

Kyrgyzchylyk Searching New Paradigms for Ancient Practices¹

GULNARA AITPAEVA

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the concept of *kyrgyzchylyk* (rather inadequately rendered in English as 'Kyrgyzness') as a way of transcending different boundaries: the Soviet past, Koran-based Islam, rational thinking. Several aspects of the concept and its meaning in everyday life are discussed; in particular the idea of *kyrgyzchylyk* as spirituality is examined. Moreover, the concept can be seen as transcending the boundaries between traditional beliefs and Islam. Traditional practitioners – healers, clairvoyants, epic storytellers, sacred sites custodians and others – are seen as becoming powerful people through their practices, and the role of *kyrgyzchylyk* in the context of the traditional worldview is assessed. In conclusion, some implications for ethno-anthropological research are outlined.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic identity, *Kyrgyzchylyk*, pilgrimage sites, spirituality, traditional healing practice

At the very beginning of my educational path I preferred to study epics and literature – 'an imaginable reality' – rather than examining issues of real contemporary life. My initial research interest was Kyrgyz small epics and the Kyrgyz historical novel. I defended two dissertations, wrote a monograph and taught a variety of folklore and literature courses. However, the time came when I started feeling that something essential was missing. Using the words of Boris Pasternak, this 'something' could be described as a 'warm breath of life'.

This feeling and my search for a 'warm life breath' pushed me to start a new life circle, which could be called 'an anthropological exploration'. In



1999, I created the Kyrgyz Ethnology Department at the American University in Kyrgyzstan, with the mission of developing a new social-science-based anthropology. Three years later I took the initiative of transforming this department into the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology, expanding its scope and mission.

When I started building the ethnology and then anthropology department in the country, there were no academic standards and curricula in the Ministry of Education, no human resources and material sources to teach a new social science; there were also no interested applicants and no shared vision among the scholars invited to develop an initial curriculum. In the first year my colleagues and I admitted only seven students. By 2005, when I left the department, there were already alumni taking Masters-level and doctoral degrees in Europe and the USA, prospective students motivated to study anthropology, and qualified staff to teach it.

The time came to use anthropology to contribute to a revival of Kyrgyz culture. In the spring of 2004, the Aigine Cultural Research Center (Aigine RC) was founded with the mission of expanding research into lesser-known aspects of the cultural and natural heritage of Kyrgyzstan, integrating local, esoteric and scholarly epistemologies relating to cultural, biological and ethnic diversities. The Aigine RC seeks to achieve rapprochement and interconnection between nature and culture, tradition and innovation, West and East, and other experiences often felt to be in opposition.

At Aigine RC we have been conducting extensive research projects involving local healers, ritual specialists, epic storytellers and other traditional practitioners since late 2004. These projects have been innovative in many ways, including fieldwork, conferences and workshops in which practitioners, scholars and local universities students have all participated together. Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been chosen as the main approach to generate interest and give the culture practitioners a sense of empowerment.

Essentially Participatory Action Research (PAR) is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts which make sense of it. . . . Participatory action research is not just research which is hoped will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by participants. Nor is it simply

an exotic variant of consultation. Instead, it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped. Nor can it be used by one group of people to get another group of people to do what is thought best for them – whether that is to implement a central policy or an organisational or service change. Instead it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry. (Wadsworth 1998:12)

In this essay, I would like to draw attention to a key theme and concept my colleagues and I regularly encounter when researching cultural heritage in two provinces of Kyrgyzstan – Talas and Issyk-Kul. It is the concept of *Kyrgyzchylyk*.

Kyrgyzchylyk as Transcending the Past

Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union until 1991. It is well known that the USSR was a totalitarian system with no freedom of choice, particularly in the religious and spiritual spheres. Following the disintegration of the Soviet system, the new independent states have faced the search for new understandings of identity. The emerging Kyrgyz state was unable to offer a new ideology which could unite and mobilise citizens during the post-Soviet identity crisis. In a time of powerlessness of the state, there appeared a unique chance for each citizen to create an identity. Thousands of people began, often in subconscious ways, to search and find such forms of existence and survival as would help them to overcome the crisis.

Traditional practices, including spiritual and religious experiences, have begun to re-emerge and be revived in Kyrgyzstan as well as in other Central Asian countries. The revival of spiritual and religious consciousness, and the shift from an officially atheist state to independence and religious freedom, has brought a return to such widespread spiritual practices as pilgrimages to sacred sites or *mazars*, worshipping of ancestors' spirits, healing, and many others.

At Aigine RC, our initial research has focused on pilgrimage to *mazars*, and on the *shaykhs*, the caretakers and specialists connected to these *mazars*.

The word *mazar* comes from Arabic; originally, it means 'place that is visited'. It refers to an object of pilgrimage, usually the grave of a Muslim Saint. At some point in history, a more specific notion of *mazar* as 'the place of shahid's burial' appeared. Over time, the word came to be used to designate any

place with a sacred character. In Kyrgyz the term has been applied broadly to sacred sites of all kinds including springs, trees and rock formations.

