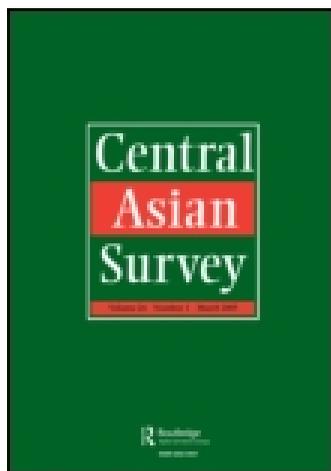


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## Migration and patrilineal descent: the role of women in Kyrgyzstan

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Migration processes in Kyrgyzstan have given rise to fundamental social and demographic changes, meaning that many villages and town quarters are inhabited nowadays solely by women, children and the elderly, whereas younger and middle-aged men live as migrants elsewhere. This article explores the role of women in the maintenance of a strong patrilineal descent system, in the absence of their husbands or sons. This is achieved by grandmothers who play a significant role in transmitting oral genealogies and passing stories on to their children. Another role of women lies in changing the names of male relatives of their husbands; while appointing whom one should marry is also of great importance. The role of mothers-in-law in the formation of their sons' marriage ties in the latter's absence points to the powerful positions of these women. The final point is that young brides continue to live with their parents-in-law – even if their husband does not – and they must be respectful brides.

**Keywords:** Kyrgyzstan; women; kinship; marriage; patriarchy; migration

### Introduction

Typical scholarly (and non-scholarly) representations of the place/status of women in patriarchal systems do not seem to leave much room for female agency in real life. Are patriarchy and female agency inherently contradictory? If we look at Central Asian history, the role and positions of women have been widely discussed and targeted as the subject of highly patriarchal and male-dominated public discourses. Soviet scholarship in particular has shaped this kind of stereotypical representation of patrilineal societies in Central Asia. Influenced by Soviet ideology, Abramzon (1971) examines Kyrgyz social organizations through the Marxist prism of 'class', i.e. in terms of the so-called feudal patriarchy of the nomads. In particular, women in Central Asia have been described in terms of suffering and great injustice.

However, when one looks at the work of the second half of the 19th century, Russian explorers and travellers visiting northern Kyrgyzstan noted the relatively high status and power of women (Russian explorers and travellers 1973, 185, 196). Kyrgyz women also had equal rights during pre-Soviet times as part of the nomadic system, specifically as a result of the nomads' need to deal with both the political and economic aspects of their mobile lives within their kinship-based social structure (Russian explorers and travellers 1973, 185, 196). Instead of saying that women had no rights and their existence was to perform sexual and reproductive functions, as well as to display unconditional obedience to their husbands (Tabyshalieva 1998; Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2001), I would argue there are many processes through which women actively affect political decisions in society at large. Women have become subjects of – and ideological sites for – religious, political and economic projects (Abu-Lughod 1998). Recent anthropological and historical literature looks at the construction and reproduction of gender ideology in conjunction with larger political goals, mainly the nation-building projects of contemporary societies (Kandiyoti 1991, 1992; Massell 1974). Issues of women's rights are 'part of an ideological

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terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated and women's appropriate place and conduct are being made to serve as boundary markers' (Kandiyoti 1992, 246).

With this perspective in mind, it is important to underscore the role of Central Asian women as the political tools of Bolshevik ideologues and policy makers at the beginning of the 20th century. Soviet Central Asian women underwent programmes of gender socialization, which brought about fundamental changes in social life (Edgar 2003; Kamp 2006; Northrop 2004). Soviet policy improved the position of women in society by advancing women's legal rights and benefits in the social welfare system (Akiner 1997).

I agree with Kamp (2006) that the relatively progressive status of women in Kyrgyzstan today is very much the consequence of earlier Soviet Union policy. It is true that the Soviet Union opened its doors for most working-class women, thereby encouraging them to use non-domestic labour as a resource for their self-realization, and that women were finally granted equal access to education and other resources which were once forbidden to them. Nevertheless, as Kandiyoti rightly argues, 'Soviet policies in Central Asia had the paradoxical consequences of both expanding opportunities for women's education and public presence and stalling processes of occupational and spatial mobility commonly associated with modernity' (Kandiyoti 2007, 616).

Kuehnast's research on the everyday lives of Kyrgyz women in times of uncertain transition focuses on the influence of the 'Sovietization' of women. Her main point is that women in Kyrgyzstan could simultaneously maintain Soviet ideals for women as well as Kyrgyz 'traditional' expectations: 'Kyrgyz women creatively intertwined Soviet and Kyrgyz gender ideologies as parts of their day to day lives, more through accommodation and collaboration and mutual critique than passive resistance' (Kuehnast 1997, 36). In the case of Tajikistan, Harris (2004) examines the interlinkage of gender and social control by exposing the ways in which Tajik society after the civil war threatened men's masculinity. This resulted in forcing through female conformity despite the suffering that it might cause. Uehling (2007) also talks about how the idea of masculinity is produced and maintained in a highly uncertain political context which 'assumes a natural order of things' in Tajikistan (139).

