

Chapter I

Anthropology Goes “Native”

If I am in a foreign country, I introduce myself simply saying that I am Elmira, a Kyrgyz from Kyrgyzstan. If a Kyrgyz inquires about my identity, I say that I am from the Aksı region. The Kyrgyz will ascertain that I belong to the Saruu.¹ Within the Saruu, I belong to the Ogotur (<Okatar) or ‘hunter’ uruk, clan.²

Until a few decades ago, the practice of ethnography was primarily the task of western anthropologists from the former colonial powers. Today however, many “native” or “indigenous” researchers and intellectuals in the formerly colonized regions of the world have entered the academic space, studying their own culture and writing in their native language for their people. Since anthropology was founded as an academic discipline in the West, western theories and methodologies still dominate anthropological scholarship and fieldwork. This draws native anthropologists to western institutions, where they receive academic training. They then conduct their fieldwork in their own cultures, using western fieldwork methodologies and pursuing their scholarship in English or other major European languages, reaching wider, international audiences. This is changing the face of anthropology. Japanese anthropologist Takami Kuwayama³ also notes that while in the past, “natives were merely objects of representation, today, they not only read outsiders’ ethnography written about their culture, but also protest against it, if

¹ *Saruu* is one of the major tribes which belong to the *Sol* (Left) division, one of the major three (*Ong*, *Sol*, *Ichkilik*) Kyrgyz tribal divisions. The region of Aksı is mostly populated by the *Saruu* Kyrgyz.

² In English and in popular western view, the words “tribe” and “clan” have negative connotations implying primitive, whereas, in Kyrgyz, they carry a positive meaning which gives people a sense of pride in having a clear family history or ancestral genealogy and personal identity.

³ Like me, he lived and studied in the United States for many years and upon finishing his PhD, returned to his home country Japan where he teaches at Hokkaido University.

objectionable...” The growing influence of native anthropologists is forcing western researchers to negotiate with their native colleagues as “professional others.”⁴

One result of this anthropological globalization is the development of terminology to establish and clarify the status and identity of anthropologists. For foreign anthropologists studying other cultures, these include - *outsider*, *foreign* and *western*; *native*, *indigenous* for those who study their own cultures; and the more complex - *halfie* or *hybrid*⁵—for anthropologists who are born into migrant families, receive their academic education in the West, and return to their ancestral homeland to study their historical roots, people, and culture.

The increased presence of non-western anthropologists has also opened up a dialogue of various viewpoints by people within the field of anthropology. Some Western *outsiders* cling to traditional western paradigms of anthropological practice; others have adapted their approaches. Many *native* scholars question and challenge western approaches and methodologies applied to non-western cultures and societies. *Halfies* or *hybrids* bring unique blends of perspectives to the field. There are disagreements not only *between* the groups, but also *within* groups, as to whose practice of anthropology is more valuable.

Terms such as *natives*, *fieldwork* and *informant* reflect the colonial roots of the field. Most non-western anthropologists resist using the term *native* to identify themselves professionally, claiming it is a “synonym for primitive.” That reflects the “unequal relationship between the colonizer/civilized and the colonized/primitive.”

⁴ Kuwayama, Takami. *Native Anthropology. The Japanese Challenge to Western Academic Hegemony*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004, pp. 37-38.

⁵ Abu-Lughod, Lila, “Writing Against Culture” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Richard Fox, ed. Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991.

Moreover, the double standard, or use of the term *insider* research to describe work by anthropologists who study their own cultures in the West, and *native* or *indigenous* to describe work by non-western researchers studying their cultures also indicates Western academic hegemony. Interestingly, while Kuwayama suggests using a more neutral term like *local* which “conceals important power differences,” he himself deliberately uses *native*, explaining that: “First, the term native testifies to the “colonial roots” of anthropology. Second, it draws attention to the “intrusion” into the academic space of former colonial powers by their subjects. And third, this intrusion signals the radical change taking place in the structure of anthropological knowledge.”⁶

Since anthropology was developed as the study of ‘primitive’ societies, the term ‘native’ tends to refer to people in places far removed from the metropolitan centers of the West.”⁷ The definition of ‘native anthropologists,’ is said to be more complex. Kuwayama asserts that the concept of native anthropologist is “fluid” or “relational” based on the social context and geographic location of the researcher:

At the most fundamental level, these [natives] are anthropologists who belong to the research community by birth. However, professionally trained researchers are seldom found in the small communities anthropologists have traditionally studied. They ordinarily live outside immediate research community, and many of them work at educational institutions in the cities. Local anthropologists are, therefore, native only in a secondary sense of the word. Yet, they are part of the larger society under observation, and have common interests with the people being studied. ...Japanese anthropologists from the cities studying rural communities in Japan are outsiders and non-native to the community they research. They may, however, be considered insiders and native in relation to foreign anthropologists studying Japan...⁸

⁶ Kuwayama, Takami, p. 21.

⁷ Op.cit.

⁸ Op.cit

In my view, *native* is no longer an appropriate term in the modern or postcolonial context. Instead, *insider* should be used for *all* researchers, anthropologists and ethnographers who study their own societies and cultures.

Traditional fieldwork requires the “physical displacement of a fieldworker.”⁹ Traditional fieldwork is still carried out, largely by anthropologists from the West, in non-western societies and cultures, because “... fieldwork conducted among ‘exotic’ natives in faraway lands has been, and still is, considered more authentic than fieldwork at home.”¹⁰ The term *fieldwork* reflects a colonialist mentality and attitude towards colonized peoples and their lands. I find the term obsolete, and disrespectful of peoples and cultures. For me the word “field” connotes an image of a wild and uninhabited place, implying the study of nature rather than people. In anthropology, there is no logical connection between the term and the actual activity that a researcher undertakes. In the early colonial period, westerners imagined themselves as civilized people going out to remote “fields” and studying the “savages.”¹¹ Anthropologists should come up with a term that is more respectful of the human beings and places they study.

The term *informant* is widely used in cultural anthropology and social sciences, and also reflects the unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched, as well as between outsider and insider researchers and scholars. For me, the term has negative

⁹ Alan, Barnard. *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 3.

¹⁰ Kuwayama, p. 21.

¹¹ Clifford Geertz. *Works and Lives. The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1922; Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer. A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford University Press, 1969. Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person. Essays on Tallensi Religion*. Cambridge University Press, 1987. Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.

connotation, suggesting that those who share their knowledge with the researcher are spies or agents who provide secret information for the researcher's benefit. By definition, an *informant* is "a person who gives information or one who supplies cultural or linguistic data in response to interrogation by an investigator."¹² Local translators, consultants, or assistants, who are usually paid by the researcher for their work, are also considered informants. In the classical, colonialist model, Western scholars often considered native intellectuals as "knowledgeable informants," rather than equal research partners, who provide raw and unprocessed material. It is argued that Western researchers "monopolize the rights to interpret the information provided by their 'informants.'"¹³ In Kuwayama view, problems arise when western anthropologists "assume the superiority of their research skills and excellence of their interpretations while neglecting native reactions"....and he believes that the discipline of anthropology will advance only when western scholars are willing to accept natives as "dialogic partners".¹⁴ Today, that old, asymmetric, colonialist model has changed and does not entirely reflect the current reality. In the past, as founders and inheritors of anthropology, western anthropologists have always enjoyed certain level of privilege in the academic discourse. Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith critiques dominant research methodologies and approaches to indigenous cultures, and proposes an alternative research agenda for indigenous scholars. She argues that Western education inhibits these scholars from writing from an indigenous point of view. If they do, they are criticized as

¹²Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary: <http://mw1.m-w.com/dictionary/informant>

¹³ Kuwayama, p. 13.