Because of the historical circumstances mentioned above, gathering information on and describing *mazars* was impossible for quite a while. Until the present time, stories about *mazars* have been preserved only in the oral tradition. The Aigine team collected, described and listed details of 157 sacred sites in the Talas province. The number of sacred sites itself suggests that *mazar* pilgrimage is a live and pervasive tradition.

	Total for Talas oblast	Rayon			
		Kara-Buura	Bakay-Ata	Manas	Talas
Population in thousands	199.9	49.9	38.9	28.4	82.7
Total number of mazars	157	40	46	34	37

At present, mythological or pre-historical, historical and modern sacred sites might be distinguished, presumably, by a time of their creation and/or existence. For example, one of the biggest sacred sites in Talas is called Nyldy Ata (Farther Nyldy). I have found no reference to a person called Nyldy in Kyrgyz written sources relating to history, folklore, or ethnography. Oral stories, told by their custodians, contain the events that happened about three thousands years ago. The names of the *mazars* like Ak Baka (White Frog), Ak Tailak (White Bear Cub), Bugu Ene (Mother Deer), Kochkor Ata (Farther Goat) reflect the time that might be defined as mythological. Historical sites are connected to historical events or people, whose names, faces and stories have been fixed in books, films and other socially recognised media of documentation, including a family's photo albums or genealogy. Sometimes *mazars* are also distinguished by their functions or specialisation. Another distinguishing feature is ownership status. There are *mazars* in state, private and public ownership. Sacred sites are divided into two types according to origin – natural sacred sites, such as springs, mountains, forests, stones, trees, lakes, or caves; and *mazars* created by humans, such as mausoleums of great people, ancient buildings, or graves of martyrs, including victims of political repression. However, the most sacred sites are combinations of natural phenomena with recognised and sometimes designated graves as well as unnoticed and unrecognised burials. Such *mazars* are places where death and life, culture

and nature, humans and ‘other-than human-beings’ (Harvey, 2006: XI) are seen as reconciled and equal.

In Talas, the Aigine team has worked with about 400 informants. The only criterion to select informants was their more or less regular pilgrimage to sacred sites. During a six-month period, the team visited the sites mostly on Thursdays and Fridays and asked very simple questions, such as when and why people started visiting *mazars*, where and how they usually went to worship, or what the expectations for and outcomes of their pilgrimages were. At the sacred sites we met people of different age, sex and social status. As for ethnicity, about ninety-nine percent of the informants were Kyrgyz. The main reasons driving Kyrgyz people to go on pilgrimages are health, fertility, well-being and spiritual need (Aitpaeva et al. 2007: 124–135).

In the most general terms, all regular visitors to *mazars* can be divided into two types: cultural practitioners and needy people. Cultural practitioners are those for whom visiting *mazars* is part of a profession or vocation – healers, clairvoyants, narrators of the *Manas* epic and other folk genres, and also psychotherapists. Needy people are those for whom visiting *mazars* is related to problem-solving. The pilgrims range from university graduates to those lacking even a basic education. There are administrators and politicians, people who run clinics, teach at schools and universities and housekeepers. Initially, most of the cultural practitioners came to *mazars* as people in need of help to restore their health, or to have certain life problems solved, and later such practice became a part of their professional activities and life.

Our field research revealed that there is a strong folk concept that certain people are chosen for a life mission, such as healing, reciting epics, guarding sacred sites, mediating in different ways between this world and the otherworld, and that their health and well being are directly affected by their acceptance or rejection of this spiritual mission. The health of the people selected for spiritual service strongly relates to whether they accept or reject their ‘calling’. Only those who have accepted their spiritual mission can live a fair and healthy life, with the social approval of others. Otherwise, they are likely to suffer long-term illnesses and die early. The concept of the divine call and the necessity to respond to it are well-known in divination and shamanistic study (Walsh 1996: 46; Eliade 1998: 23–29; Winkelma and Peek 2004). In Talas, this concept applies to a diverse spectrum of spiritual practices, which are unified by the general term *kyrgyzchylık* (Kyrgyzness); sometimes it also called *aktyk* (whiteness) or *aruuluk* (purity). During the period 2006–2008,

when Aigine RC was working in the Yssuk-Kul province, we found the same terms and similar concepts behind them.

The Concept of *Kyrgyzchylyk*

Kyrgyzchylyk is the key word and concept we regularly encountered when researching sacred sites in Talas and later in Issuk-Kul. There is no easy translation of this term into the Russian or English languages, and not even a generally recognised definition of it in the Kyrgyz language; it has many different meanings. The term does not appear in classic works of Kyrgyz ethnography (Amanaliev 1963, 1970; Bayalieva 1981; Abramzon 1990; Karataev and Eraliev 2005). But this word is regularly used by Kyrgyz speakers and is used commonly in everyday life.