The nation-building projects of Central Asian governments have contributed to patriarchal authority by symbolizing the head of government as the male figure (Akiner 1997). However, the appropriation of 'patriarchy as national culture' by the post-Soviet state and the re-Islamization of society are not the only factors that place the role of women in the private realm. Rather, the leaders of newly independent countries in search of ideologies on national independence have started focusing on the ideas of 'de-Sovietization', calling on women to return to their 'natural destiny' and to give up their 'unnatural tasks' (Constantine 2007; Kandiyoti 2007, 616; Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004; Uehling 2007). Additionally, there was a decrease in state support for women during the post-Soviet period (Werner 2004a). Kandiyoti indicates that women were ambiguously incorporated into the postcolonial states, by giving them a position as citizens of the state as well as 'privileged custodians of national values' (Kandiyoti 2001, 54). This was also the case in Central Asian countries where newly independent governments used ambiguous rhetoric to incorporate women into the state as keepers of the *hearth* and *home*. These overtly male-centred and new national ideologies, however, overlooked women's real and active role in alleviating economic hardship, both within and outside the home.

Based on my fieldwork, I argue for a broader analytical integration of empirically observable female agency into the models of Central Asian patriarchal/patrilineal societies. Here Bourdieu's distinction between official and practical kinship is useful for my purposes. Bourdieu (1977, 34) provides a pathway of connecting representations, or discourses, on patrilineal descent, for instance, with the agencies and practices of women in rural Kyrgyzstan. In this article, I examine kinship and marriage practices in contemporary rural Kyrgyzstan, and draw attention to changes in family relations brought about by massive male out-migration in the post-Soviet

period. What forms of female labour and agency exist in these new social spaces? My argument is that women who stay behind keep and maintain ‘patriarchal’ orders and strong patrilineal descent in the absence of men. Here I would like to invoke Kandiyoti’s (1988, 275) idea of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ to argue that women with available resources have to negotiate in order to maximize their power and choices within a patriarchal structure. I would therefore like to demonstrate that women actually hold a determining position within the strongly patrilineal Kyrgyz society.

### Village Bulak

I encountered Bulak village for the first time in 2007 while following my informants during ethnographic research for my doctoral project. In 2012, I then had a chance to revisit the village and examine the impact of migration, as well as the mobility of people from one place to another. At that time, the village had 5042 residents<sup>1</sup> and consisted of 370 households, according to the village statistical report. The village is located in Issik-Ata raion of Chüi valley in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan. The social life of the village is centred on kinship, i.e. patrilineal descent is the basis of individual and group identity. The Kyrgyz segmentary patrilineage system consists of two emic terms for the lineage: *uruu* and the sub-lineage *uruk*. In this system, *uruu* is divided into several *uruk* sub-lineages, meaning that major lineages are segmented into small lineages. *Uruu* is a higher level of the lineage branch, whereas *uruk* is the lower level. Each *uruk* consists of approximately 40 or 50 households, and each can be considered a stable social unit. The members of any one lineage, whether of a lower- or higher-level segment, place great emphasis on being able to trace their patrilineal ancestors back seven to ten generations in order to prove their membership of an *uruu* and *uruk*. Thus, *uruu* and *uruk* define where people reside and how they are related to others in their social worlds. In earlier times, those who could not prove their *uruu* lineage membership were instead considered slaves (*kul*). Though residents use the name ‘Bulak’, given by the Soviets, the village is locally named after a common patrilineal ancestor, namely Nurmanbet (Suumurun). He serves as an ancestral point of reference for five minor lineages: Karasakal, Shaibek (Ongkogoi), Sagyndyk Kochokbai and Akjol (Figure 1). (On kinship in rural Kyrgyzstan, see Ismailbekova 2011.)

Kyrgyz also conceptualize kinship through ideas about bones and flesh, particularly those of women, both in descent terms and in funeral practices. For example, most of the time the husband’s patrilineage takes responsibility for the burials of women in the village. When a man marries, he brings his wife to the village and they follow the rules of patrilocal residence, so that co-resident males share patrilineal descent. This paper will now address genealogies in

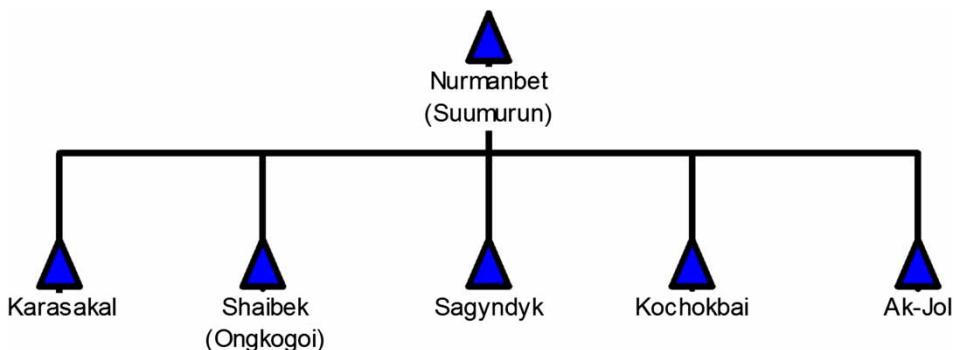


Figure 1. Simplified genealogical chart of the Nurmanbet (Suumurun).

detail, to show the significant role of women in transmitting oral genealogies and passing on stories to their children.

