Stefan B. Kirmse

Youth and Globalization in Central Asia

Everyday Life between Religion, Media, and International Donors

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In memory of my grandmother
Dorothea Scheuermann
(1910–2001)

Contents

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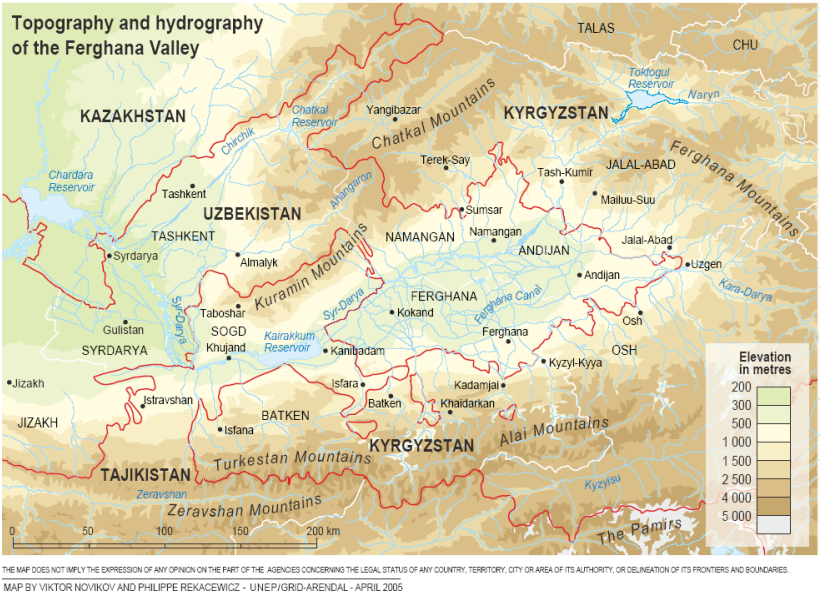
The Ferghana Valley cuts across the territories of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (the red lines indicate international borders). The city of Osh is located at the valley's eastern end.[1]



THE MAP DOES NOT IMPLY THE EXPRESSION OF ANY OPINION ON THE PART OF THE AGENCIES CONCERNING THE LEGAL STATUS OF ANY COUNTRY, TERRITORY, CITY OR AREA OF ITS AUTHORITY, OR DELINEATION OF ITS FRONTIERS AND BOUNDARIES.

MAP BY VIKTOR NOVIKOV AND PHILIPPE REKACEWICZ - UNEP/GRID-ARENDAL - APRIL 2005

Map 1: The Ferghana Valley

1 Courtesy of: Philippe Rekacewicz, UNEP/ GRID-Arendal http://www.grida.no/graphicslib/detail/topography-and-hydrography-of-the-ferghana-valley_101c

Introduction

I did not set out to write a book about youth and globalization. This project started as a study of ethnic and religious conflict in Central Asia. Given a number of events at the time, this seemed to be the obvious choice, and the inter-ethnic bloodshed in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 would seem to vindicate such an approach. And yet, my work in Central Asia over the years led me to believe that it was more important to write a different book, and thus I begin the discussion by explaining the reasons behind this decision.

In the late Soviet period, bloody ethnic clashes rocked Central Asia's Ferghana Valley, situated in the border region of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Already dubbed "the valley of blood and tears" after violence between Uzbeks and Meshketian Turks had left hundreds of people dead in 1989 (Crowfoot and Glebov 1989, 155), another ethnic conflict erupted the following year. This time, fighting between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks caused hundreds of deaths in and around the city of Osh. In the 1990s, armed Islamist groups began to operate in the valley, now considered "the bastion of Islamic activism in the whole of Central Asia" (Haghayeghi 1997, 79). Gloomy pictures of the Ferghana Valley emerged in the press and the academic literature (for example, Lubin and Rubin 1999; Rumer 2002). When Islamic militants took hostages in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2000, local analyst Akimbekov concluded: "[These events] have demonstrated how ephemeral the notion of stability is in the enormous powder-keg called Central Asia" (2000).

The degree to which perceptions of the Ferghana Valley have been framed in terms of conflict is illustrated by a statement made by a young Frenchman who visited me in Osh, the site of my field research. "And this is supposed to be wild Osh?" he remarked while looking at the cafés,

boys and girls in school uniforms, and crowds of city folk busy with their work. His reaction shows how a literature and media coverage focusing on holy warriors and ethnic tensions have created the image of a battlefield. As Megoran notes, "Outsiders perceive Central Asia through the prism of danger" (2005, 555). This image continues to inform Western policies. And yet, it often has little to do with people's everyday lives.