¹⁴ Kuwayama, p. 14.

being “naïve,” “contradictory,” and “illogical.”¹⁵ According to Stevan Harrell, “Most Western anthropologists have a hard time wrestling with certain views that come entirely out of local traditions. I think the real difficulties come when native scholars assert that, for example, their people emerged from the earth a few generations ago.”¹⁶ In Kuwayama’s view, this is due to the power inequality in the ‘academic world system,’ rather than the poor quality of “native discourse.”¹⁷ Kuwayama uses Thomas Gerholm’s theory on world systems which describing the asymmetrical relationship between core and periphery, likening it to the relationship between the mainland and remote islands:

Every academic field constitutes a ‘world system’. This system consists of two major groups of countries or regions: the core (center) and the ‘periphery’ (margin). ... In anthropology, the US, Great Britain, and to a lesser extent France together constitute the core.... People on the mainland can go through their life oblivious of what happens on the remote islands, but the opposite is hardly true. Similarly, scholars in the center can safely ignore their counterparts in the periphery without risking their career, whereas the latter will be labeled ‘ignorant’ or even ‘backward’ if they are unfamiliar with the former’s research. This asymmetrical relationship shows that the core has the power to dictate the dominant modes of academic discourse. The periphery is forced to accept them, for example by adopting the central scholars’ theories, methods, and writing styles, if it wishes to be recognized internationally. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for scholars in the periphery to speak as equals with those at the center.¹⁸

I received my academic training in the United States. In researching my Kyrgyz culture, I often struggle to think and write in English and fully conform to western academic standards. I tend to hesitate in expressing my genuine feelings on Kyrgyz culture when I write for or speak to western colleagues and audiences. Kuwayama notes, “native

¹⁵ Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London; New York: Zed Books Press; Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999, p. 14.

¹⁶ Written comment from Stevan Harrell, Anthropologist at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA.

¹⁷ Kuwayama, p. 9.

¹⁸ Op.cit.

discourse tends to be seen as ‘propaganda’ promoting a particular political position. This perception keeps natives outside the respectable academic community.”¹⁹ If non-western researchers are to enjoy a successful international career, they must study in one of the core Western countries.²⁰ Non-western intellectuals often focus on their own traditions. This is often interpreted by western anthropologists as evidence of nationalism or propaganda or the “propaganda mission of showing their culture to the world, and as such (native anthropologists) are much more interested in showing off their epics than their systems of marriage relations.”²¹ This can result in different research agendas for western and non-western researchers. For example, while subjects that reflect positive aspects of social and cultural traditions, such as the epic *Manas*, traditional music, and nomadic heritage are commonly studied by Kyrgyz scholars and intellectuals, issues that focus on existing or emerging social problems, such as *kız ala kachuu* or bride kidnapping, gender, and the revival of Islam have been popular subjects of western anthropologists in the post-Soviet period. As younger Central Asian researchers and anthropologists are studying at western universities, this trend may shift. For now, however, I believe it is logical, when a newly independent country like Kyrgyzstan is entering the world arena, for its intellectuals to focus on the most distinct or unique aspects of its national culture. For the majority of ordinary Kyrgyz as well as intellectuals, their historical nomadic heritage, oral tradition and music serve as key markers of their emerging national identity and culture. Intellectuals then become purveyors of both knowledge and identity as it is constructed and conveyed.

¹⁹ Op.cit.

²⁰ Kuwayama, p. 29.

²¹ Written notes from Stevan Harrell, Anthropologist at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA.

Insider, Outsider and Collaborative Ethnography

There are advantages and disadvantages to anthropologists studying their own culture, and to anthropologist studying cultures other than their own. An outsider view will differ from that of an insider. Outsider anthropologists doing fieldwork in other cultures admit the fact that they “can never become or go native.” During fieldwork, many foreign fieldworkers experience “culture shock,” describing a “syndrome precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all your familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse.”²² Insider researchers do not necessarily experience these things during fieldwork in their own society. Conversely, unlike most western anthropologists who go out to remote “fields,” most non-western anthropologists tend to study their own societies and cultures. As Stevan Harrell, anthropologist at the University of Washington notes:

It's interesting, though, that so many do work in their own home towns. There is a respectable position that says distancing, the shock of the new, is necessary to certain kinds of insight. To this end, I always want my students from China or Taiwan to do some ethnographic research in the US, so they will have the experience of the cultural encounter while gathering information. It's interesting also, that when US anthropologists do ethnographic research in the US, they almost never do it in their hometowns or home communities.²³

In discussing the status of researchers, Kirin Narayan suggests a focus on the “quality of our relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts” rather than a focus on the researcher’s cultural identity.²⁴ Factors other than culture are important. The researcher’s personality can also have a positive or negative influence on the quality of

²² *Women in the Field. Anthropological Experiences*. 2nd edition. Ed. by Peggy Goldie. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986, p. 11

²³ Stevan Harrell’s personal written comments. University of Washington, September, 2006.

²⁴ Narayan, Kirin (1993a), ‘How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist?’ *American Anthropologist* 95 (3), p. 672.

research. “There is a need for more open speculation and consideration of such issues as: how were my data affected by the kind of person I am, by my sex or other apparent attributes, and how did my presence alter, positively or negatively, the flux of life under observation?”²⁵ However, I believe that it is a challenge for an outsider, whose behavioral manners and thinking have solidified in his or her own culture, to fit into a foreign culture. Even though the main goal of an outsider is not to fit in completely or become “native,” but rather to obtain rich and reliable data, I believe it is impossible to accomplish research objectives without gaining adequate knowledge of the local language, people’s trust and conforming to local customs and values. To be able to see and understand things from the local point of view, the researcher should become an active participant-observer of everyday life activities and customs by behaving and dressing like the local people.

Conversely, non-native scholars usually argue that insider researchers cannot detach themselves from their culture and society, while “non-native researchers maintain a distance and write about them from detached viewpoints in the name of science.”²⁶ I often struggle to detach myself from my own culture and write “objectively” in the name of science in my academic practice. Whether this is a merit or demerit, is disputable. In my opinion, it is a difference in approach to the culture under study, rather than a difference in the standard of research and analysis. Like other Kyrgyz intellectuals, I feel a high level of responsibility to study and present my Kyrgyz culture and that commitment reflected in my choice of research topics, my methodology and analysis. Moreover, after more than 150 years of Russian colonial rule and cultural hegemony, it is

²⁵ *Women in the Field. Anthropological Experiences*. p. 5.