### Genealogies

The following illustrates the importance of genealogies in daily life. Kyrgyz men are expected to know the names of seven of their forefathers, especially when they are still boys. However, many boys are not actually aware of the name of their seventh forefather; instead, they refer to a genealogical expert for detailed information on this matter. When looking at the constantly shifting nature of kinship and descent, it is critical to explore the role of women. Kyrgyz women have a very significant role in transmitting oral genealogies and passing on stories to their children, as well as transforming them in the process. For example, they may develop ‘new names for the men’ in the genealogical charter, the ones which are used exclusively by women, because they are expected not to say the names of their fathers-in-law in public. The work of Yessenova (2005, 48) analyses similar practices among the Kazak. She notes that Kazak grandmothers in transmitting oral genealogical knowledge to their offspring shape their sense of the past and retain generational continuity.

The role of women in transmitting oral genealogies to children and arranging marriages (deciding whom one should marry) is of great importance in these patrilineal societies. Women married into the village cannot use the name of their fathers-in-law. They use instead nicknames, the knowledge of which creates a distinction between locals and outsiders. Those who know the nicknames of the patrilineages are considered to be ‘local’, and only women know the nicknames of men in the village. For example, brides in the village in which I carried out the fieldwork were not allowed to use the name ‘Shaibek’ in public, and consequently they called him, Ongkogoi, ‘Big nose’, which depicted his physical appearance. This nickname was invented by daughter-in-laws and then spread around the village. While elders usually have the final say on genealogies, they also take into account those changes introduced by the brides.

Another important role of women is in finding a potential bride for their sons by carefully checking genealogies. During my research, I encountered many grandmothers who had taught their grandchildren the names of seven of their forefathers and encouraged them to learn these names by heart. They constantly recounted various tales concerning these ancestors and their great heroic actions in the past. Moreover, a grandmother would also include the story of her own childhood and how she came to the village. This demonstrates the role of grandmothers in keeping the history of a lineage alive within a village community. The next section discusses the mobility of women.

### Marriage in the village

The young brides I talked to in Bulak were all from distant villages. In this village, as well as in the other villages, exogamy is widely practised. Villagers are forbidden to marry members of their own lineage (*uruu*), i.e. someone who shares a common patrilineal ancestor within seven generations, and marriage is permitted only between those who are separated by at least eight generations or more. It is not preferred that women marry into the village, so the ideal marriage is one between people who are extremely distantly related. In addition, it is not approved of if a new bride lives close to her own family, because it is thought that she might be constantly returning to them instead of taking care of her husband’s family. On this point, there is a proverb to which the Kyrgyz refer: when a bride gets married very close by, her house is in chaos (*jakyndyn töshögü jyylbait*). I also often heard parents wishing that their daughters would not marry far away, meaning the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, as it would be very difficult for their daughters to visit them. Nevertheless, at the same time,

villagers would prefer not to have their daughters too close either (i.e. neighbouring villages); rather, they preferred to give them away as brides to men in a different province. The man can also decide whom to marry, following which he needs to gain approval from his parents. However, sometimes the parents of a girl also play an important role in their daughter's betrothal.

Young brides are expected to be obedient wives and to be subordinate to the husband's family, but they also become affiliated with their husbands' lineages. The bride has no right to use the name of any male member of her husband's family; instead, she must use other words to address these relatives. This prohibition (*tergöö*) usually functions throughout the life of the bride, and as a sign of respect, even in old age, a woman will not use the names of her deceased husband's male family members. Instead, she addresses her husband's male relatives using the names of her children. In addition to the ban on using the names of her husband's relatives, a bride also cannot sit with her back to them, sit with an outstretched leg, talk in a loud or sharp manner or walk bareheaded or barefoot. A new bride should also try to avoid direct meetings with her senior in-laws. All these prohibitions reinforce the subordinate position of the bride, as well as the respectful nature of her relationship with her husband's family.

What I found very interesting about the young brides with whom I talked was that even after being married for several years, they kept wearing white scarves and bowing to their husbands' parents. The display of respect through the white scarf and bowing lasts for many years in some families, but in other families women stop bowing after having given birth to three or four children, although they keep wearing the scarf. This also depends on the families – some prefer to put an emphasis on tradition and are concerned about 'what people would say' or observe that 'someone's bride is not respectful because she is not wearing the scarf or bowing', but not all. Grooms' mothers are instrumental in making sure that their daughters-in-law behave appropriately in this patrilineal context. The next section explains the role of the groom's mother in finding an appropriate bride for her migrant son as a way of keeping the status of her husband's family.

### **The role of the groom's mother in marriage**

The role of the mother is crucial, especially when it comes to the marriage of her son,<sup>2</sup> and she usually has a role in deciding whom her son should marry and gives blessings to her children at the time of their marriage. There are two kinds of weddings that Kyrgyz usually practice: bride kidnapping; and *söikö salmai*, where the bride receives earrings from the groom's family.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the role of the groom's mother is important, especially if her son is in Russia, and she is influential as an organizer and decision maker.