The Ferghana Valley is a fertile and densely populated area and home to a mix of ethnic groups. About 300 km long and between 20 and 70 km wide, it was part of the Soviet Union until 1991 (for a recent historical overview, see Starr 2011). Now its territory is shared by the independent republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (map 1). Low incomes, overpopulation, social inequality, drug trafficking, and anti-government mobilization have affected the region in recent years. In 2005, with uprisings leading to the overthrow of the president in Kyrgyzstan and the killing of hundreds of demonstrators in Uzbekistan, the Ferghana Valley once again made headlines as an epicenter of volatility. The mass violence in Osh in 2010, which came in the aftermath of yet another presidential crisis in Kyrgyzstan, represents the culmination of local instability and ongoing power struggles thus far.

The fact that many observers of Central Asia focus on conflict and security, however, also reflects a wider trend in the post-Soviet literature. Throughout the former Soviet Union (FSU), the end of communist rule has brought about tremendous change. Yet, scholars have tended to look at the social and cultural aspects of this change in different parts of the FSU from different angles. Developments in Slav-dominated regions are analyzed from a variety of sociological perspectives, including youth and youth cultural studies. In predominantly Muslim areas, by contrast, culture and society are usually placed within one of a number of established frameworks, such as post-colonialism and nation-building, "transition", or mobilization along clan, ethnic or religious lines.

Cultural globalization plays a subordinate role in discussions of Central Asia. Regional specialists examine individual transnational phenomena such as migration, religious activism, and international development cooperation. Though these discussions are illuminating, they do not address the multiple effects of cultural globalization on local lives in a holistic manner. These effects are explored mainly in relation to cultural elites engaged

in processes of state and nation-building (Adams 2004; Megoran 2005; Blum 2007). Analyses of everyday life, by contrast, largely skirt around the global dimension (for example, Sahadeo and Zanca 2007). And yet, the expectations, life options, and self-identifications of ordinary people are shaped by a plethora of transnational connections, images, and actors.

Youth are often at the forefront of global cultural exchange. In Central Asia, however, young people are discussed mainly as victims of crisis (Nazpary 2002; ICG 2003; Falkingham and Ibragimova 2004; Moser 2007), as targets of state and elite policy (Handrahan 2004; Blum 2007; McGlinchey 2009), or as young "deviants" (not least, the relationship of young Muslims towards Islamic groups like *Hizb ut-Tahrir* [Liberation Party] has spawned numerous publications). These approaches are not unique to Central Asia. Urban youth are framed in terms of crises, violence, and marginalization throughout the Global South, both in the media and the social sciences (Hansen et al. 2008, 15, 208; Ansell 2005, 30–35). At the same time, analysts have become interested in the political potential of youth, studying youth bulges and youth participation in social and political "movements" across the former Soviet space and beyond (Council of Europe 2005; Urdal 2007; Dhillon and Yousef 2007; Nikolayenko 2007; Roche 2010; Shukan 2012; Comai 2012; Hemment 2012). To a degree, these perspectives draw on earlier studies of Western youth. Analyses of crime and deviance in the 1950s and 1960s, and discussions of symbolic rebellion in the 1970s, helped to sustain a "youth-as-trouble"-focus for decades (Pilkington 1994, 7–43).

Offering an alternative to such approaches, this study paints an ethnographic portrait of young people's lives in the city of Osh, Kyrgyzstan. Osh is renowned as Central Asia's epicenter of Islamic activism, political instability, interethnic violence, and as a focus of international development aid. And yet, this book shows that young people often experience everyday life in the city in a very different way: as a series of interactions with transnational actors, goods, and images.

By focusing on urban youth, this book addresses a specific yet important social group in Central Asia. While they are more dependent, more monitored and regulated than older people, they are also more eager to experiment and challenge. They in many ways stand at the cutting edge of

globalization and post-Soviet change and thus offer a useful point of entry for the analysis of these processes.

I discuss globalization as the "widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual" (Held et al. 1999, 2). As a set of processes that operate on various levels, globalization also incorporates the exchange of cultural meanings. It is the local experience of such "cultural globalization" that I concentrate on in this book.