The word *kyrgyzchylyk* consists of two parts: *kyrgyz* and *chylyk*. *Kyrgyz* is the name of an ethnic group. *Chylyk* (*-chilik*, *-chuluk*, *chülük*) is a collective suffix which means a totality of definite characteristics and qualities. For example, *musulmanchylyk* is translated as ‘Muslim-ness’, *tengirchilik* as ‘Tengrian beliefs’ (Tengir is sky god), *tuuganchylyk* as kinship. There is no single positive or negative connotation assigned to this suffix: *koshomatchylyk* means groveling, and *mei'manchylyk* means hospitality.

Kyrgyzchylyk can be translated as *Kyrgyzness* and defined as the totality of definite characteristics and qualities inherent to Kyrgyz ethnicity. In the widest sense *kyrgyzchylyk* is everything that is in any way connected with the traditional identification of Kyrgyz people.

A word with such polysemic potential depends for its different meanings and uses on historical period and social context. During the period of Soviet rule the term took on a very negative meaning because it was assumed that the Kyrgyz were backwards, lower on the scale of social evolution, and therefore the label referred to the assumed backwardness and ignorance of the Kyrgyz. Nowadays many Russian and Kyrgyz people continue to use it to refer to negative aspects of Kyrgyz life. When criticising the promotion of relatives in the sphere of public administration or making presents to top people, the term *kyrgyzchylyk* is broadly used.

Today the semantics of the term has radically changed, however, and has become more closely associated with the philosophy of *tengirchilik* (Ömüräliev 1994) and such concepts as ‘a specific system of world perception’, ‘a particular way’, ‘a system of ideas and values inherent to Kyrgyz people only’

(Ibragim and Tajiev 2006; Koshaliev 2007). Kadyr Koshaliev (2007: 3; my transl.) expresses the ideas which are typical today for many Kyrgyz people from various spheres: cinema, literature and folklore, ethnology, policy and education: 'For a person who can think deeply and carefully, *kyrgyzchylyk* is a great philosophy and endless saga. The *kyrgyzchylyk* concept is defined as a peculiarity of the Kyrgyz ethnic group. It was a root concept proclaiming principles of generosity and fairness in military-nomadic life.' According to the mediums Ibragim kyzy Zulfia and Mamyrasul Tajiev, which have been receiving spiritual messages since 1998, '*kyrgyzchylyk* is a traditional, ethical, eternal, endless super power that has developed under no control and without boundaries, endured for centuries' (Ibragim and Tajiev 2006: 43; my transl.).

I would define this approach as a 'romantic national movement'. It is characterised by the 'excellent' and 'perfect' judgement of *kyrgyzchylyk*; the use of mythological references, epic heritage and language as basic sources of material and ideas; the idea of national oneness or exclusiveness of the Kyrgyz nation; and a panegyrically-didactic style. This approach gives rise to interesting hypotheses and suppositions; for example, the subtitle of one book translates as 'Kyrgyz people will lead world peoples to the goodness' (Sariev 2004).

Systematic and scrupulous analysis of the proposed ideas is not typical for this approach. If such analysis is insisted upon, this is met with opposition, such as 'analytical versus spiritual' or 'rational versus irrational'.

It is assumed that *kyrgyzchylyk* can rarely be applied to anyone or anything that is 'not Kyrgyz'. In this light, the dichotomy 'rational versus irrational' can be transformed into the dichotomy 'rational versus traditional', or 'rational versus national'. Such predictable transformation can considerably increase the level of positive assessment of the *kyrgyzchylyk* concept under conditions of split identity as they exist among people living in countries of the post-Soviet space. Moreover, it can lead to a more radical separation of 'alien rationality' from 'native spirituality' unless attempts are made by actors representing our 'own rationality' to describe and explain thoroughly our 'own spirituality'.

***Kyrgyzchylyk* as Spirituality**

Our field research confirms the importance and necessity of 'distinguishing spirituality from religiosity' (Groff 2004b): 14). The concept of spirituality is often perceived as a synonym for religiosity, realised in behaviour through a complex set of established rituals. If individual beliefs do not correspond

with officially recognised religion but are formed on the basis of native national traditions, the meaning of ‘spirituality’ is broader than that of ‘religiosity’ and, moreover, may or may not include belief in God (Titone 1991, Sullivan 1993).

As mentioned above, spiritual *kyrgyzchylyk* is today more actively used to mean being selected for a particular spiritual mission, including the presence of unusual and extraordinary abilities.