### ***Bride kidnapping***

The first type of Kyrgyz marriage that was widely practised in the village of Bulak was bride kidnapping. The emergence of this practice has wider implications. As a consequence of changes in gender ideologies in post-Soviet countries, there has been a revival and legitimization of non-consensual bride kidnapping as a national tradition (Amsler and Kleinbach 1999; Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva 2005; Werner 2004b, 2009). Even though in Kyrgyz law the practice is considered illegal and a violation of human rights (Criminal Code 1994), up to 50% of ethnic Kyrgyz marriages are a result of kidnappings, both consensual and non-consensual (Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva, 2005).

There is a scholarly debate surrounding the theoretical understanding of bride kidnapping in modern-day Central Asia. For Kyrgyz men, bride kidnapping is more than just a renewed tradition, it has also become a 'primary act defining cultural identity and manhood' (Handrahan 2004). Werner (2009, 314) links local discourses of shame and tradition to explain changing

marriage practices and to mark a shift towards greater patriarchy in post-Soviet Central Asia. She argues that ‘these discourses of shame and tradition have helped men assert further control over female mobility and female sexuality’ (314). O’Neill Borbieva argues that ‘kidnapping in Kyrgyz society is used in a variety of ways by individuals who are struggling to respond to a changing conception of love, marriage, and authority. By mediating competing ideals, it is a powerful engine of social change’ (O’Neill Borbieva 2012, 141–143).

The case of bride kidnapping in the village of Bulak is now described. It is important to note that, despite the name, ‘kidnapping’ does not always happen against the will of the girl. In the practice ‘*ala kachuu*’, which translates roughly as ‘grab and run’, a girl is taken by a man on an involuntary (non-consensual) or voluntary (consensual) basis, depending on the individual case, in order to enter into marriage. My informants told me that this often happens because the man then pays a lower bride price. Consensual kidnappings occur if a young couple has been dating for many years and decide to get married despite their parents’ refusal to agree to this course of action. However, grooms’ mothers can also initiate and support the bride kidnapping practice if their sons do not get married on time. This is best exemplified by my informant, Nurjan, in Bulak village.

Nurjan, 58 years old with three children, found a potential bride for her eldest son by asking neighbours and other distant relatives. She took this action because Kanybek, her son, was not planning to get married in the near future and was completely ignoring the requests of his mother. Kanybek, almost 29 years old, had been working in Russia for five years and been constantly ordered by his relatives to get married as soon as he could find a suitable bride, but for him it was very hard to date a girl in the village because he considered many of them to be his sisters. He did not have time to go to the neighbouring village or to the city to search for a marriageable girl, so working in Russia was one way of avoiding the constant social pressure to get married. (It should also be noted that he was not interested in the Kyrgyz girls in Russia either.) Men by the age of 28 are expected to be married and already have at least two or three children, but this was not the case of Kanybek. Nurjan would constantly tell him that she was tired at her age of being a young wife (*kelin*) by cooking for her children, cleaning the house and washing their clothes; instead, her wish was to take care of her grandchildren and spend enjoyable times with her girlfriends and neighbours by drinking tea or chatting. Moreover, she desperately needed someone to help her with the household tasks so that she could return to her position as a history teacher at the local secondary school.

One day, Nurjan decided to visit her sister, Gulsun, in the city of Tokmok to discuss her concerns about Kanybek. While they were talking about various alternatives and potential brides around, one of them remembered that their mother’s younger brother, who lived in the village of Emgekchil, had three daughters. Nurjan recalled that she had seen them as small girls only once before, when she visited the village for a funeral 10 years previously. Nonetheless, she realized that one of these daughters should be at a marriageable age by now, since almost 10 years had passed since the funeral. One of these daughters would be an ideal bride for her son, because Nurjan knew the parents and their educational backgrounds. Moreover, Nurjan thought that by joining their children in marriage she would ‘renew the bones’ between two distant relatives and strengthen relationships with the relatives of their deceased mother and her brother. Nurjan and Gulsun went to the village of their mother’s younger brother just to visit and greet them. Once they were in the village, they found out that one of the elder daughters of the family had already gotten married, but that their second daughter, Mirgul, 17 years old, was studying at the medical school in the city of Tokmok. Nurjan did not tell the father of the girl her intention; rather, she expressed her happiness that finally the relatives had gotten together and they should do it more regularly.

Mirgul welcomed Nurjan and her sister Gulsun splendidly and showed great hospitality to her distant relatives. The day before going home, both Nurjan and Gulsun suggested that Mirgul visit their own village and spend the night there, and then the next morning go to the city from their

