



Reflections on Ethnic diversity in Kyrgyzstan and implications for pluralism: papers by Janyl Bokontaeva, Amantur Japarov, Ideat Temirbek uulu and Gulrano Ataeva

Dr. Jeff Sahadeo (Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada)

The scope of Kyrgyzstan's diversity unites these papers, which offer strong research into the opportunities and challenges of cross-ethnic or cross-cultural encounters. Each takes a ground-level approach, examining detailed interactions between communities to draw out the nuances of individual and group relationships across different regions and time periods. Archival sources, oral histories and interviews offer direct access into factors that affect pluralism in Kyrgyzstan's past and present.

The legacy of empire and external control provides important context to these papers. **Janyl Bokontaeva's** "History of the Formation and Development of Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Karakol" displays an ethnic diversity influenced by Chinese, tsarist Russian and Soviet control. Ethnic entrepreneurs in the city of Karakol include Dungans and Uighurs, many of whom came from Chinese territories from the eighteenth century onwards, and Russians, Ukrainians and Koreans, the subject of population politics in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like the Koreans in Karakol, the Karachais who are the subject of **Amantur Japarov's** paper, "The Deportation of the Karachais to Kyrgyzstan" were forcibly brought to Central Asia as part of Stalinist deportations. Over 26,000 arrived in Kyrgyzstan during the Second World War. In his paper, "Integration Issues of Ethnic Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan: The Example of Kyrgyz who Moved from Tajikistan," **Ideat Temirbek uluu** examines a case where Soviet border-making at once enforced the political importance of a Kyrgyz identity within a homeland and divided Kyrgyz between republics, now independent states. The politicization of ethnicity also appears in **Gulrano Ataeva's** "Isfana: A Land of Diversities." Kyrgyz and Uzbeks have separate parties to contest elections, a form of government that Russia brought to the region. In each of these cases, local communities have wrestled with the facts of diversity, and the authors work to display the extent to which pluralism has, or can, emerge.

Each author focuses on spaces of exchange, with all except Temirbek uluu finding largely positive relationships on the local level. Bokontaeva notes that entrepreneurs in Karakol are united through values of hard work and honesty. These small-scale businesspeople find moral as well as economic satisfaction in their enterprise, holding a sense of independence and duty. Respective ethnic groups gain reputations for expertise in the production and trade of certain goods, gaining customers' trust. Japarov notes that Karachais and Kyrgyz learned farming techniques from each other, also respecting mutual values of hard work and tolerance. As Karachais remained dispersed within Kyrgyz communities, interactions were frequent and friendly after initial wartime and postwar suffering. In Isfana, Ataeva notes a long tradition of multicultural exchange in the famously diverse Ferghana Valley. Isfana residents place their own twists on local cultural events such as sports, and seamlessly interact in ceremonies. Interchange also occurs in new regions of the city, where different ethnic groups live side-by-side; only the older *mahallas* (Uzbek neighbourhoods) are home to a single (Uzbek) ethnic group.

Temirbek uluu notes limited interchange in Chui oblast villages (located in the north of Kyrgyzstan), where integration of ethnic Kyrgyz who fled Tajikistan's 1990s civil war have been hampered by subsequent severe economic difficulties and "Tajikification" processes. Cultural differences form the focus of this paper—Kyrgyz from Tajikistan see local co-ethnics as "un-Islamic" due to different religious practices, whereas locals cite the facts that newcomers speak a different dialect and have different marriage and other practices as a reason to isolate them. Temirbek uluu notes that the state has failed to pay attention to social aspects of integration, even as it has allowed a legal framework for Kyrgyz from Tajikistan to gain recognition in their adopted state. The economic aspect should not be underplayed here; new migrants are arriving when Kyrgyzstan is experiencing a weak economy, even if not to the extent of Tajikistan. In Japarov's paper, relations between Karachais and Kyrgyz appeared to improve only after the end of wartime privations, when the Soviet Union began to invest in social services for the countryside. Japarov and Bokontaeva also note one positive legacy of empire: the Russian language has come to be seen as a "neutral" means of communication, and in their cases provides a work-around for potential challenges to positive interchange.