Building on Appadurai (1990), I frame cultural globalization in terms of complex "global flows". The academic literature has extensively discussed the supposed effects of these flows, devoting considerable attention to the question of whether globalization promotes cultural homogenization, resistance, or diversification (for overviews, see Featherstone et al. 1995, and King 1997). Admittedly, few scholars are still making cases for global cultural convergence or divergence on a grand scale. Evidence from the field has called for more nuanced analyses that acknowledge the "in-between-ness" of cultural belonging. Undoubtedly globalization involves "the simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local" (Robertson 1995, 30). Beyond this insight, however, there are many open questions. Various concepts have been used to capture the process and outcome of cultural mixing, including "hybridization" (García Canclini 1989; Hall 1990; Bhabha 1990) and "glocalization" (Robertson 1992, 172; 1995). These concepts, however, tell us little about the distinctiveness of cultural globalization in particular places.

Exploring the specificity of cultural encounters in urban Kyrgyzstan, this book argues that young people now inhabit a "marketplace for styles and identities". In contrast to youth in villages or more authoritarian states nearby, young people in Osh are exposed to an unprecedented array of media images and social actors. They consume Hollywood and Bollywood movies, listen to Russian rap music, follow ideas of "true Islam", interact with Christian missionaries, and engage with global capitalism and international organizations. And yet, their choices in this marketplace are not random. They are historically and geographically specific, and in addition,

constrained by young people's social environments, including their families, wider communities, and peer groups.

My particular focus is on male youth. While various studies have addressed female youth (Kuehnast 1998; Rigi 2003; Harris 2006; McBrien 2009), the male perspective has often been neglected. This focus, however, offers a vantage point from which to examine the effects of globalization. Boys and young men are often less constrained to explore the "outside" space of the city, the streets, parks, and central squares whereas girls are more confined to the "inside" space of the local neighborhood, which is considered safe (Stephan 2010). Some "sites" of globalization such as Internet cafés are inhabited primarily by male youth.

Most of the young people discussed in this book are university students. They are predominantly Muslim, and either Kyrgyz or Uzbek by ethnicity. This focus is helpful because universities are marketplaces where global ideas are exchanged and contested. Students should not be discarded as too specific and privileged an elite, either. They are a highly heterogeneous group. Enrollment figures suggest that they make up nearly a third of the population in Osh, and as a result they represent a wide variety of interests, socio-economic backgrounds, and frames of reference.

Globalization, Youth, and the Study of Central Asia

The two central concepts of this book, youth and globalization, have so far received only perfunctory attention in discussions of contemporary Central Asia. All too often, globalization appears as little more than a cliché or a battle cry in such debates. It is rejected as a rhetorical device that glosses over persistent inequalities and ruthless exploitation (Nazpary 2002); or it is presented—not least, by local scholars—as a flood of detrimental Western goods and ideas that help to alienate local youth from their traditional culture (see, for example, Moldobaev 1998; Abdurazzakova 2002; Vasipov 2004).

More differentiated discussions of youth and globalization in the post-Soviet space have been offered by Pilkington et al. (2002) and Blum (2007). Blum's analysis of youth in Astrakhan (Russia), Baku (Azerbaijan) and Almaty (Kazakhstan) makes a case for cultural "hybridization". While

he allows for the possibility that young people move between multiple identities, he insists that, on the whole, such movement is less common than hybridization (ibid., 14). Pilkington, by contrast, argues against hybridity, noting that young people engage in a "parallel reception" of local and global cultural ideas, instead of synthesizing them (Pilkington et al. 2002, 210–211). She concludes: "While young Russians aspire to Western standards of living, (…) they do not seek to emulate Western standards of 'being'; and where spiritual life is concerned, young people remain firmly rooted to the local" (ibid., 20). As I suggest in this book, however, both "parallel reception" and "hybridization" seem to be of limited use in Osh, and I therefore use other concepts to frame experiences of cultural globalization.

Pilkington and Blum, moreover, examine the relationship between the global and the local in terms of the interaction between Western and national cultural forms. This view of globalization is too narrow to capture daily life in the Ferghana Valley and probably in many other parts of Muslim Central Asia. As Adams notes for the case of Uzbekistan, people now play on "multiple fields (Soviet, Muslim, Asian)" (2008, 635). Yet, it remains unclear how this process manifests itself in everyday interaction.