²⁶ Kuwayama, p. 3.

hard to have a native cultural discourse that is free of the politics of modern nation building in Central Asia. Kuwayama quotes scholars like Ernest Gellner (1983), and Nagao Nishikawa (1992) who point out that “the notion of culture is inseparably related with the political framework of a modern nation-state,”²⁷ and in acknowledging the reaction of indigenous systems to colonialism, himself states “there is no genuinely indigenous system of thought that is completely free from Western influence, whether positive or negative.”²⁸

Another difference between outsider and insider research is that outsiders cannot always see or understand the “deepest layers” of foreign culture. Yanagita, a Japanese folklorist criticized outsider research as “touching the skin, but failing to reach the heart.”²⁹ Conversely, insiders are criticized for tending to overlook or ignore certain elements of their culture that may be significant to an outsider, but are considered too ordinary from their local perspective. In my opinion, the quality of both outsider and insider research is dependent on the targeted audience. If an insider writes exclusively for a foreign audience, he/she should be aware of the reader’s background about the subject and should include necessary details. However, if he/she writes for a local audience, he/she needs to employ a different approach to the same subject taking into account what may be common knowledge. The selection of the research topic or subject among outsider and insider researchers varies. As mentioned earlier, many western researchers focused their research in Kyrgyzstan on issues related to socio-political issues, such as Islam, gender and bride-kidnapping, interethnic relations, border, minority, and human rights issues. In most cases, these topics mirror the interests of their primarily western

²⁷ Kuwayama, p. 24.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 72.

audience, and their funding agencies. Conversely, native researchers study issues which they consider valuable, unique, or important. When writing about aspects of their national culture for a foreign audience, they tend to describe and interpret them positively and sympathetically. When their traditional values and beliefs are criticized or undermined by outsiders, they become protective of it.

At the same time, there is a danger in insider researchers' rejecting all western intellectual thoughts and academic approaches. Using valuable educational and professional training, often retained in the West, insider researchers need to focus more on how we, as learned men and women of our societies, can contribute to the improvement of cultural understanding among various peoples in the world. Strong cultural nationalism and over emphatic claims to difference can result in alienation from the wider world, and marginalization of cultures as being exotic³⁰ and, I would add, a marginalization of insider research.

Most outsider researchers continue to publish ethnographic work based on interviews and cultural data collected from ordinary local people. There is little collaboration with cultural experts, scholars and intellectuals, who possess critical knowledge and thus are able to elaborate on many aspects of their culture for they are also the bearers of that culture. Kuwayama asks an interesting question about why outsider researchers do not consult "native" scholarship:

When doing fieldwork, at least, they respect the worldview of the people they are studying, listen carefully to the stories native informants tell, and take field notes meticulously, so as to understand their 'peculiar' customs.

³⁰ Kuwayama, p. 13.

Why, then, can they not approach native scholarship with the same sympathetic attitude?³¹

Today, however, as a result of anthropological globalization, or more precisely, due to the emergence of critical native discourse, modern anthropology seems to be moving towards a more collaborative and reciprocal ethnography. In this new collaborative ethnography, former informants not only contribute to fieldwork, but also become consultants to the outsider ethnographer, by co-writing and co-interpreting the research results.³² Modern technology has aided this process, allowing scholars from different parts of the world to share and discuss their research ideas and results on line.³³

When it was time to do my fieldwork, I left my ‘academic home’ of American culture and society and was re-placed into my own Kyrgyz society and culture. In this position, I had “double native” status. Not only did I conduct my research in my home country, but I did it in my hometown. This placed me in a unique position compared to many anthropologists – both *outsiders* and *insiders*.

During the Soviet period, Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, was an unknown region for most westerners. Almost every conversation I had with an American began with questions such as, “Where are you from?” “Where is Kyrgyzstan located?” “What is the population?” “What language do they speak?” and “What is their religion?” Most information they had about the region was limited to Russian or Soviet sources.

³¹ Ibid, p. 24.

³² Lassiter, Luke Eric. *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

³³ A good example of a collaborative anthropology is the book called *Fieldwork Connections. The Fabric of Ethnographic Collaboration in China and America* (2007, UW Press) written by Bamo Ayi, Stevan Harrell, and Ma Lunzy. There also exists an annual *Collaborative Anthropologies* published by University of Nebraska Press (<http://www.marshall.edu/coll-anth/>).

However, following the Soviet collapse, the independent nation states of Central Asia made major steps to join the global community by establishing new political, economic, and cultural ties. The opening of the “iron curtain” enabled many scholars in the West to travel to Central Asia and conduct new research. Since then, many valuable anthropological works have been written by western scholars on Central Asia. The rich history and cultures of Central Asia deserve different perspectives, approaches and interpretations free of the bias of both former Soviet accounts and new accounts by those who do not know the cultures intimately. Due to language barriers and differences in scholarly paradigms and assumptions, the older generation of Soviet trained Central Asian ethnographers has not been able to effectively exchange academic knowledge with their western colleagues. It is essential for the region to cultivate its own, new generation of scholars with language skills, to better represent their country in various international academic fields, including anthropology.

Auto-Ethnography and Self-Awareness

It is common for modern anthropologists to discuss “what it means to be an anthropologist.”³⁴ They identify their status and position to the people and culture being researched and write explicitly about their fieldwork experiences. They openly share personal accounts of their foreign experiences, talk about the process of adjustment to another culture, and discuss the ethical and pragmatic challenges of conducting ethnographic research. According to Maja Nazaruk, this type of reflexive writing is not very new, but became popular in social sciences after the publication of Malinowski’s diaries about his research in the Trobriand Islands. “Reflexivity is the process of

³⁴ *Women in the Field. Anthropological Experiences*, p. 4.

reflection, which takes itself as the object; in the most basic sense, it refers to reflecting on *oneself* as the *object* of provocative, unrelenting thought and contemplation....”³⁵

Reflexive writing enables the audience to get a fuller and more intimate picture of the fieldwork experience, and what it took for the author to gather the necessary materials. Another form of emergent ethnographic writing is auto-ethnography, which provides a way for researchers to incorporate their personal stories, experiences, and interactions with the culture being researched into their scholarly writing.³⁶ In this genre of writing, the main focus is the self, the author, who discusses his personal accounts of doing research within a social context. Some auto-ethnographers emphasize “*graphy*” or the research process, others emphasize *ethnos* or the culture, and still others, emphasize *auto* or the self.”³⁷ Auto-ethnography allows researchers to focus on different, unexplored areas that can contribute to the diversity and strengthening of the field of regional or “native” anthropology. The premise is that it is important and helpful to know about the author who constructs the cultural knowledge. Moreover, anthropology is a new field in post-Soviet countries, including Kyrgyzstan, and during my study in the US in mid 1990s and early 2000, there were almost no or very few Central Asian/Kyrgyz students who pursued this field of study. Therefore, I believe that some background information on my family, upbringing, and education in Kyrgyzstan and my experience of American academic education would be interesting for readers. By my profession, I would be considered a Kyrgyz anthropologist with American academic training. I left Kyrgyzstan

³⁵ Maja Nazaruk, “Reflexivity in Anthropological Discourse Analysis” in *Anthropological Notebooks* 17 (1) 73-83, Slovene Anthropological Society, 2011, p. 73. (http://www.drustvo-antropologov.si/AN/PDF/2011_1/Anthropological_Notebooks_XVII_1_Nazaruk.pdf)

³⁶ Nicholas L. Holt, “Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story.” In: *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2 (1), Winter 2003, p. 2.

