also because the Sart-

²⁷ Many of the villagers, especially those who grew up during the Soviet era, may eat some pork contained in sausages from the market. However, I personally did not encounter pork on the table in Chelpek during my fieldwork.

Kalmaks are not an issue of “urgency” on the nationalising Kyrgyz agenda. One of the institutional frameworks that historically shaped their destiny was accommodating and being accommodated within the wider Kyrgyz culture. During the past century and over the last decades, Chelpek inhabitants’ interactions with ethnic categories have been mediated by and have been transformed by the wider institutional frameworks that play out on multiple levels from the macro to the micro level and which have encouraged assimilation within the broadly defined Kyrgyz culture. The Soviet and post-Soviet nationalities and language policies, making education available only in Kyrgyz, and later in Russian, led to Kyrgyz – and Russian to a lesser extent – now being the language of everyday formal and informal interaction. The reproduction of the Kalmak (Kalmyk) language is in the process of vanishing. However, the use of the memory of the Kalmyk language is still there as one of the core elements of Kalmak identity.

The borders of the Sart-Kalmak are ambiguous and contested by themselves and by outsiders. The ideas of being Sart-Kalmak can come together at the lineage or family level. What makes this case special is that those who could be subsumed under this term or definition will still doubt its validity. Against the current cultural and historical, political and economic background in Kyrgyzstan, identity issues are complex because they link some contradictory but at the same time constitutive ethnic concepts. Different pasts and stereotypes can be activated depending on the situation and perception of the actors. The concepts are called the “Kalmak”, “Kalmyk”, “Sart”, and “Kyrgyz”. The play with them may be activated at the local level of the village and its surroundings, but also at the level of the current (and still indistinct, still shifting) national idea.

Blommaert’s approach can be helpful in systematising and clearing paths through the density of intertextualities that underlie “loaded words”. It is particularly useful for the analysis of rich and complex material, and it offers a solution to a methodological dilemma, namely, dealing with issues of translating culture and putting diverse ethnographic data and their explanation into a comprehensible text.

The Kyrgyz word *ele* meaning “almost” from the second example opened up the common perception of the villagers themselves as being no longer Kalmak/Kalmyk but not yet Kyrgyz. This is about being in-between: between the ethnic concepts and between minority and majority status. This little gap called “almost”, as I showed, is still there as an indication of an ongoing transition.

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