One of the reasons why the analysis of cultural globalization in the former Soviet South continues to be patchy may be the view that globalization is largely an urban phenomenon, and scholars of Central Asia are only beginning to analyze metropolitan spaces (Alexander et al. 2007; Darieva et al. 2011). To some extent, this lack of interest in cities is understandable: Central Asia is largely rural. While cities appear to be growing (often because of unregistered rural-urban migration), in countries like Kyrgyzstan the official share of the urban population has been lingering at about 35 percent for years.

Similarly, as an analytical category for the study of everyday life, the concept of youth has not been prominent in scholarship on Central Asia. This is striking insofar as the study of youth has become a cottage industry in northern parts of the post-Soviet space (Adelman 1994; Cushman 1995; Tomasi 1995; Yurchak 1999; Oushakine 2000; Roberts et al. 2000; Puuronen et al. 2000; Pilkington et al. 2002; Williams et al. 2003; Roberts 2008). What are the reasons for this imbalance?

That the field of Central Asian Studies is not fully integrated with sociological research on other parts of the FSU is, to a significant degree, rooted in an implicit Central Asian exceptionalism traceable to literature on the region from the Cold War era. Western and Soviet authors, both inspired by modernization theory, conceptualized Central Asian Muslims as essentially pre-modern beings whom the Soviet authorities sought to modernize. The cliché of Central Asian societies as traditional and intrinsically different from the secularized and urbanized society elsewhere in the Soviet Union was based on two key assumptions: namely, the assumed effects of Islam, and the inherent "backwardness" of predominantly rural and nomadic societies. The region's alleged traditionalism was thus explained in terms of a distinctive local culture. Put differently, both Western and Soviet writings were steeped in cultural essentialism.

Western Sovietologists often stressed the exploitation of Muslim regions by Soviet "imperialists" (Myer 2002).[1] Many of them viewed the supposed tensions between Islam and communism in terms of a cultural clash between *homo sovieticus* and *homo islamicus* (Carrère d'Encausse 1978, 311–333; Bennigsen 1980; Rywkin 1982; Bräker 1984). Such claims were rooted as much in Western Orientalism, which upheld the dichotomy of Western modernity and Muslim Others, as in Soviet writings, which were equally essentialist. Against this background, it is not surprising that the extensive Sovietological literature on youth in the USSR paid little or no attention to young Central Asians (see, for example, Fainsod 1951; Fisher 1959; Kassof 1965; Taubman 1968; Unger 1981; Fierman and Olcott 1988; Riordan 1989; Dobson 1991).

This implicit exceptionalism of the former Soviet South has, with few exceptions, continued into the post-Soviet period. It has become part of an implicit division of labor among scholars of the post-Soviet space. Russia, Ukraine, and other Slav-dominated regions have been appropriated by sociology and cultural studies, among many other mainstream disciplines. With its traditional focus on young people in core societies, however, the field of cultural studies has been hesitant to extend its analysis to the southern periphery of the FSU. And thus, the study of society in Central Asia has largely been left either to scholars of international relations and geopol-

1 For critiques of Western "Sovietology", see Waardenburg (2003 [1987], 8–11), Saroyan (1997), and DeWeese (2002).

itics working at the macro-level, or to social anthropologists who have tended to ignore the concept of youth as a Eurocentric construct.

For many years, "youth" indeed represented a white, male, heterosexual, Western middle-class ideal that did not reflect young people's lives in many parts of the world (Ariès 1962; Wulff 1995). In the Muslim Middle East, for example, various concepts cover different aspects of adolescence: some refer to sexual maturity (*bulugh*, *murahaqa*), others focus on social sense and moral maturity (*'aql*, *shabb*) (Davis and Davis 1989, 47–49; Booth 2002, 210). Yet the use of the concept of youth has changed in recent years. The realization that youth is constructed in specific ways in specific contexts has increased the appeal of the concept, along with its offshoots such as "youth culture", in non-Western settings. For a long time, youth culture was associated with urban space and teenage consumers; scholars used the term to analyze peer group encounters resulting in spectacular or oppositional behavior. Post-modernist and feminist critiques, however, have helped to free the term from its male, Western connotations (for example, McRobbie and Garber 1976; Griffin 1985; McRobbie 1993). There is now increasing agreement that youth culture does not only capture groups of skaters and graffiti sprayers in New York but also the girl who chooses to read a glossy magazine in her parents' house in Egypt. As Wulff put it, "Youth culture is what young people are concerned with" (1995, 15). Given these changes in the meaning of youth and youth culture, geographers, sociologists, and social anthropologists have begun to engage in the cross-cultural analysis of youth (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Fernea 1995; Skelton and Valentine 1998; Brown et al. 2002; Ansell 2005; Nilan and Feixa 2006; Hansen et al. 2008; Marsh 2010). Central Asia and the Caucasus, however, are only beginning to become part of these discussions (Kirmse 2011a).