village directly to her school, which was 10 kilometres closer than the village where Mirgul was living. Mirgul immediately agreed to be a guest in Nurjan's house. When Nurjan, Gulsun and Mirgul all came home together, Mirgul did not even suspect that in a few minutes she would be asked to stay at this house forever; rather, she was enjoying tea in her relatives' house. Once the girl was in the house, Nurjan told Kanybek that she had brought this girl to the village with the specific intention of making her his bride and future wife. Kanybek was shocked and totally disagreed with this option, as well as with the decision of his mother, but the mother insisted that he should get married soon and this was the only girl she wanted to see as her daughter-in-law, otherwise she would not give her blessings in future. Kanybek finally had to agree with his mother because he had run out of any other options. He hoped that 'if Mother says that she likes the girl, perhaps I will like her eventually'. When everything had been settled with Kanybek, the mother told Mirgul directly that she had been kidnapped and would be expected to stay in the house and be Kanybek's wife. Mirgul attempted to leave, but Nurjan did not allow her to go home. Moreover, Nurjan invited many village women to help her with the young bride. Mirgul tearfully protested but the other women in the village physically restrained her and persuaded her to accept her fate by staying with the groom's family, saying that the family was well respected in the village. They also described Kanybek as a positive and kind person. A delegation (*achuu bazar*) was then sent to Mirgul's family to inform them of the news that their daughter had been kidnapped. After several hours of resistance and the constant persuasion of the women, Mirgul finally decided to accept the 'proposal' on the basis that the groom was not a bad person and the family was well respected in the village. Moreover, Kanybek's family members were not complete strangers because of their distant familial relationship. When the family of the girl arrived in the village, Mirgul had already accepted that she would be married to Kanybek by symbolically taking the white scarf. Mirgul told me that for a few months it was very hard to adapt to the new house and family, but after a year she was very happy with her husband and mother-in-law. Many female relatives in the village even took a dislike to Kanybek because he was now too close to his wife by being very attentive, constantly buying various kinds of gifts and helping her.

In this way, Kanybek's family brought a new member into the household and the bride was incorporated into Kanybek's lineage. However, Nurjan wanted to ensure that her bride was treated well by her husband once she was married, so that she did not go to her natal family with any complaints. After living together for almost three months, Kanybek went to Russia for half a year and returned when his wife gave birth to their first son.

This case study shows a strong woman taking a leading role in the decision-making process and being responsible for providing her son with a wife. As Kandiyoti (1988, 279) argues, 'the cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves'. In the case of Nurjan, she is head of her household and she tries to keep the family of her deceased husband alive in the village as well as in front of her distant relatives. Nurjan internalized patriarchy herself by claiming that she had authority and power to make very important decisions in the life of her son.

### ***The marriage 'söikö saluu'***

The second type of marriage, *söikö saluu*, involves the custom of giving earrings, a ceremony which is also a widely practised phenomenon in the village of Bulak. During my research I met Nazgul, a girl in her early 20s, who in 2010 had the chance to visit her uncle in Novosibirsk, Russia, for three months in order to help him with his business. Although she enjoyed her stay in Russia, she decided to return to Kyrgyzstan because her parents needed help in the household. On

the way to Kyrgyzstan, whilst on the train, Nazgul met a 24-year-old man named Altyn. The pair got to know each other better by conversing for three days on the same train from Russia to Kyrgyzstan. When they arrived in Kyrgyzstan, the young man went to Osh (southern Kyrgyzstan) and the girl stayed in Bulak village near the capital. However, both of them exchanged telephone numbers in order to keep in touch with one another. When Altyn was in Osh he informed his relatives about his intention to marry – demonstrating that he did not intend to ‘steal’ her – so it was time for the family to visit the potential bride’s home and discuss arrangements with her parents. Nevertheless, his mother insisted that she would meet the bride first and assess her before giving her blessing. A few weeks later, the young man telephoned Nazgul from Russia and asked her to marry him and to meet his mother in Bishkek. Nazgul agreed to do so because she liked the young man.

The question as to whether or not the mother of the young man would like the potential young bride is quite important. The requirements for a bride in the south were completely different to those in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan. Many southern mothers prefer not to have brides from the north because of their *Russified* character and inability to meet the norms of respect and various kinds of domestic tasks. But if the mother of Altyn liked the girl, there would be a high chance of him getting married. However, after the meeting with Altyn’s mother, Nazgul was not sure whether the mother liked her or not, because she seemed to be a very strict and uncommunicative person. Nevertheless, both the young man and the girl kept talking to each other on the phone. A few days later, Nazgul got a call from Altyn, asking her to get prepared because his mother had agreed to his marriage and his relatives and mother were on their way to Bulak in order to arrange the *kuda tüshüü* wedding and *söikö saluu* (the bride receives earrings from the groom’s family). *Kuda tüshüü* is the traditional visit of the groom’s family members to the potential bride’s family to express their interest in becoming relatives. If the bride’s family has no objections, the groom’s family then takes the bride to their own household. The movement of the bride from one place to another is accompanied by a ritual action known as *arkan tartuu*.

When Nazgul heard this news, she told her mother (whom she had already spoken to about her boyfriend in Russia) so that she could prepare for the guests’ arrival at a prearranged time. On the eve of the groom’s arrival, a traditional farewell party (*kız uzattuu*) was held for the girl. It was a very modest event, to which only her closest relatives and neighbours were invited. While saying goodbye to Nazgul, her relatives told her that ‘If a girl is married, she always leaves her father’s lineage – “*kız chykkán chiyden tyshkary*.”’ Once the girl is married, she is an outsider or a woman of another people, ‘*kız bashka eldin kishisi*’.