The spiritual spectrum of *kyrgyzchylyk* includes folk medicine in its most varied forms (cf. Adylov 2007), such as *tabypchylyk* (herb and breath healing), *kuuchuluk* (conjuring), *bubu* (healing by women), or *bakshylyk* (healing and acting with shamanistic techniques), as well as *ai'tymchylyk* (soothsaying), *manaschylyk* (narration of the Manas² epic), *dubanachylyk* (dervish phenomenon), *jai'chylyk* (human influence on weather), *tüsh jooru* (interpretation of dreams), *tölgöchülük* (divination), *shai'yktyk* (caring for *mazars*) and others.

The term *kyrgyzchylygy bar* can be used to describe someone with *kyrgyzchylyk*, and refers to a person with extraordinary gifts to cure, recite epics, soothsay and conduct other traditional practices without any special education and training. These gifts have been received through inspiration from supernatural forces. The idea of a supernatural gift and the possibility of a human being possessing it suggest an interconnection of different worlds and times. *Kyrgyzchylygy barlar* (bearers of *kyrgyzchylyk*) of any type and quality are united by a capacity to mediate between visible and invisible worlds, the world of people and the world of spirits, the world of owners of gifts and their ‘masters’ or patrons, the world of thinking and feeling creatures other than human – all this is consistent with and implied by *kyrgyzchylyk*. For *kyrgyzchylyk* practitioners, past, present and future are links in the insoluble chain of time. According to this meaning, *kyrgyzchylygy barlar* are people with an ability to transcend any boundaries of body, brain, time and space.

There are two culturally defined factors that help recognise *kyrgyzchylyk* and differentiate it from psychiatric disorders: inheritance, that is, when one or several of the forefathers or other relatives in the paternal and/or maternal line had, and practised, special abilities; and prolonged disease, the cause of which cannot be diagnosed by experts in medicine or by other means of modern equipment and analysis. These culturally recognised indicators of *kyrgyzchylyk* coincide with the conclusions that Mircea Eliade drew in the middle of the last century when researching shamanism in other regions (Eliade 1998: 27).

Some ninety-nine percent of our informants recognise the fact of inheritance and know about ancestors who carried *kyrgyzchylyk*. As Davletova Chynar explains:

In 1920 my grandfather visited Azimbai' Aji and died a year later. My grandfather would wear only white clothes and always carry rosary. I started having serious problems with my health; then in 1980 my child died. My relatives said to me: You must practice *kyrgyzchylyk*; you have inherited *kyrgyzchylyk* from our family's ancestors. I found out that *kyrgyzchylyk* is inherited from generation to generation. Now I fully follow the rules of *kyrgyzchylyk* and try to practise it appropriately. I also visit *mazars* on a regular basis. (Aitpaeva et al. 2007: 238)

Different manifestations or different practices of *kyrgyzchylyk* occur among different generations of the same family. Ulan, whose case we will encounter later on, is a Manas epic teller. There were no epic tellers in his genealogy (seven generations); however, there was a traditional mullah with the gift to heal.

There is also a certain algorithm typical for all representatives of Kyrgyz traditional culture. Everything is started with the aforementioned prolonged disease. Treatment in institutions of formal medicine, as a rule, does not have positive results and people have to search for alternative ways of curing themselves. According to a healer from Talas, Burul Kojobekova, people having *kyrgyzchylyk* will never recover with the help of medicine. This reflects the belief of all spiritual practitioners of Talas and Issyk-Kul with whom Aigine RC has worked (Aitpaeva et al. 2007: 226–251).

Toktosh Ümötbaeva, a seventy-eight-year-old *bübü*, is sure: the worst illness is *kyrgyzchylyk*. She says, as a result of this illness, 'when I was a girl I had not lived and experienced things that girls usually experience; when I was a young married woman I had not lived and experienced things that young women usually experience'. Another practitioner used the expression: '*Kyrgyzchylyk* tortured me' (Aitpaeva et al. 2007: 226).

These diseases can be revealed at any age. They often coincide with a twelve-year cycle in a person's life (Mukambetova 2001; Aitpaeva 2006: 8). Bearers of *kyrgyzchylyk* frequently fall sick in childhood, but diseases can be acutely developed at any other age. Diseases are accompanied by strange and terrible dreams or visions, on the one hand, and a series of accidents around the 'chosen' person, on the other hand. Moreover, in most cases, the person's

diagnosis (*kyrgyzchylyk karmady*) is made that he/she has caught, or been caught by, *kyrgyzchylyk*. The literal meaning of the expression indicates that *kyrgyzchylyk* was initially an animated power entering a person from outside.

Diseases, failures and visions force people to start searching for ways of implementing their mission if they accept it. Denial and misunderstanding of the mission have serious consequences, which might even lead to death, as Kumarbübü's story illustrates:

Kyrgyzchylyk caught me when I was 29 years old, but I did not accept it until I was 49 years old. I could not move. I have suffered terribly from this. I tried everything to heal my illness. One day I was brought to a famous *moldo* [mullah]. He said: 'You have been carrying your father's (spiritual) burden; you must realise and accept that.' I said: 'I will not accept it; how may I live with that?' I was against it. Finally I could not resist it because I wanted the pain to go away. I have accepted it. It is a very difficult task; one should execute all the rules. If one does not follow its rules properly one may be sick. This is sent by Allah. We do not notice when this is sent and keep visiting doctors to understand what is happening with our health. If one chooses this way, this does not mean that everything becomes good, because once one has chosen this way, one must follow all the rules and if not, then something bad may happen. This is a difficult task. (Aitpaeva et al. 2007: 233)

Searching for a way includes searching for a mentor who can explain what is happening, or for communication with supernatural forces to realise what is happening.