Yet, in the former Soviet South, youth is a particularly meaningful category because it has shaped and regulated local lives for many years. Known in different languages as *molodyozh'*, *yosh*, *jash, javony*, or other, it was institutionalized and promoted by the Soviet system on various levels. The introduction of obligatory schooling increased the time that young people spent outside the home, particularly in cities. Large numbers of children, school and university-age boys and girls joined communist youth organizations, such as the *Octobrists*, the Pioneers, and the *Komso-*

mol (Communist Youth League).[2] The authorities were initially faced with "a general public insensitivity and unreceptivity to organized activities for youth" (Medlin et al. 1971, 196), yet by the mid-1980s, the *Komsomol* covered two thirds of the eligible age group throughout the USSR (Riordan 1989, 22). In short, through compulsory education, youth organizations and publications,[3] the Soviet system created a new category of youth.

Despite these antecedents, the importance of youth as a category for social analysis is only beginning to be recognized in the region. A small number of ethnographic studies have focused on Central Asian youth (Kuehnast 1998; Rigi 2003; Handrahan 2004; Harris 2006). At the same time, some sociologists and political scientists working on post-Soviet youth have extended their work to the FSU's southern regions (Blum 2007; Flynn 2007; Roberts 2008; and numerous recent articles in disciplinary journals such as the *Journal of Youth Studies* or the *Journal of Education and Work*). Taken in their entirety, however, these studies still offer only a fragmentary picture. More importantly, they are largely disparate and lack a coherent focus.

By introducing the language of cultural studies into the context of Central Asia, this book offers a way of moving beyond the persisting double standards in the analysis of post-Soviet youth. While young Slavs are discussed as multifaceted social actors, young Muslims in southern regions are all too often studied as religious and ethnic *persona*s, or even as potential threats. This book is therefore, among other things, an attempt to integrate Central Asian Muslims with the study of global youth. While any location in Central Asia could have been chosen for this purpose, my concentration on youth in the Ferghana Valley, the supposed powder-keg of

2 These organizations targeted the 7–9 year-olds, 9–14 year-olds, and over-14 year-olds, respectively.

3 In the Kyrgyz SSR, the Kyrgyz-language *Komsomol* paper *Leninchil Jash* (Leninist Youth) first appeared in 1926, the Russian-language *Komsomolets Kirgizii* was established in 1938 (Akmatov and Keleshbaev 1987, 104). The pioneer newspaper *Kyrgyzstan pioneri* was published in Kyrgyz from 1933 and in Russian from 1984 (Semenov and Abdykalykov 1986, 340). In total, by the mid-1980s there were six *Komsomol* and pioneer newspapers and magazines in the Kyrgyz SSR with a total circulation of 500,000 copies (ibid., 339).

Central Asia, is useful for showing that young Muslims, like young people elsewhere, draw on numerous cultural ideas.

I use several concepts to capture young people's engagement with cultural globalization. To begin with, I argue that a "marketplace for styles and identities" has emerged in Osh (hereafter usually without inverted commas). Related concepts such as the "market for identities" (Navaro-Yashin 2002) or "merchants of style" (Butcher and Thomas 2006) focus on consumer practice. This is largely because scholars of youth often rely on theories of individualization in "late modern" and "post-modern" consumer society (Lash 1994; Fornäs and Bolin 1995; Beck 2000). In the post-Soviet space, such theories may be of limited use, as young people often do not perceive themselves first and foremost as consumers. The concept used in this book is therefore about more than a commodity market. It is about young people's encounters with numerous actors that offer opportunities for affiliation and identification, from religious activists to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Styles and identities, however, are not simply out there on a shop counter, waiting to be taken off the peg and put on. The students of Osh craft them (or fail to do so) in daily negotiations. This approach relies on a constructivist understanding of identity, using Suny's definition of identity as "a provisional stabilization of a sense of self or group (…)" (1999, 144).

The notion of the marketplace is not meant to imply "free trade". In most of Central Asia (and probably elsewhere), young people cannot rummage as they please. Their engagement with global cultural forms and practices, and thus their experiences of youth, are shaped by their gender, socio-economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Moreover, their options are shaped at the macro level as they reflect local, regional, and national rules and regulations.