³⁷ Op.cit.

at the age of nineteen, and studied in the United States for ten years (1994-2007),³⁸ after which I returned to Kyrgyzstan. As a Kyrgyz, I have direct knowledge and experience of my culture, which influences my work as an ethnographer. To shed light on both my own perspectives and the value of auto-ethnography, I would like to discuss my status, role, and cultural identity and experiences in relation to my research on Kyrgyz culture and emerging national identity.

Growing up Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

Like most Kyrgyz, I take pride in my Ogotur *uruk*, clan and in knowing about my family history and seven forefathers of whom I personally got to know three- Mamatkerim, Kochkorbay and Köchümkul. I am the first of five children, and I was raised in a Kyrgyz family with a long semi-nomadic tradition. Like the most Kyrgyz, my ancestors on both sides were nomads or herders for many centuries, leading a semi-nomadic life up until the 1990s.

When I was one year old, my parents began their teaching careers at a local school in Kızıl-Jar, my hometown in the Aksı region of southern Kyrgyzstan. My *tayene* or maternal grandmother, offered to take care of me in her mountain village about sixty kilometers away. However, when my mother told my paternal great grandfather Köchümkul, that she had given me to her mother to raise, he became upset and immediately sent her to bring me back. My Sakal Ata or “White Bearded Grandpa”, said: “I have no daughter to give to the Agıнай [clan]! Go right now and bring Elmira back! If she is raised in Ak-Suu by the Agıнай, she will become *bölök östü*,” or estranged from

³⁸ I visited Kyrgyzstan almost every year in summer for about two months. In 2002-2003, I spent about 16 months in Kyrgyzstan during ethnographic research.

her own paternal clan. Then he asked my grandmother Kumu to raise me among my own kinsmen. Thus, my Sakal Ata played a key role in the formation of my childhood identity. While my tribal identity would not have changed to another clan, the legacy of traditional, patrilineal Kyrgyz culture remains strong in my family.

For the next five years, my childhood with my paternal grandparents was intimately tied to nomadic life and culture, which I enjoyed tremendously; it became an integral part of my personal identity as a Kyrgyz from the Ogotur *uruk*, clan. We lived in yurts, and moved from pasture to pasture five or six times during the six months of summer. Our daily activities included milking mares to make *koumiss*, fermented mare's milk; milking cows to make yogurt, cheese and butter; making felt; tending sheep; collecting dung and wood for fuel; and for children, playing traditional games and picking flowers in the meadow. We also enjoyed feasts and gatherings involving traditional horse games such as *bayge* or horse races; *ulak*, a game played by a group of horsemen who fight over a goat's carcass filled with coarse wet salt; *er english* or wrestling on horseback; *kiz kuumay*, a young man on horse back chasing a girl, who is also on horse back; and *kürösh*, wrestling on the ground. Even after I returned to my parents when I was six, until I turned fourteen, I joined my grandparents in the *jayloo* or summer pasture during my summer vacations.

During World War II, like many other Kyrgyz who led a nomadic life, my great grandfather, Köchümkul, fled with his three young boys, to the oasis regions of modern day Uzbekistan in the Ferghana Valley to avoid mobilization to the front line. In the 1970's, my great grandfather returned to Kizil-Jar. However, his three sons and their families remained in Uzbekistan until the mid 1990s. They were hired by the local Uzbek

collective farm or *kolkhoz* as herders. The Kyrgyz herders in Uzbekistan lived peacefully with their Uzbek neighbors with each community participating in each other's feasts and gatherings. However, they consciously kept their Kyrgyz identity separate from the sedentary Uzbeks. They spoke Kyrgyz at home with each other and their children. They did not intermarry with Uzbeks and kept close contacts with their kinsmen in Kyrgyzstan and carried out all their customs and feasts in a Kyrgyz way.

Growing up in southern Kyrgyzstan, which is part of the Ferghana Valley, I experienced both Uzbek sedentary and Kyrgyz semi-nomadic cultures. Every year, after five to six summer months in the mountains, we returned to the Uzbek collective farm, where we lived side by side with Uzbeks farmers and merchants. Uzbek and Kyrgyz languages are closely related, and I learned to speak Uzbek fluently, briefly attended an Uzbek school, and developed a taste for Uzbek music and dance. My mountain Kyrgyz relatives would jokingly call me *sarttın kızı*, which means daughter of a Sart or merchant and townsman.

The Uzbek *kolkhoz* village was pleasant with narrow streets and mud houses with courtyards, surrounded by high mud walls. In the autumn, upon returning to the *kolkhoz* from the *jayloo*, summer pasture we would kill a sheep and invite our Uzbek neighbors for a meal. They in turn would bring us fruits and freshly baked hot *somsas*, pastries filled with meat and onions and baked in a clay *tandoor* oven.

I returned to my biological parents at the age of six, when it was time for me to go elementary school. My schooling from the 1st through the 11th grades was in Kyrgyz, in Kızıl-Jar *sovkhoz*, state farm, one of the most agriculturally developed regions in southern Kyrgyzstan, specializing in corn, cotton, and tobacco. During harvest time, school

children like me had to work in the fields. I especially hated the tobacco field, because it smelled bad and was labor-intensive and time-consuming. Everything - picking, stringing, drying, and sorting the dry leaves - was done by hand. During the tobacco harvest, I would long for the cool mountain pastures.

My Love for *Komuz* and Singing Kyrgyz Songs

I grew up listening to Kyrgyz music on the *komuz*. In my family, it is mostly men who play the *komuz* but they do not sing. My grandfather Kochkorbay always took his *komuz* with him to the *jayloo*, and he used to play in the evenings in the yurt. He loved to listen to the radio to the *aytish*, a traditional singing contest between two poets who challenge each other in improvising poems while keeping alliteration and rhyme. As a little girl, I loved to sing. I became interested in playing the *komuz* when I was in the 10th grade, and I owe my first inspiration to the well-known Kyrgyz singer, Jolboldu Alıbayev who revived some forgotten poems of great Kyrgyz oral poets, particularly after Kyrgyzstan became independent, and experienced a cultural and national revival. Alıbayev gave new life to one of oral poet Jengijok's popular lament poems called "Balam jok," or "I have no child (son)." It was this particular poem that inspired me to learn the *komuz* and to sing *dastans*, long poems. It was my *komuz* and my passion for Kyrgyz music that helped me to earn recognition in my hometown and at my university in Bishkek, and that finally brought me to the United States. In the Soviet Union, Kyrgyz traditional music and instruments were considered backward and primitive, and children in the cities learned mostly European classical instruments such as the piano and violin. When I began singing traditional songs on the *komuz*, I found and felt the spirit of Kyrgyz oral tradition

and mountain culture. Touched by the spirit, people, especially the elderly would often cry while listening to old poems of *aqıns*, oral poets. The well-known Kazakh scholar, Mirzatay Joldasbekov said, “A Kazakh who does not cry when hearing [traditional] Kazakh music/song is not a true Kazakh.” This touched my heart deeply, because it is indeed so. Traditional music, especially those played on *komuz* or *dombra* remains an essential component of Kyrgyz and Kazakh cultural identity.