As with gifted people of other cultures (Eliade 1998: 93–112; Walsh 1996: 38f.), the overwhelming majority of people chosen by *kyrgyzchylyk* have a mentor. Sometimes a pair 'mentor-follower' may not work well together, as in the case of Sonunbubu S., and a needy follower has to start another search. Some practitioners say that they do not have a mentor, or rather, that they have mentors who are not people but supernatural forces. Thus, the healer Burul Kojobekova from Talas and the Manas teller Ulan Ismailov from Kara-Kol did not have human mentors, but they perceived fundamentals of their gifts with the help of supernatural tutors and teachers. This way is also experienced in other parts of the world (Walsh 1996: 38f.; Vitebsky 2001: 59–63).

For the individual, a period of realising his/her 'specific' way and carrying out his/her obligations is accompanied by a considerable improvement in health and also the gaining of stability in life and internal peace. Generally,

ways of accepting and carrying out different practices of spiritual *kyrgyzchylyk* might be considered as one of the manifestations of a universal model, certain types of which have been described by Eliade (1998: 39–119), Walsh (1996: 31–104), Vitebsky (2001: 52–94) and Virlana Tkacz et al. (2002: 12–14).

Usually different rituals are practised at the sacred places in the presence of a mentor and close relatives. They symbolise certain steps of the implementation of a spiritual mission. At many *mazars* of Kyrgyzstan, especially on a Thursday night, one can run into people who are undergoing a test (Aitpaeva 2006: 122–123).

One of the Aigine informants, *dubana* (dervish) Atamkul, started his mission in 1985, a year before the time when Gorbachev's *perestroika* was introduced in what was then the Soviet Union. According to the dervish:

One of my ancestors was Baabedin.³ I did not know about it. I even did not know that I had *dubana* qualities and skills. Later I became suddenly sick and had mental problems. I could not understand why this was happening. I went to many doctors; none of them could help me. One day I met one famous *dubana* from Issyk-Kul region. He said that one of my ancestors was a great *dubana* and if I do not accept *dubanachylyk* I will not get healed. I wanted to live further and I accepted this. There are only two ways to get away from *dubanachylyk*: first is death and second is acceptance of it. I decided to continue my ancestor's way. (Aitpaeva et al. 2007: 258, 259)

Over a period of almost twenty years, Atamkul became a well-known dervish not only in Talas, but around the country. His biggest regret is that there is no follower who will continue his way. In this context it is necessary to narrate a dramatic story, confirming dervish Atamkul's belief in 'the only two ways to get away from *dubanachylyk*'.

Sixty-five-year-old Jumadil Mamekov is currently the *shai'yk* of Chypy *Mazar* in Talas. He has four years of secondary school education, and wonderfully combines academic strictness and logical thought with mythical perception of the world. Originally Jumadil comes from a family where seven fathers have been *shai'yks* of the *mazar* Manas Kümbözü (Manas Mausoleum). Among his kin there were *manaschy*, *komuzchy* (the *komuz* is a folk musical instrument) and *dubanas* known throughout the Talas valley. According to the traditional Kyrgyz understanding, the family is chosen to bear *kyrgyzchylyk*. However, one of Jumadil's six children, the eighteen-year-old son, does

not want to take up this spiritual burden, and he is now being treated at the Chym Korgon hospital for mentally ill people.

Since he was 8 months old he has had seizures. Now, from time to time he may be very sick. I took him everywhere to be healed. We visited doctors, different *tabyps* [a type of healer], we even visited *mazars*. Because of no results, we had to hospitalise him for some time. There is a great *moldo* called Kojo Bii' who can cure such diseases. If three of them read the Quran over him he would be healed. Such *moldo* are said to be only in Tashkent and Bukhara. To find 3 such *moldo* is impossible now.

Jumadin has a very clear explanation for his son's disease:

There is one more way of being healed – this is to become a *dubana* like Atamkul. But my son says: 'It is better to die than to become a *dubana*'. Now he has been so depressed saying: 'As far as I do not serve in the Army or do not study or cannot make friends with girls, how can I call my life a life?' You see he desires a life of mere people. He is, by the way, a very clever boy. (Aitpaeva et al. 2007: 197)

Jumadin believes that if his son had accepted *kyrgyzchylyk*, everything would have been another way, but he is unable to persuade the son.