Furthermore, I suggest that youth are experiencing "nested globalization", a process that manifests itself both in the available cultural repertoires and in young people's usage of them. This line of argument follows cultural flow models. Appadurai explained that in the contemporary world, influences from near-by areas are often stronger than those from developed countries far away: in Sri Lanka and Cambodia, Indianization and Vietnamization, respectively, raise greater concern than Americanization (1990, 295–296). Indeed, while global cultural images

and genres reach Central Asia after multiple translations, they have often been re-worked in neighboring countries. In addition, young people's use of cultural resources is nested insofar as they employ local concepts and language when communicating global ideas; and some choose to utilize elements of global discourse in their articulation of local identities.

Notions of movement and *bricolage* go further than "parallel reception" or "hybridization" in capturing experiences of globalization in Central Asia. Lévi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage* is used here to indicate young people's movement between and playful mixing of cultural goods, ideas, and identity discourses in which cultural origins are often ignored or subverted. Unlike many scholars of youth in the 1970s and 1980s, I do not use the term to imply conscious acts of youthful resistance to "hegemonic" culture. The notion of movement, moreover, ties in with the argument that young people inhabit "plural worlds" as they deploy a range of local, regional, and global identity discourses (Nilan and Feixa 2006). Differences and inconsistencies between these discourses are perceived as such mainly by older generations and outside observers while young people themselves tend not to experience any contradictions in moving within and between plural worlds (ibid., 2).

In sum, in focusing on a specific group of youth, this book explores the complexity of globalization in terms of multiple opportunities and constraints, and the local responses to global influences. It charts the ways in which ordinary people draw on different cultural repertoires in their everyday lives, gaining information, comfort, and inspiration from them.

An important question, however, has so far remained unanswered. What exactly are the competing cultural repertoires of meaning in play in Central Asia?

Competing Discourses: Between the Nation, Islam, and Globalization

People in Kyrgyzstan, as in other Central Asian republics, are exposed to competing discourses. First, the government, opposition, and members of the intelligentsia promote visions of a new national identity, visions that are often blurred and subject to contestation and change. They communi-

cate these visions through the mass media and other forms of public representation, such as monuments, celebrations, and demonstrations. Second, diverse Islamic practices and institutions have achieved a substantial public presence. They are spread by Islamic missionaries and movements, and by the state authorities. Other religious movements, especially Christian groups, also receive considerable media attention. Third, various manifestations of globalization beyond transnational religious activism contribute new repertoires of meaning, for example the images and goods of global capitalism. Finally, globalization manifests itself as the influx of international organizations, an adjunct to market and governance reforms. These organizations spread the reform talk of international donors.

A multiplicity of discourses is not new to Central Asia. Located on the ancient Silk Road, the region has always been at the forefront of cultural exchange. Soviet rule isolated the Central Asian union republics from external influence to a degree. As early as the 1920s, however, local writers and artists heavily drew on European genres and methods which had been imported to the region via Russia, the Middle East, or South Asia (Baldauf 2007, 103–104). The following decades were characterized by a complex interpenetration of both global and local cultural forms and practices (Adams 2008). An interest in Islam and "national culture" surged in the late 1960s. Western goods and media images were desired and, to some extent, accessed. By the 1980s, moreover, small groups of Islamic preachers and Protestant missionaries, including Russian Pentecostalists and German Baptists, had established themselves in the region.

The region has undergone substantial change since the end of Soviet rule. The observation that globalization in the contemporary world is characterized by unprecedented degrees of extensity, intensity, velocity, and impact (Held et al. 1999, 15) can be applied, with some exceptions and caveats, to Central Asia, and particularly to the Kyrgyz Republic. The government of Askar Akaev (1991–2005) generally followed the prescriptions of the international community and passed reforms designed to strengthen democracy and build a market economy. These reforms facilitated the influx of foreign goods, organizations, and media. As Gleason noted (1997, 94), "After independence, Bishkek quickly became the favorite city of European, North American, and Asian diplomats and development assistance officials." Since the authorities tended not to interfere with the

activities of social movements and religious groups, the country also attracted Islamic and Christian missionaries. While increased pressure on opposition movements and the press began to tarnish the country's reputation as Central Asia's "island of democracy" in the mid-1990s, in many ways Kyrgyzstan is still the most liberal of the Central Asian republics.