Student Life in Bishkek

In 1992, I graduated from high school with honors and that summer, my father took me to the capital Bishkek, to apply to university. I applied to two departments of Kyrgyz philology, or Kyrgyz language and literature departments, and one Russian philology department at different universities in Bishkek. I was accepted by all three departments, and chose the newly opened department of Kyrgyz philology (today known as *Turkology*, or the comparative study of Turkic languages, literatures, and cultures) at the Kyrgyz Pedagogical Institute of Russian Language and Literature University, which later became the Bishkek University of Humanities because of two Kyrgyz professors there who promised a great future for the department, and the announcement that the department especially encouraged talented students who wrote poetry, sang, or played traditional instruments. This attracted my father and me because I play the *komuz*, a three-stringed strummed Kyrgyz instrument and sing traditional Kyrgyz songs. We went to a musical instrument shop where he bought me a new *komuz*. The new chair of the Kyrgyz Philology Department, Sulayman Kayıpov, a leading folklorist who himself plays the

komuz, gave me an oral exam. While I was preparing for my exam questions in the examination classroom, Sulayman *agay*³⁹ entered the classroom and saw my new *komuz* on my desk. He asked me about my *önör* or talent, and challenged me with a smile, “Would you like to compete with me in playing *komuz*? I was not shy and replied, “I cannot play melodies well, but I can compete with you in a singing contest.” His eyes lit up with surprise and he laughed with happiness. After my oral exam, Sulayman *agay* told me that he liked my bold answer, and he asked me which other universities I was applying to. When I told him, he asked me to choose his department, and we shook hands in agreement.

The language of instruction in Kyrgyz philology was Kyrgyz, and in Russian philology was Russian. As future *Turkologists*, we were taught new courses such as the Introduction to Turkology, Old Turkic language and grammar of the 7th -8th centuries and Turkish, which belongs to the same language group as Kyrgyz. My generation of high school graduates from countryside became students in the capital city Bishkek in 1992 right after the 1991 Soviet collapse. We enjoyed our work and student life in Bishkek. Most of us lived in a university dormitory, and Bishkek seemed like a very big city to us. The language used on the streets, buses, and in university administrations was mainly Russian and many of us spoke Russian poorly. However, we had supportive Kyrgyz and Turkish professors who inspired us to learn and appreciate our Kyrgyz language, history, oral tradition, and nomadic cultural heritage. As in other newly independent nation states, the early independent years were filled with great hope and ideas for the national revival

³⁹ *Agay* is a respectful term of address used by students for their male teachers. *Ejey* or *ejeke* is used for female teachers.

and the development of Kyrgyzstan. This has a big impact on our early intellectual development, personal identity, and sense of patriotism.

All the newly independent Central Asian republics began celebrating the traditional spring equinox or *Nooruz*, in March declaring it a national holiday. In Kyrgyzstan, anniversaries of epic songs such as the traditional spring equinox or *Nooruz*, in March as well as those of well known historical personalities and poets were celebrated on a national level. Many student musical festivals and competitions were held in Bishkek where talented students demonstrated their musical skills in playing traditional instruments, singing songs in Kyrgyz, and reciting parts of the epic *Manas*. The winners of the competition, including myself were selected to perform in a gala concert for Kyrgyzstan first President Askar Akayev.

The first two years of our study also coincided with the post-Soviet economic crisis which hit all the newly independent republics. All of a sudden, grocery store shelves were empty. Monthly student stipends were not given out on time. During the winter of 1993, Kyrgyzstan faced its worst economic crisis. The government asked parents, local state farms and village administrations in the countryside to bring humanitarian aid to their students studying in the cities. Each *rayon*, or regional administration, brought truck loads of food and distributed it to the starving students in Bishkek. Many students also received special food packages from their families and like our nomadic ancestors, we crumbled pieces of *chabati* or thin flat bread, into bowls, added three or four balls of dried curd, *kurut*, and poured boiling water over them. In this way, we survived the economic hardships of the post-Soviet collapse of the early 1990s.

In the winter of 1994, the president of the Bishkek University of the Humanities announced that there was an opportunity for a student to go to the United States to study. One day, my teacher Sulayman *agay*, told me that the university rector wanted to talk to me. When I entered the rector's office, the rector asked me "Would you like to go to America?" He described an exchange agreement between our university and the University of Washington in Seattle. Professor Ilse Cirtautas, a leading western Turkologist, had initiated the program during a recent visit to Bishkek, and she wanted a student with good grades, who spoke Kyrgyz, and who could represent Kyrgyz culture. She did not want a Russified Kyrgyz student. My rector asked me to write a short biographic essay and send it to Professor Cirtautas. Soon after, I heard that I had been accepted into the University of Washington. Stunned by this news, I rushed to the central telephone center in Bishkek to call my parents. I remember standing in the phone booth, telling to my father that I was going to America. My father remained silent for a moment and then said "Are you really sure?!" After the spring semester, I returned home. My parents gave a farewell offering for me by killing a sheep, and invited all our relatives and neighbors. Everyone was very happy and proud of me, but at the same time, they were worried that I was going far away, where I did not know anyone.

My American Chapter

In July, 1994, I left Kyrgyzstan for the United States. I flew via Moscow with Aeroflot Airlines, and traveled with a Kyrgyz elderly gentleman whose daughter was teaching Kyrgyz in the Central Asian Language and Culture Summer Program at the

University of Washington. At Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport, I met a Kazakh girl, Aynura, who was also going to Seattle on a similar exchange program between her university in Almaty and the University of Washington. As we left Moscow, I felt scared, missed home and cried. My elderly Kyrgyz companion comforted me and reminded me to appreciate the unique opportunity I had.

We arrived in Seattle in the evening and we were met by the elderly man's daughter. We approached the city's downtown with its lit-up skyscrapers driving in a big American car; none of it seemed real and I felt as if I was in an American movie. Aynura, and I were taken to Professor Cirtautas' apartment around 10:00pm. She was already waiting for us outside and was very happy to see us. She greeted us in Kazakh and hugged us both, welcoming us to Seattle.