Numerous interviews conducted with people chosen for spiritual services with a predictable constancy demonstrate the identical milestones of their own stories. In this case, the freedom of choice amounts to choosing between a life following one's predestination, or suffering and death in the case of its denial.

Kyrgyzchylyk: Transcending Islamic Boundary Lines

Islam is the main religion in Kyrgyzstan. There is an academic tradition to consider Islam in Kyrgyzstan as a mixture of traditional and Islamic beliefs (Poliakov 1992; Montgomery 2007; Toktogulova 2007). However, as Nathan Light (2007: 492) points out: 'In the case of Kyrgyz religion, throughout the 20th century both Soviet scholars and clerical officials have attempted to distinguish Islamic and native practices, while popular practitioners have generally been less concerned with these divisions.'

The overwhelming majority of traditional practitioners or *kyrgyzchylyk* bearers consider themselves Muslims and combine without conflict the ancient

values with Islamic norms. And the Islamic norms are as traditional to them as the pre-Islamic ones. The differentiation between Islamic and pre-Islamic is effectively erased for them. Aigine research in 2004–2006 has shown that exactly this type of Muslim is typical and widespread, but not voicing their position. One of the reasons why they are silent is ‘because many people perceive Islam as a shared, scripturally-based international religion, and they do not hear about the diversity of Islamic practices throughout the world, they often accept as authoritative pronouncements about what all Muslims should do’ (Light 2007: 492).

Current Islamic authorities in the country do consider this type of Muslim as ‘impure’ and ‘incorrect’. The ‘Pure’ or ‘Mosque Muslims’ consider *kyrgyzchylyk* to be of historical importance, not as currently valuable phenomena. The main reason why they have a negative attitude towards *kyrgyzchylyk* practices is because of their fear of *shirk*. *Shirk* means equating material things or human beings with Allah and it is the unforgivable sin in Islam. It should be recognised that there is a problem of control and power between followers of popular Islam and clerical Islam (Toktogulova 2007: 511–517). Moreover, the potential conflict between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’, ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ Muslims has its roots in the old contradiction of polytheism and monotheism. Those who are visibly monotheistic become ‘pure’ and ‘correct’, since a long time ago the modern world has rejected polytheism.

The ‘incorrect’ or popular Islam of the Kyrgyz practitioners has an ‘extra’ focus on rootedness in nature and ancient spiritual practices. In this connection, *kyrgyzchylyk* might be compared with new religiosities, which, ‘as they emerge both inside and outside of traditional world religions, are characterised by a strong sense of a holistic emphasis on nature, and they experiment frankly with imaginations and traditions of *sacred space*’ (Bergmann 2007: 372; orig. emphasis)

Kyrgyz practitioners acting within Islamic boundaries usually argue that worship of Allah takes diverse forms, and these forms exist only by Allah’s will and creativity. If we look for scientific paradigms to explain this notion of traditional thinking, Niels Henrik Gregersen’s theology of nature would be one such paradigm: ‘Gregersen’s theology of nature builds on the notion of God as “the Creator of creativity”’ and ‘we should see the natural self-unfolding of life forms as an expression of God’s creativity’ (Melin 2007).

The majority of traditional practitioners who are Muslims have bypassed orthodox restrictions not by virtue of intelligence or belief in a ‘special’ re-

ligion: they simply needed to survive and remain in this life. Even during seventy years of Soviet governance, when atheism was deeply rooted in the society, the spiritual custodians practiced in spite of the persecution. In order to hide from the militia they went to sacred sites in the dark and would spend nights under bushes; they never gave up their beliefs. Actually, traditional practitioners played a significant role in preserving Islam during Soviet time (Toktogulova 2007: 517).

Along with Islam-oriented practitioners, there are several communities and practitioners who deliberately distinguish themselves from Islam. They are healers, clairvoyants, oral historians, ritual keepers and other Kyrgyz wisdom carriers. They signify the great changes happening to the earth, humanity and the role of indigenous people in that change. Aigine RC is currently working with two such communities. These communities predominantly work based on their transcendental experience, being free of Islamic religious influence. As a rule this experience includes three main components: receiving messages from the divine (spirits, 'other-than-human beings'; cf. Harvey 2006: xv), interpreting divine messages and following up these interpretations of divine messages, which may involve writing books, creating pictures, visiting sacred sites, carrying out rituals, creating spiritual communities and other activities.