Regardless of their openness to outside influence, however, local elites have been eager to furnish their republic with a distinct national ideology and identity. Thus, Soviet internationalism has been replaced with the idea of *Kyrgyzchylyk* (Kyrgyzness) (Elebaeva et al. 2000, 345; Aitpaeva and Mochanova 2007). Opinions differ, however, on what this concept means. Some promote customs, folklore, and epic figures as the essence of "Kyrgyzness"; others stress the role of a nationalized form of Islam or pre-Islamic religious beliefs. In its attempts to articulate a new national ideology, the government of Kyrgyzstan has also vacillated between ethnic and civic conceptions of nation (Megoran 2002, 124; Dave 2004, 141). In addition to promoting *Kyrgyzchylyk*, successive governments have sought to forge a civic, "Kyrgyzstani" identity.

The reasons were partly pragmatic. Intimidated by the demands of Kyrgyz nationalists and the downgrading of the Russian language, many educated Russian-speakers left in the early 1990s, leading the country to suffer a serious "brain drain". A conciliatory policy was also needed to placate the local Uzbeks after the inter-ethnic violence of 1990. Akaev thus coined the motto *Kyrgyzstan—nash obshchii dom* (Kyrgyzstan—our common home). Measures to strengthen a common identity included the formation of advisory bodies (the Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan), relatively lenient language laws[4] and the foundation of educational institutions like the Slavonic University in Bishkek and the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in Osh, aimed at integrating ethnic minorities. As Fumagalli argues with respect to the Uzbeks of Osh, however, it was a combination of such formal measures with an informal patronage system that helped to alleviate the grievances of ethnic minorities and create a mechanism

4 Kyrgyz is the Republic's "state language". In 2000, Russian became an "official language" in Kyrgyzstan. Teaching in schools and universities is offered in Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek and other languages. While the language laws are comparatively lenient, they were the result of a protracted political struggle and continue to be controversial and subject to change (Dave 2004).

for managing multi-ethnicity (2008, 222). Until 2010, this mechanism seemed to work.

In any case, the state and especially nationalist parties and intellectuals frame the new Kyrgyz nation mainly in ethnic terms. One only needs to switch on state television to see endless displays of men and women in national costumes, on horseback or with eagles on their arms, singing Kyrgyz folk songs in front of yurts and mountains. The Kyrgyz nation is being visually constructed as a people of nomads, animal breeders, and warriors, a continuation of Soviet nationality policy that encouraged the "flourishing" of ethnic nations, not least through the promotion of folklore (Sadomskaya 1990a; Slezkine 1994; Tishkov 1997, 24–43; Martin 2001, 171). Since independence, a range of cultural practices have been promoted as fundamental Kyrgyz traditions and key to Kyrgyz identity. Local intellectuals see no contradiction between the construction of an ethnically defined nation and the civic idea of *nash obshchii dom*. As a lecturer in Kyrgyz history at Osh State University put it:

> Why should any minority complain? Nobody's rights are being violated. But as the titular nationality, of course, the Kyrgyz play the leading role.[5]

His statement reveals the persistence of Soviet thinking: from the notion of "titular nationality"—that is, the belief that particular territories, such as the Kyrgyz SSR, belonged to certain national groups—to the idea of the "leading role" (previously played by the Communist Party).

In addition to the use of folklore, the production of national culture in the Kyrgyz Republic rests on several pillars. First, the authorities present the epic poem and its hero *Manas* as the embodiment of Kyrgyzness. *Manas* is celebrated through monuments, publications, and festivities, and the study of the poem is now compulsory in the national school system.[6] A high point was reached in 1995 when the government, backed by inter-

5 Roundtable discussion, Osh State University, November 30, 2004.

6 During the Soviet period, the authorities repeatedly changed their attitude towards the *Manas* epic (Myer 2002, 87–89). By the 1980s, the communist party actually promoted *Manas*-telling in the Kyrgyz SSR as part of its efforts to let nations "flourish". A source from Southern Kyrgyzstan stated that whereas the epic had not been well-known in this part of the country before, "under Soviet rule the art of *Manas*-telling has been spread everywhere. Party organizations have attached great importance to the continuation of the tradition of the *Manaschi* (*Manas*-teller)…" (Iarkova 1987, 114).

national donors, somewhat arbitrarily celebrated the 1000th anniversary of *Manas*.[7] The epic is invoked by Kyrgyz politicians and intellectuals for several reasons. For local scholar Ashymov, it is the absence of a strong religious or political tradition that makes the Kyrgyz turn to *Manas* to define their collective identity (2003, 138). The epic hero also serves as a symbol of unity for the disparate, formerly nomadic Kyrgyz tribes. Former president Akaev used the epic to furnish the country with a new religio-spiritual codex (Kostyukova 2001, 265). He derived seven principles from *Manas* which he sought to raise to the level of state ideology. According to Megoran, the contradictions between these principles (especially the tension between the "unity of the nation" and international "peace and solidarity") partly explain the government's vacillation between civic and ethnic concepts of nation (2002, 122–123).