When Altyn’s parents arrived in the village, Nazgul’s close family members organized a ceremony, *jüz körüşüü*, where her brothers’ wives (*jengeler*) revealed the face of the bride to the groom’s parents, for which they received various gifts and money. In addition to the long ceremonies, there was the negotiation of a ‘bride price’ which, according to southern tradition, the groom’s family had to pay. In return, the bride’s family also followed northern regional ways by providing a dowry. The final event was the *soiko saluu* ceremony (the bride receives earrings from the groom’s family), following which the groom’s family put a scarf over the bride’s head as a symbol of blessing and took her to their own household.

Normally the groom would come to the village with his friends to take Nazgul, but since Altyn was in Russia at that time, he could not join his own wedding ceremony process. Instead, his mother and other relatives came to the house of the bride and took her to the southern region of Kyrgyzstan. Nazgul had to live with her husband’s family alone for a few months, after which her mother-in-law accompanied her to Russia to bring the bride to her husband personally and to give her blessing to the marriage. Nazgul later told me that she was with her mother-in-law in Russia for three months and both of them went back to Kyrgyzstan together when she knew she was pregnant. Nazgul was expecting her first child and her husband was supposed to come back

home for the birth of their son in a few weeks' time. Nazgul was excited about her husband's arrival because the couple intended to go to Russia together after the birth, leaving their first child in the care of Altyn's mother. This case example shows the powerful role of the mother-in-law in blessing the potential bride, because without her blessing, her son would not have entered into marriage with Nazgul.

Taking into account the role of women in migratory processes, Thieme (2008) and Isabaeva (2011) explicitly mention how they stay behind with their parents-in-law when their husbands are in Russia or Kazakhstan. However, the authors miss the decisive role of mothers in finding brides for migrant men. Mothers must approve decisions about the choice of a spouse and may even be involved in kidnapping a daughter-in-law. This pattern operates better with migrant youth because they are far away from their homes most of the time and they have to rely completely on their mothers' support in terms of finding a spouse. The next section describes the invisible as well as the powerful roles of brides in their husbands' households, as well as their social importance and contribution to maintaining patrilineal descent in the absence of husbands.

### **The role of brides (*kelin*)**

The term *kelin* comes from the verb *kelloo*, to come and enter, because usually young brides move from their natal families to the husband's families. The wives of the youngest brothers usually remain in the families of the husband forever in order to take care of their parents-in-law, but the wives of elder brothers move to their own houses after a certain amount of time. Each *kelin* has her own position within the kinship grid and is responsible for a certain amount of domestic tasks. The bride's position does not always remain the same; it changes gradually depending on the children's growth and their subsequent marriages – as in the case above describing powerful mothers-in-law. Here, I describe the experience of a *kelin* from her own point of view and show that even young *kelin* can hold a respected position in the household of her husband.

I start with the story of a young bride, Umut, who was 20 years old when I met her. She was six months' pregnant during my interview. I asked her to tell me about her married life. She told me that she had been kidnapped by her husband one year previously, when she was studying at the university in Bishkek. She had not planned to get married in the near future, but she was kidnapped and she could not change her fate. She had not previously known her future husband. Murat, her husband, was a young 28-year-old man and the eldest son in the family. When his parents asked her to stay as their bride, after some struggle she decided to stay with them and accept their proposal because of the 'shame' involved if she decided to leave the house of the kidnapper and also because Murat looked like a very handsome young man who would be supportive. Murat's family was also wealthier compared with other families in the village. Murat had two younger brothers and one younger sister. His father was a school director and his mother also worked at the school as a Russian language and literature teacher. Murat's younger sister was 16 years old and attending the secondary school in the village. They were economically very stable compared with the girl's family. Murat and his two brothers had been involved in business in Russia for many years. In the context of such population shifts in Fergana Valley, Reeves (2012) highlights that the main motivation behind the movement of young men is not necessarily economic, but can also be due to an increase in family status or the need to comply with the obligation to get married. This was the case with Murat, who was in Russia with the aim of collecting enough money so that he could get married.

When Murat got married, the family organized a big wedding celebration which was accompanied by a lot of games, songs, music and competitions. The groom's family provided a bride price and carried out the *shökülö* rite – meaning that a cone-shaped headdress with a

veil on top is taken off and the bride is given a ‘white scarf’ instead. Umut told me that, usually, the white colour of the scarf symbolises purity, a happy demeanour, happiness and pure thoughts. She hoped that her marriage would last forever, as the white scarf signifies. Such a celebration typically lasts from one to three days and involves the participation of close and distant relatives, friends and neighbours in meals together at a restaurant.

After the wedding, Umut moved to Murat’s parents’ house. In the beginning, according to Umut, it was very hard to adapt to the new family and their tastes and requirements. However, after a few months she became used to living with her husband’s family. Her mother-in-law was supportive and taught her some cooking skills. Once the girl was settled in the new household, and after a few months of resting and celebrating his wedding, it was time for Murat to work, so he went back to Russia to expand his business in the city of Yekaterinburg, where he and his brothers worked together. Later, Murat’s youngest brother became responsible for distributing goods from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, while the other two brothers were responsible for distributing the goods to various traders in Yekaterinburg. Umut would see her husband frequently because Murat returned to the village for a few months each winter. Murat was building a huge house near his parents and he wanted to finish it within a few years. Now Umut lived with her mother-in-law, father-in-law and her younger sister-in-law in the village and engaged very quickly in the family’s business and initiatives.