I still remember my first impression of the University of Washington. The city's cool air and very green nature reminded me of the summer pastures in Kyrgyzstan. I felt sad when I learned about the tragic history of Native American people in the state of Washington and in North America. The architecture of the University buildings mirrored medieval times in Europe. I fell in love with the city's beautiful nature and the people who were very polite and always ready to help.

I met American students enrolled in the Central Asian Language and Culture Summer Program who were interested in learning about me and my culture. However, most people in Seattle did not know anything about Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia. I gave many formal and informal presentations about Kyrgyzstan, and musical performances of Kyrgyz traditional music. I was proud to be the first Kyrgyz to introduce the American audience in Seattle to recitations of the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*.

Unlike Aynura, who spoke some English, I knew almost none when I arrived in Seattle. I enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes on campus, and in other required undergraduate courses. It was a challenge to adapt to a different educational system and academic learning style. I found writing analytic papers difficult because I had not been taught to think critically or to analyze literary and scholarly works in the Soviet school system. Professor Cirtautas, my ESL and other professors and friends helped us with our papers.

Seven more Kazakh students, funded by the Kazakh national education exchange program came to the University of Washington. They stayed in the university dormitories and we usually socialized together. I was the only Kyrgyz student in the beginning, but later was joined by a Kyrgyz girl from Bishkek came to study under another program. After the first year, there was an opportunity for those who qualified to stay on for a second year. I was homesick, but I knew that this was a great opportunity and opted to stay. During the summer, I assisted Professor Cirtautas, teaching Kyrgyz in the Central Asian Language and Culture Summer Program. I then returned home to Kyrgyzstan for about a month and a half. Everyone asked me why I had become so skinny and pale. I said that I was homesick a lot and that there was not much sunshine in Seattle. Between 1994 and 1998, I visited Kyrgyzstan three times in late summer and spent all my time with my family in Kızıl-Jar. Each home visit turned into a big feast involving slaughtering a sheep or goat and inviting relatives and neighbors. Each time I arrived home, after I greeted everyone and before I entered the house, my mother performed a traditional ritual to purify me after returning home safely from my long trip. She circled a bowl of water over my head and asked me spit into the water. Then she

dumped the water under a bush or tree and put the empty bowl with upside down. In 1996, I received my Bachelor of Arts, and in 1998, I received my Masters from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at University of Washington. My parents, professors, and friends encouraged me to apply to the doctoral program, and I did. I realized that I needed to learn more to do academic research and I decided to focus my research on the oral traditions and nomadic cultures of Central Asia.

A Change of Status: Getting Married

My life was not limited to academic pursuits. During a visit home in 1998, I got engaged, to (as Americans would say), my “high school sweetheart,” in the traditional Kyrgyz way, in which gifts of clothes and animals were exchanged between the future in-laws. My future mother-in-law brought golden earrings and put them on my ears, and symbolic *kaling* or bride price negotiations were done between the two sides. Traditionally, the bride-to-be does not participate in the bride price negotiations. However, as a bride-to-be and a researcher, I assertively joined my parents, great uncles and aunts in their discussion of my bride price to see how it was done. No one seemed to mind my presence. An aunt even asked me jokingly: “Elmira, for how much should we sell you?” Traditionally among the Saruu Kyrgyz of the Aksı region, those, who can afford it, pay nine *müchös*, a fixed number of animals headed by a *tay*, a yearling, *torpok*, a one year old calf, sheep and goats. In addition, a separate cow is given to the bride’s mother, as a *süt akı*, “breast milk price,” to show respect and appreciation for her mother’s breast feeding and raising the bride. For the *kulduk urdu* part of the marriage negotiation they bring a *kazikka baylar*, which literally means “a horse to be tied onto a

stake.” The tradition of paying the bride price is expected from those who can afford it, those who cannot still need to cover some of the expenses of the wedding feast offered by bride’s parents and of the dowry that is also prepared by bride’s mother. In my case, there was a mutual understanding and agreement of the economic situation of my husband’s family.

The following year, I returned home after defending my Ph.D. candidacy, and was married in a traditional Kyrgyz style which involved erecting yurts; singing *koshok*, the traditional farewell and advice song for the new bride by her mother, grandmother and sisters-in-law; riding horses; and transporting the bride’s dowry on a camel to the husband’s house.⁴⁰ Two weeks after our wedding, I returned to Seattle alone. My husband joined me six weeks later when he got his American visa. It was his first time out of Kyrgyzstan and he had to learn English. He got a job and like me, learned to love Seattle.

The Researcher Goes Home

Three years later, in June, 2002, my husband and I left Seattle and returned home to Kīzīl-Jar. I was pregnant with our first child. We spent 16 months in Kyrgyzstan, during which time I gave birth and conducted my ethnographic field research. My earlier visits, as a daughter visiting her home, were usually no longer than six weeks. I was now returning home in a different capacity; as a researcher. During my stay, I balanced two roles and their related duties: I was an insider researcher, and I was simply a Kyrgyz woman. During the visit, I mostly conformed to traditions and customs expected of a married woman and daughter-in-law. This deepened my knowledge about my own

⁴⁰ See my wedding description on the Silk Road Seattle website at this URL address: <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/wedding/wedding.html>

culture. I developed a greater appreciation and respect for many traditional values and customs, and for the daily human interactions which are vital to a healthy and happy community life. At the same time, my status as a researcher required me to make certain exceptions in terms of my interactions with people to accomplish my academic goal.

This was my first visit home as a married woman or *kelin*. This change of status brought about adaptations in my identity and my relationships with my parents and my in-laws. I now had to stay in my husband's parents' house. Although I understood my role as a married woman, I was unhappy that I could not visit my parents' house freely. Following the tradition, I did not visit my parents' house until two days after my arrival. After this initial meeting, I still encountered difficulties. Although my mother-in-law is a kind and understanding woman, I felt uncomfortable asking her the customary permission to visit my parents. Since I had lived by myself in the United States for many years, I was used to making independent decisions about my personal life and mobility. While my parents also wanted to see me every day, they respected traditional values and rules of marriage. Once, my father jokingly said: "It is not nice of you to visit your parents' house so often after you got married. My mother would jokingly recite the Kyrgyz proverb, every time I came home: "Törkünü jakındın töshögü jüyilbayt," "The bed of a woman whose *törkün* lives close by is never folded up," meaning, she takes off to visit her own *törkün* or parents and clan in the morning without putting her bed away.

As a married woman in another clan, I had to integrate into the kinsmen of my husband through specific rituals, to establish my new relationship with them. I could not visit my husband's older married relatives' homes without a special invitation. My invitation was called *otko kirüü*, or entering the hearth by the new bride. In the past,

when entering the yurt, the new bride threw a small piece of fat or butter onto the fire as an offering and a symbol of the new relationship being good and prosperous. I was officially invited into the home of my *kayın aga*, my husband's oldest brother. Custom requires the host to kill a sheep; prepare a special *dastorkon* or traditional tablecloth filled with various foods, sweets, and fruits; and give gifts of clothes. In exchange, according to the *otko kirüü* custom, the bride does not come with empty hands, so I brought a pair of new traditional hand made pillows, sleep on mat, and blanket from my dowry given my parents. After this symbolic establishment of our new relationship, I could visit their home any time. Another tradition required of a new bride is that of *tergöö* or speech taboo prohibiting the daughter-in-law to call her in-laws and husband's kinsmen by their names to establish a respectful relationship between the newcomer and the accepting family. The daughter-in-law may use nicknames or respectful terms of address, but she can never pronounce their real names.