The authors also note challenges to pluralism in their scenarios. Bokontaeva mentions, though does not discuss, the pejorative "Sart" that local Kyrgyz launch at Uzbek traders. The nineteenth-century term, roughly meaning "oasis-dweller," shouted before the 1990 riots in Osh, connotes resentment towards those who see themselves as masters of urban spaces. The idea that each ethnic group has a separate domain for entrepreneurship hinders a sense of common purpose among Karakol's entrepreneurs. Even as Ataeva finds mutual understanding and a desire for pluralism to reign in Isfana, the 2010 Osh riots and their aftermath have strained relations. Kyrgyz and Uzbeks look upon each other with increased suspicion, even as they cooperated to ensure that violence did not reach the city. It would be interesting to consider how much the post-2008 economic downturn also plays into today's more strained relations in Isfana. Ataeva notes a renewed interest in history in the city, but it's not clear whether this might lead to "discoveries" of separate ethnic origins and paths or will privilege the benefits of pluralism; in Kyrgyzstan's current nationalist climate, it may well be the former.

Another theme that runs through the papers, to be considered alongside pluralism, is that of home. Ataeva sees the idea of Isfana as home to more than one ethnic group as holding the city together; even as political parties are organized along ethnic lines, the city's population respects the results and considers the other group as equal city-dwellers and citizens. Karakol's entrepreneurs operate in a city, developed in the tsarist era, that was always known to have a significant Slavic population and has served as a regional centre, so a legitimate home to various ethnicities. The Kyrgyz displaced from Tajikistan remain torn between two homes, holding to cultural rituals developed in different places that they hold to now, perhaps more than ever, in the face of physical displacement. This in turn hinders integration with local Kyrgyz, who use these differences to paint newcomers as, virtually, a different ethnic group altogether, one that challenges their own ideas of home and appropriate rituals both for members of their nationality and for Chui oblast.

The state is an important actor in all of these papers, by its absence as well as its presence. Temirbek uluu criticizes the state for not investing in social integration, a key step towards developing a sense of pluralism. New Kyrgyz arrivals still live in abandoned 1990s schools, isolated from the rest of society. The Karakol entrepreneurs interviewed by Bokontaeva condemned the state for its inability to promote the region as a tourist destination or otherwise

assist; rather, bureaucrats fidget with excessive regulations, which increases their chances to obtain bribes. This behaviour seems to be consistent regardless of the business owner's nationality, at least. Japarov's discussion of the Karachai deportees likely underplays the positive role of state investment in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. Ataeva privileges local state actors as holding the community together and notes that Isfana's multiethnic "hero," Ishkak Razzakov, was a politician claimed by both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz as their own. So we see instances where the state can motivate and symbolize pluralism, as well ignore its importance.

Ishkak Razzakov was a Soviet-era administrator, and his lionization stems in part from a broader nostalgia for the Brezhnev era especially, similar to elsewhere across the USSR when it was seen as a time of stability and relative prosperity. Japarov, Ataeva and Bokontaeva's articles contain wistfulness for the "friendship of peoples," the slogan that underpinned Soviet nationality policy, when members of all nationalities were equal citizens and minorities had rights to counterbalance the privileges of republican "titular" majorities. The idea of the friendship of peoples remains popular on the everyday level, associated with relatively good ethnic relations in Central Asia before the perestroika era.

So where can we go with these papers, when we consider how to address ethnic difficulties and move towards a pluralistic society? Clearly, the incidents where the greatest tensions are discussed in these papers are set against a backdrop of economic challenges, which is difficult for a developing country such as Kyrgyzstan to fully address. But Isfana is no richer than the rest of Kyrgyzstan; here a tradition of tolerance has been established over decades. Can the state play a role in bringing Kyrgyz from Tajikistan and other Kyrgyz together? How can community leaders assist? How can we bring about dialogue when each group is more inclined to lobby government authorities than talk to each other? Can we bring people of different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds together based on shared values of work and mutual respect that can overcome stereotypes, especially as, Japarov and Bokontaeva show, this can have economic benefits? Can cultural differences, over time, as in the case of Isfana, be celebrated and integrated, instead of serving as a cause for division as among the new arrivals in the Chui valley, despite—or perhaps because of—their shared ethnicity?