Whenever I visited the house of Umut, she would be at home alone and always busy with household tasks such as cooking before the parents came home from work, cleaning the house and baking bread before 3.00 p.m. Apart from her household tasks for her husband’s family, she was also a bride within their lineage (consisting mainly of up to 60 families); therefore, she was constantly asked to give a hand to neighbours organizing their own events – it is the obligation of brides in a patrilineage to help each other in times of need. Depending on the life cycle events and the degree of closeness of the families, young brides would usually work for one to three days helping the family by cooking various kinds of food, washing up dishes and constantly serving tea for guests.

Apart from the labour service she provided for lineage members, she was also actively engaged in the social aspects of these events. Being a figurative *jenge* (older sister-in-law), a young bride had a social obligation to bring the dowry of the daughters of the village to the family of the groom and to welcome other young brides into the village during the wedding. For Umut’s social tasks and active engagement, she would receive money and various gifts in recognition of being a good *kelin* in her husband’s family. She would be the first person to tell the natal families of newly brought brides into the village that their daughters were virgins, for which she would yet again receive many gifts (*süüünchü*). She was also the one who would first see potential grooms and again receive a gift for describing the grooms to the families of the brides.

Another task she was involved in was making traditional Kyrgyz carpets – ‘*kiyiz*’ and ‘*shirdak*’ are made from warm felt and richly decorated with ornaments – together with other young wives of the village. In the village of Bulak, Kyrgyz women invest a great deal of time and effort in making beautiful and elaborate felt carpets. The *shirdak* is sewn by applying a mosaic technique based on joining felt-work pieces with many-coloured threads. Work on a single carpet is time consuming and can take several months, if a single woman does the whole job. Therefore, a few women get together not only to make carpets but also to gossip, socialize and share with each other their experiences of living with their husbands’ parents in their absence.

The case of Umut shows that her social life in the village was very busy, not only with domestic tasks but also with social tasks outside the home. The migrant husband’s wife lived with her in-laws and was involved with his family as expected, but she also integrated into the social life of

the community by actively participating in life cycle events, joining a group of young women in making carpets and also providing labour for her neighbours. She was not alone, but rather was surrounded by more than 20 young brides who had the same tasks and experiences. Even though her husband was in Russia, she was still so fully engaged in community life that sometimes she would forget to pick up the phone when her husband called. This case study clearly shows how patrilineal order is maintained in the absence of men by their brides. These young women continue to live respectfully with their husbands' parents, and to perform social community tasks on behalf of that family. The status of the husband depends on the socialization of his wife in village social life, while the status of the young wife depends on how well she performs in her in-laws' house.<sup>4</sup>

The next section describes the case of the groom's mother's relatives and their crucial contribution to the maintenance of patrilineal order.

### *Aida's in-law family*

Aida, one of my informants from Bulak village, married Azamat in the summer of 2011, at the time when I visited the village. Azamat was a migrant worker in Yekaterinburg and had been working in Russia for the previous four or five years. When I was in the village, Aida invited me to attend her wedding and to observe her boyfriend's wedding preparations. Azamat and Aida had been dating each other for many years because they used to work together in Russia. Azamat was in the village only for one month for his wedding, after which he needed to go back to Russia again for a few months. It was discussed in advance that Aida would stay with her husband's parents for one year, as in the aforementioned cases. One week before the wedding Azamat came back from Russia and the family started to prepare for the wedding. Azamat's father had one sister, who lived in Bishkek, but she could not attend the wedding preparations; instead, I would fill her role by spending time with the relatives on Azamat's mother's side, especially his mother's brothers and sisters. The distant lineage members of Azamat's father and neighbours came only when they needed to slaughter a horse for the wedding. Azamat's mother had six sisters and three brothers. A few sisters and two of her brothers came all the way from Toktogul to the village of Bulak in order to help her with the wedding preparations. Azamat's mother also invited local brides to help.

Prior to the feast there was much preparation, during which Azamat's mother's relatives took leading roles. One of Azamat's maternal uncles was working in Yekaterinburg and he sent Azamat US\$2000 for his wedding as a gift because he could not attend. Azamat's father's distant relatives also helped, but they were not as active as the mother's side, especially financially. The organizing of the wedding party, which included buying various gifts, slaughtering sheep and arranging a café in the city, was in the hands of Azamat's mother.

The wedding party was organized in the small town of Tokmok, where more than 250 people attended. The café was large and wide, built especially to accommodate many people celebrating major events. The walls were decorated with traditional paintings depicting yurts, horses and a Kyrgyz family. The building was also fully furnished with modern furniture. The mostly rural guests, stunned by the urban appearance of the café, were asked to sit down at particular tables with close friends and acquaintances in order to make the event interesting and cosy for everyone. Meanwhile, Azamat's father greeted his guests outside the café and accompanied them inside.