Messages usually come to a person who is in a raised state of consciousness. Traditionally this is called *maalymat aluu* (receiving information) or *aiyan aluu* (receiving prophetic dreams and visions (Aitpaeva 2006: 119). A message receiver may interpret a message alone or with a community/group of like-minded people. It should be noted that there is a significant gender difference between traditional spirituality and Islam. Since Islam prefers not to have women in public, some women who search for the satisfaction of their spiritual needs and public service turn to diverse types of traditional activities, such as sacred sites pilgrimage and healing. For example, at the moment there are four published books that have 'come from the divine', and three of these were written by women (one of these books is actually a series of eight published volumes so far, presenting a new version of the Manas epic). From a gender point of view, kyrgyzchylyk currently is a way to trans-evaluate and transcend gender boundaries characteristic of both Kyrgyz traditional patriarchy and Islam. Vitebsky (2001: 11) noted that '[t]here can be no shaman without a surrounding society and culture'. No religiosity exists in a 'pure', isolated space. It might be different with spirituality. However, modern Kyr-

gyz spirituality is grounded in the surrounding social context and exists alongside culture, politics, economics, legislation and education, to a certain extent reflecting their qualities and level. In the light of the fact that Kyrgyzstan is a developing country with extremely limited access to resources in any social field, spirituality is used as one of the sources of securing welfare and social recognition. Omurbubu Begalieva was one of the first practitioners to publish 'divine' books: *Основные законы развития человечества* [Main Laws of Human Development, 2003] and *Ааламдан келген каттап* [Messages Came from the Universe, 2004]. She also ran for Parliament in 2000. Although she did not succeed, she highlighted the connection between spiritual and political power. Traditional practitioners – healers, clairvoyants, epic storytellers, sacred site custodians, and others – become powerful persons only when their practices are publicly recognised (at the level of community, village, region, country).

***Kyrgyzchylyk* in the Context of the Traditional Worldview**

In order to study the *spiritual kyrgyzchylyk* in a broader social and cultural context, the Aigine Research Centre conducted a field research project on 'Communication with the Spirits' in 2006 and 2007. A complex set of rigidly structured interviews with 200 randomly selected respondents from Talas oblast allowed verification of the presence of powerful cultural roots in relation to the supernatural abilities that *kyrgyzchylyk* practitioners must possess. For example, more than seventy-seven percent of respondents do not doubt that people who can communicate with ancestral spirits really exist, and almost forty-five percent of respondents are sure that ancestral spirits are capable of communicating with the living (however, only with chosen ones). Similar results are found in many other direct statements from the interviews, describing the mediums' abilities, their responsibilities and meaning for the community as a whole.

The belief in the supernatural power, that is a core of spiritual *Kyrgyzchylyk*, is directly related to the idea of interconnection of people and nature:

- a human being is an integral part of nature, and when this natural connection is broken it results in life difficulties, sometimes illnesses;
- the souls of our ancestors (*arbaks*) are not only the object of worship, but also a source of information about the past and future, knowledgeable

advisors and invaluable helpers in finding solutions to life's problems, including cures for illnesses;

- a gifted person cannot realise his or her talent individually and must not credit the gift to his or her self. However, the role of a medium in communication between the souls of the ancestors, the keepers of the 'old' traditions on the one hand and the material 'new' world on the other hand is an extremely large responsibility.

There is a powerful mechanism that might be called the traditional worldview, which supports modern spiritual *Kyrgyzchylyk*. The ideas of holism and reciprocity lie at the foundation of this traditional worldview.

◆ ————— ◆

Gulnara Aitpaeva is Director of the Aigine Cultural Research Center, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In 1999, she created the Kyrgyz Ethnology Department at the American University in Kyrgyzstan. In 2004 she founded, together with two colleagues, the Aigine Cultural Research Center, which conducts research into lesser-known aspects of the cultural and natural heritage of Kyrgyzstan, integrating local, esoteric and scholarly epistemologies relating to cultural, biological and ethnic diversities.

————— ◆

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a plenary lecture at the 9th SIEF Congress, delivered at the University of Ulster on 17 June 2008.
2. The great Kyrgyz epic *Manas* has roughly half a million lines. *Manas* telling and tellers played an exclusive role in traditional Kyrgyz society and it held a special place among Kyrgyz folk works.
3. Baabedin Bahhaudin is the name of the Buhara protector; usually the heroes of Central Asian epics call on his help.

References

- Abramzon, S. (1990), *Kyrgyz People and Their Ethnic and Genetic and Historical and Cultural Ties* (Frunze: Kyrgyzstan).
- Adylov, D. (2007), 'Healing at Mazars: Sources of Healing, Methods of Curative Impact, Types of Healers and Criteria of Their Professional Qualification', in Aitpaeva, G.,