I Became a Mother

In September, my status changed yet again, when I became a mother. Close to my due date, my mother and other female relatives recommended that I go to Bishkek and give birth there in a city hospital. My mother and husband accompanied me. When I began my labor, before we left the apartment for the hospital, my mother and husband grabbed a sheet and asked me to lie down in it on my back. They then rolled me on my right side three times saying: "Ong, ong, ong!" "[May the baby come out] the right way, right way, right way [with his head down]!). After the birth, my mother, my husband, myself and the baby Erbol (lit.: "be brave") returned to Kızıl-Jar.

My husband, son and I lived at my mother-in-law's house, with my *kayin ini*, my husband's younger, single brother. As family members, my husband and I did not pay rent but we always contributed to the family's food and other needs. We also paid for all the traditional events that took place in our house, including *ash*, a final memorial feast for my father-in-law who had died in 1991.

I did not start my formal research until my son was about 5 months old. However, I was very busy with my new family, organizing and participating in traditional feasts and offerings, which enriched my other research through participant observation. As a member of the community and a researcher, I enjoyed a unique position during these social events. I knew the town and surrounding villages, and had close relationships with most of the people whom I encountered. Additionally, the life history of my paternal relatives in Uzbekistan provided me with valuable ethnographic and historical information to help me understand the issues and questions that I would formally study.

I found many advantages to being an insider researcher. As a member of the community, I had easy access to culturally sacred and sensitive gatherings such as funerals and memorial feasts. My research site and people were neither new nor unusual. I had the advantage of knowing both Kyrgyz and Uzbek. Moreover, I did not have to begin my research by learning about the culture from scratch. My task was to use my new Western academic skills to update my existing knowledge of my own culture and to analyze and interpret current socio-cultural and religious issues and developments.

I became aware of changes in myself in how I related to my own culture through the lens of Western academic training. Although I was familiar with many cultural behaviors and rituals, for the sake of my research experience and to allow people to speak

for themselves, I asked research questions. This felt uncomfortable because most people knew that I knew the answers to many of the questions I asked. I did not want to be perceived as an “Americanized” woman, or to look at my own culture from an outsider’s perspective. My relatives and friends noted that I now smiled a lot and spoke Kyrgyz slower, pronouncing words clearly. I explained that this was because I taught Kyrgyz to American students. Despite some awkwardness, I participated and contributed to various social and customary events as a community or family member, and I very much enjoyed visiting relatives and having discussions on various issues.

When I began conducting structured interviews in the winter of 2003, I had no difficulties gaining people’s trust and permission to be interviewed, photographed or videotaped. My relatives and other community members, whom I interviewed, did not quite understand the necessity of interview consent forms, which I asked them to sign. Many simply signed them without reading them. As a researcher, I understood the necessity of the consent forms. However, as an insider, I felt that they created an official and artificial barrier between me and the ‘subjects’ with whom I had close and trusting relationships.

My first experience of participant observation was during the traditional cradle feast, *beshek toy* or *jeentek toy* which we offered for our own one month old son Erbol in my mother’s in-law’s house. According to custom, the maternal grandparents bring a new wooden cradle for their daughter’s first child.⁴¹ My mother and three other respected female relatives came with a new cradle with a colorfully painted frame, homemade mats, pillows and blankets, a protective charm and some hanging toys.

⁴¹ A new cradle is given for the first child only, but is also meant to be used by the younger siblings.

Mother brought the main traditional dish called *talkan* or sweetened powdered corn, which is eaten with clarified yellow butter, and the cooked meat of a whole sheep. I captured the essential parts of this tradition on videotape. Another ritual that I participated in related to my son's development was *tushoo kesüü toy*, an important life cycle ritual to initiate and celebrate the walking of a toddler. Strings, usually of white and black colors, are tied to the legs of a toddler who is learning to walk. It is believed that the toddler stumbles or keeps falling to the ground because his legs are tied by a string and only after cutting the string the toddler will walk freely.

One of the religious duties my husband and I had, as adult Kyrgyz Muslims, was to pay visits to the homes of those relatives, friends, and teachers who had passed away while we were in the United States. It was important to do this as soon after arriving home as possible, and to recite from the Quran in their remembrance.

In addition to participating in specific ceremonies, feasts and rituals, I was able to observe broad socio-economic and religious developments in the town and in the country in general. I observed and listened with wide-open eyes and ears and captured many special events and gatherings on video camera and with photographs. As a local, I was able to focus on what I knew was the essence of certain traditional customs and religious rites and their relevance to the social, family, and spiritual lives of community members. At times, I found it difficult to separate myself from my own society and culture, because the rituals required my active participation. Almost everyone I interviewed or talked to freely expressed their thoughts and opinions on Muslim and Kyrgyz identity. Similarly, it was difficult for me to keep my opinions on certain issues to myself. People wanted to hear what I had to say as an educated young Kyrgyz woman who had been to the United

States, and I often found myself engaging in lively dialogues and discussions. I openly expressed judgments and personal feelings about particular subjects, even though I was aware that this might affect the ways in which people related to me or influenced what they told me in response to my research questions. During a memorial feast for my grandfather, there were heated discussions between two local members of the Islamic “fundamentalist”⁴² group Hizb-ut-Tahrir and my uncles and cousins, about what they called the “pure form” of Islam versus “Kyrgyz Islam.” Unable to withstand the condemnations of Kyrgyz customs and traditional values by the “Hizbut”⁴³ men, I joined the discussion and began arguing with them based on my own knowledge and opinions. As an insider researcher, I found it difficult to passively observe critical discussions like these, especially when I knew the language and had cultural and historical knowledge and opinions on the subject.

Like many other Kyrgyz, until the post-Soviet Islamic revival, my Muslim religious identity was never questioned. I do not come from a religious family background, but our Muslim faith was an accepted fact of life. None of my forefathers was a *mullah* or *imam* or practiced orthodox Islam. My great grandfather Köchümkul, who died at the age of 80, began praying his Muslim *namaz* at the age of 60, when his first grandchild was born. While not a fanatic about his Muslim faith he was a good example or role model, demonstrating good behavior, wisdom, and deeds. He was a wise respected *aksakal* in the community who knew a lot about Kyrgyz traditional values and customs as well as his tribal genealogy. He had no religious schooling when he was young, could not read nor write in Arabic, but memorized those Arabic prayer words

⁴² Hizb-ut-Tahrir is officially banned and recognized as a “fundamentalist” Islamic organization in Kyrgyzstan.