Those who were invited were mostly Azamat's father's close and distant kinsmen, colleagues, friends and the parents of Aida. There were also relatives on Azamat's mother's side and Azamat's group mates, classmates and colleagues. Invitations were delivered orally through social networks, specifying the date and time of the occasion. Once the guests arrived at the café, the organizers started to give out their pre-prepared welcome letters. Since so many people had been

invited, several assistants had been recruited to help out on the day of the feast; many of them were Azamat's mother's relatives. The mother's relatives worked on a voluntary basis and served Azamat's guests with food and tea and distributed meat. Their experience in organizing feasts was crucial to the success of the wedding. The tasks (such as cooking and various other services) were divided according to their age and gender. Younger assistants were responsible for serving the guests, delivering and clearing dishes of food, cleaning dirty dishes and pouring tea.

The organizational part of the event was decisive because the guests evaluated every detail of the feast and the hospitality of their hosts (including the *tamada*, the speeches and the food). The feast and hospitality would only be classed as excellent if the norms and guests' expectations were fulfilled.<sup>5</sup> Once the task of the hosts had been accomplished, the guests would be indebted to them. Despite the capable knowledge of the Kyrgyz waiting staff, what was interesting was the fact that these staff still received orders from the feast organizers, Azamat's maternal kin.

During the wedding, however, many close and distant kinsmen of Azamat's father's side received more attention and appreciation for organizing such an amazing event. Azamat's father's authority immediately increased in front of his relatives, who glorified a father for marrying off his son and fulfilling his duty. Azamat's mother's side was considered *taike jaak*, which implies they are theoretically distant and should stay more respectful. Most of the time they were not even mentioned in the speeches. The *taike jaak* praised Azamat's father for raising such a son as Azamat, who worked hard and helped his parents. Overall, the organizing the wedding feast was done by the mother's side, but in front of many guests their part had not even been mentioned; rather, the mother's relatives glorified Azamat's father, thereby increasing his authority in front of people.

The case example above shows that a woman and her kin expend a great deal of social effort and energy on behalf of their husband and his family in the patrilineal system. A man's prestige depends on such labour and the affirmation of his wife.

## Conclusions

After highlighting the shapes and types of observable female agency and the ways these relate to male outmigration, this section contextualizes the observations within a broader context. I thus invoke the notion of 'patriarchal bargain', in which women 'actively collude in the reproduction of their own subordination' (Kandiyoti 1988, 280). In the case of Kazakhstan, Werner (2009, 324) also argues that bride abduction is not a 'simple act of male dominance over women, but the role of women is crucial in maintaining male dominance'.

There is of course a broader range of literature on women's 'informal' power and their role in the reproduction of patriarchy. Ortner and Whitehead (1981, 20–21), for instance, argue that in societies where male prestige is heavily dependent on women, females have a capacity to undermine male ambitions and damage male prestige. Tapper (1991) discusses how informal power is exercised by the Durrani Pashtuns women of Afghanistan by 'subverting social orders through spirit possession or romantic liaisons if their men cannot meet the expectation of protecting the households in whose households they live' (195). In the case of colonial India, women's resistance is most often recognized in a struggle against patriarchal social norms (O'Hanlon 1991). Not only resistance but also compliance are crucial and also involve decision making and strategizing (Kamp 2006; Kandiyoti 1988). Abu-Lughod (2000) reveals how the women of Bedouin communities creatively involve poetry and sentiment in the maintenance of a system of social hierarchy. Rassam (1980, 171) argues that in Morocco men seem to have complete authority over women; however, a thorough examination of the structure of the household shows the presence of a

considerable measure of ‘unassigned power’, which women compete for and utilize to further their own needs and wishes.

Women in Central Asia as well as the Middle East and North Africa are expected to see their interests embedded in those of their male kin and to put others before themselves. Thus, the ‘patriarchal relationality’ of women can contribute to the patriarchal hierarchy (Abu-Lughod 1998; Joseph and Slyomovics 2001, 7).

From a long-term perspective, it would be interesting to revisit Bulak village after another decade of migration to see if marriage patterns have modified or not, because migration processes and experiences are relatively young in Kyrgyzstan. In the case of the outmigration of Turkish workers to Germany in the 1970s, brides typically co-resided with in-laws (much as the case study above demonstrates). However, studies carried out later showed that brides had started setting up independent households, managing their own bank accounts and dealing with institutions within society (banks, post offices, trips to town) (Abadan-Unat 1977, 48–49).<sup>6</sup>

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### Notes

1. The census of Bulak village, Issik-Ata Rayon, Chüi Oblast, Kyrgyzstan 15 May 2007.
2. In some of the ethnographic cases, father-in-laws are not mentioned at all because they are deceased. In some cases, father-in-laws are alive, but completely disengaged from the organizational matters of their sons’ marriages.
3. However, it is important to mention that there are also other possible marriages (such as dating) which are not examined here due to lack of space.
4. Such a position can mean both increased responsibility and constraint for a young bride. Discussing gendered out-migration in eastern Uzbekistan, Reeves (2011) argues that ‘whilst spousal absence is experienced by some women as expanding the possibilities for social and spatial mobility, for others it can exacerbate the degree of control exerted by in-laws. The movement of some can constrain (or compel) the mobility of others’ (555).
5. Women waited until the hostess approached them and asked them to circulate and mingle. Otherwise, guests were not expected to be independent and free, which would be deemed as ‘misbehaviour’ and discussed later during informal talks. This would be interpreted as being disrespectful to the host.
6. An anonymous reviewer is thanked for pointing out this comment.

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