- M. Toktogulova and A. Egemberdieva (2007), *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan: Rituals and Practitioners in Talas* (Bishkek: Maxprint), 377–395.
- Aitpaeva, G. (2006), 'The Phenomenon of Sacred Sites in Kyrgyzstan: Interweaving of Mythology and Reality', in *Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes* (Paris: UNESCO), 118–123.
- Aitpaeva, G., M. Toktogulova and A. Egemberdieva (2007), *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan: Rituals and Practitioners in Talas* (Bishkek: Maxprint).
- Aldhouse-Green, M. and S. (2005), *The Quest for the Shaman Shape-Shifters, Sorcerers and Spirit-Healers of Ancient Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson).
- Amanaliev, B. (1963), *From History of Philosophic Idea of Kyrgyz Nation* (Frunze: Ilim).
- (1970), 'About Reflection of Religious Ideology and Freethinking in the Historical Experience of Kyrgyz People', in *Public Psychology and Religious Prejudices* (Frunze: Ilim).
- Bayalieva, T. (1981), *Religious Remnants of Kyrgyz People and Their Overcoming* (Frunze: Ilim).
- Bergmann, S. (2007), 'Theology on Its Spatial Turn: Space, Place and Built Environments Challenging and Changing the Images of God', *Religious Compass* 1 (3): 372.
- Bering, J. (2002a), 'The Existential Theory of Mind', *Review of General Psychology* 6: 3–24.
- (2002b), 'Intuitive Conceptions of Dead Agents' Minds: The Natural Foundations of Afterlife Beliefs as Phenomenological Boundary', *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 2: 263–308.
- Bloom, P. (2002), *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (New York: Basic Books).
- Boyer, P. (2001), *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books).
- Brudnyi, A. (2004), *The Science of Understanding*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Labirint).
- Carter, T. (2004), 'The Effects of Spiritual Practices on Recovery from Substance Abuse', *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 5: 409–413.
- Cox, J. (2005), 'Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe: Religious Experience in and on Behalf of the Community', *Studies in World Christianity. The Edinburgh Review of Theology and Religious Studies* 6: 190–205.
- Eliade, M. (1998), *Shamanism* (Kiev: Sophia).
- Fry, P. (1976), 'Spirits of Protest: Spirit-mediums and Articulation of Consensus among the *Zezuru* of Southern Rhodesia', *Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology* 14: 65–90.
- Gabbard, G. (2000), 'A Neurobiologically Informed Perspective on Psychotherapy', *British Journal of Psychiatry* 8: 17–122.
- Groff, S. (2004a), *Beyond the Brain* (Moscow: Act).
- (2004b), *The Transpersonal Vision: The Healing Potential of Non-ordinary States of Consciousness* (Moscow: Act).
- Ibragim, Z. and M. Tajiev (2006), *Tenir Ata* (Bishkek: Biyiktik).
- Karataev, O. and S. Eraliev (2005), *Kyrgyz Ethnographic Dictionary* (Bishkek: Bii'iktik).
- Koshaliev, K. (2007) 'Kyrgyzchylyk' (Bishkek: Biyiktik).
- Koss-Chioino, J. (2005), 'Spirit Healing, Mental Health and Emotional Regulation', *Zygon* 40 (2): 409–421.

- Koss-Chiino, J., T. Leatherman and C. Greenway (2003), *Medical Pluralism in the Andes* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Light, N. (2007), 'Participation and Analysis in Studying Religion in Central Asia', in Aitpaeva, G., M. Toktogulova and A. Egemberdieva (2007), *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan: Rituals and Practitioners in Talas* (Bishkek: Maxprint), 476-497.
- Mandelbrot, B. (1977), *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (New York: W. H. Freeman).
- Marks Tarlow, T. (1999), 'The Self as a Dynamical System', *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Sciences* 3: 311-345.
- Melin, A. (2007), 'Biodiversity and Christian Ethics – A Critical Discussion', paper presented at the inaugural conference of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment. University of Bamberg, Germany, 24-26th May.
- Mukambetova, A. (2001), 'Tengrian Calendar as a Basis of Nomadic Civilization (on Kazach material)', in *History and Culture of Aral-Caspian*, vol. 1 (Almaty: Kuz Jolu).
- Ömüraliev, C. (1994), *Tengirchilik* (Bishkek: Bi'iktik).
- Pinker, S. (2002), *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking).
- Prigogine, I. and I. Stengers (1986), *Poryadok is haosa* (Moscow: Progress).
- Sariev, A. (2004), *Jashyl Kitep* (Bishkek: Biyiktik).
- Sullivan, W. (1993), 'It Helps Me to be a Whole Person: The Role of Spirituality among the Mentally Changed', *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal* 16: 125-134.
- Titone, A. (1991), 'Spirituality and Psychotherapy in Social Work Practice', *Spirituality and Social Work Communication* 2, 7-9.
- Tkacz, V., S. Zhambalov and W. Phipps (2002), *Shanar Dedication Ritual of a Buryat Shaman in Siberia as conducted by Bayir Rinchinov* (New York: Parabola).
- Vitebsky, P. (2001), *The Shaman* (London: Duncan Baird).
- Wadsworth, Y. (1998), 'What is Participatory Action Research?' Action Research International, Paper 2. <www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html> (accessed 5 March 2009).
- Walsh, R. (1996), *Spirit of Shamanism* (Moscow: Transpersonal Institution).
- Winkelman, M. and P. Peek (2004), *Divination and Healing: Potent Vision* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press).