⁴³ People in the village called Muslims (men or women) and members of the “Hizb-ut-Tahrir” “Hizbut.”

which he used during *namaz* prayers. He would never preach to us about God or tell us to carry out the five pillars of Islam. Every time before going to sleep, he would utter a special poetic prayer in Kyrgyz: “Jattım tınch, jazdığım kench; tilim Quran, tilegenim ñyman” or “I wish myself a good-night sleep, may my pillow be full of wisdom; my tongue speaks Quran, and my wish is to be faithful.” After this phrase, he would say the *shahada* in Arabic to make the confession of faith “*La ilaha il Allah, Muhammad-ur-Rasool-Allah*,” (None has the right to be worshipped but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah). My grandfather Kochkorbay followed his father’s example and began praying at an older age. My grandmother, who practiced some traditional healing rituals, also began praying at an older age after 60 or when she began to think of the after-life. Like many other Kyrgyz men and women of their time and age, my ancestors and grandparents did not see any contradiction between their ethnic Kyrgyz and religious Muslim identities, values and customs.

“Native” Anthropology and Emerging Identities

Before learning about current anthropological discussions and debates on the existence of a whole culture in traditional societies, like many scholars and intellectuals in the former Soviet Union, I thought that every nation or people had its own national culture, to which all members of that society adhered. At University of Washington, I learned how western theorists first developed the idea of a whole and homogenous culture, and then, during postmodern or postcolonial eras, repudiated it in favor of “ethnographies of the particular.”⁴⁴ Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod suggests that to

⁴⁴ Abu-Lughod, Lila, “Writing Against Culture” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Richard Fox, ed. Sante Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991.

avoid generalizations,” in ethnographic writing, anthropologists need to focus our research on “ethnographies of the particular,” or the study of “particular individuals and their changing relationships.”⁴⁵ In doing so, “one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness.”⁴⁶ Kyrgyz scholars trained in Soviet academic tradition also characterized Kyrgyz culture as being a whole and homogenous concept that is equally valued, viewed, and practiced by all members of society. Today, most Kyrgyz scholars and intellectuals continue focusing on cultural elements and values that make the Kyrgyz society look unified. They want to see an order of cultural system instead of disorder and anomaly. However, this tendency seems to be changing among the younger generation of scholars who are adopting new global or western scholarly approaches and methods to the study of society and culture. Major changes happened during the post-Soviet transition period caused fragmentation of society on the basis of people’s socio-cultural, religious, and political views, values, and practices. The most obvious fragmentation occurred in people’s religious and spiritual life with some segments of society becoming religious or practicing Muslims. To counter react or resist fundamentalist Islam which condemns many aspects of Kyrgyz traditional values and practices, many Kyrgyz intellectuals, scholars, and youth began to promote Kyrgyz national heritage and ancient nomadic worldview (please see Chapter 6). This is a testimony to the fact that societies and cultures are never static. They undergo changes and adaptations during major historical and socio-political transformations. This was recognized in the ancient lines of the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*:

Mountains fell apart, turning into ravines,

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 149.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 154.

Ravines shook, turning into mountains.
Many seas became extinct
Leaving only their names behind.
Every fifty years, people were new,
Every hundred years the earth was renewed.⁴⁷

In this book I am concerned not with the question of whether such a cultural whole exists objectively in Kyrgyzstan, but rather with the ways in which Kyrgyz—both intellectuals and ordinary people—employ these concepts to give meaning to their own lives, in a period of rapid social and political transition. The rest of this book focuses on those aspects of Kyrgyz heritage that are derived from nomadic life and culture and their changing and unchanging roles and application in people's life. Tradition – even as it is adapted - is a persistent part of Kyrgyz cultural expression. The term for “tradition” in Kyrgyz is *salt*. However, the word *ürp-adat*, meaning “custom or law” is also commonly used. The combination of Arabic and Kyrgyz words *kaada-salt* is also used for tradition and customs. These terms have positive connotations; when Kyrgyz talk about *salt*, they stress its importance and value.⁴⁸ Expressions such as *ata-babalaryn saltın ulap* or “continuing the traditions of ancestors,” are used quite often in speeches.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Manas entsiklopediyasy* (The Manas Encyclopedia), p. ?

⁴⁸ However, lately, some cultural practices such as “*kız ala kachuu*” or non-consensual “bride-kidnapping” and funerals and other feasts have been the objects of criticism raised on national level being discussed in the Parliament.

⁴⁹ Kyrgyz writer/journalist Choyun Ömuraliev (to be discussed in Chapter 6) explains: In the west, people see tradition as a negative concept... It is because the concept of tradition comes from the ancient Greeks. In Greece, tradition did not reach its classical form but remained in its primitive state because they introduced human rights, law, and civil state. Therefore, in their view, tradition still remains primitive, whereas, in our society, tradition has been filtered and modified during the course of thousands of years and only the pure, golden stem remained thus reaching the highest peak of morality. When westerners think of a traditional society, they imagine the ancient Greek society and automatically copy its image to our society. They mostly see and explain tradition in their own way with no wish to understanding what we have inside.

Within this context of valuing tradition, there are adaptations in customs and religious beliefs and practices. For example, “Kyrgyz Islam” is an adaptation which allowed for the continuation of old or existing customs, within new contexts. Similarly, during the Soviet era, major aspects of Kyrgyz nomadic culture were modified to fit Soviet ideology. Certain key traditions and customs such as funerals, weddings, and music were heavily influenced, weakened, and distorted by Russian and Soviet culture. However, the core of these nomadic traditions and customs persist for they still serve as markers of ethnic and national identity for the Kyrgyz. People unite around them during good and bad times. My study of Kyrgyz life cycle rituals, especially the death rites showed both homogeneity in the communal life of the people of Kızıl-Jar and differences within Kyrgyz society. This book examines not only why certain traditions and customs persist, but why there new perspectives, such as those of Islamists and *Tengirists* emerge (please see Chapter 6), and how these opposing groups interact with each other and approach Kyrgyz religious and national identity in post-Soviet era. The reality is that emerging Kyrgyz identity is a complex integration of resilient ancient belief systems and practices, with global and sometimes conflicting forces.

In this study of this dynamic issue, I believe that my rich and unique personal experience as an insider researcher gives me an advantage over outsider researchers. I do not draw my conclusions and interpretations solely from my sixteen months research, but rather from my entire life experience as a Kyrgyz. I cannot exclude my life experiences and interactions with my community from my research. My family and kinsmen with a long tradition of semi-nomadic heritage, schooling in Kyrgyz language, and post-Soviet Kyrgyz national and cultural revival played an important role in my personal and

intellectual development, and defining the direction of my research as a “native” anthropologist or ethnographer. To date, no scholarly research was done in my hometown Kizil-Jar which has been a center of nomad-sedentary interaction before and during the Soviet period. I am confident that my research findings will generate interesting ideas and discussions among scholars and also contribute to the academic discourses on “native” anthropology, post-Soviet nation building and national identity, interethnic relations, nomadic heritage, Islam and its local contextualization in Central Asia.