Second, the new national culture draws on Islamic symbols and practices. Yet as officials are wary of the prominence of Islam in the south of the republic, which many perceive as an Islamic threat, they foster a secular, nationalized version of Islam that they distinguish from radical Islam.[8] They promote popular Islamic practices like the visitation of shrines as part of the national heritage: the "holy mountain" of Osh, for example, has become a national symbol (Hale 2002, 68). Third, in the debate on Kyrgyz values, some elites point to the pre-Islamic cosmology of Tengrianism as the unifying moral force of the nation (Laruelle 2007). The public foundation *Tengir Ordo*, in particular, praises Tengrianism (or Tengrism) as a comprehensive value system "founded by the Kyrgyz, reflecting their world views (…), way of life, relationship with nature, understanding of man and his place in society" (Sarygulov 2002, 14).

There is often a discrepancy, however, between such elite-driven identity projects and people's actual sense of belonging. Among ethnic Uzbeks, for example, who often define themselves against the Kyrgyz as the "real" Muslims, the government-sponsored version of Islam has found little resonance. That said, elite projects such as *Manas* or *nash obshchii dom* also generate little enthusiasm among the Kyrgyz. To understand this, one has

7 Public festivities aimed at nation-building also included the celebrations of the equally questionable 3,000th birthday of Osh in the year 2000, and the 2,200th anniversary of Kyrgyz statehood in 2003.

8 On the comparable Uzbek case, see Khalid (2003, 586–587), Rasanayagam (2006, 224), and Louw (2006, 327).

to consider that for the masses, the reforms of the early 1990s had disastrous consequences. Though welcomed by international organizations and donors, market transition entailed mass layoffs, the breakdown of social services, and soaring prices. The public sector was no longer able to provide stable incomes, and by the mid-1990s, 55 percent of the population had fallen under the poverty line (Bauer et al. 1997, 10). Before, poverty had mainly been a problem of large families and single pensioners, but the transition produced masses of "new poor", including working families (Falkingham et al. 1997, 13). At the same time, social inequality widened as a small, privileged elite accumulated power and wealth in their hands.

This development could not but impact on processes of identification. As Megoran's research shows, ordinary people, regardless of ethnic affiliation, often define themselves against the *chongdor*, the "big ones" or ruling classes who have wrought misery on the people by hoarding resources for their own (and their kin's) benefit (2002, 226–256). Not surprisingly, the masses more readily identify with calls for social justice than with the elite-driven *Manas* cult.[9] Both political and religious movements currently make such calls and thereby attract followers. "Justice" (*spravedlivost'*) was one of the main rallying cries of the opposition movement that ousted Akaev in 2005. This movement was strong in southern Kyrgyzstan, where people felt politically excluded (for Akaev's entourage mostly came from his Northern homeland) and the percentage of the population living in poverty was particularly high. With Kyrgyz nationalists playing a key role in the anti-Akaev movement, the idea of "justice", however, sometimes clashed with *nash obshchii dom* because it included calls for the dispossession of ethnic minorities and a "return" of land to the Kyrgyz (Saralaeva and Skochilo 2005; IRIN 2005a, 2005b). Justice is also a central demand of radical Islamists in the Ferghana Valley who present their idealized Islamic state as an egalitarian society. Islamic rhetoric is indeed highly influential in the region.

Since the late Soviet period there has been a proliferation of sources of, and meanings related to, Islamic practices and institutions in Central Asia. A range of both old and new social actors offer competing defi-

9 Ilkhamov (2001a) discusses the emergence of a "new poor" identity in Uzbekistan that partly relies on Islamic rhetoric.

nitions of "correct" Islamic beliefs and practices. This competition over religious meanings is not captured by dualistic models of official and unofficial Islam, or traditionalism versus fundamentalism (Rasanayagam 2006; Abashin 2006). Such categories not only establish boundaries that are blurred or even non-existent in reality, but also ignore the fact that positions on what constitutes proper beliefs and practices are tied into local networks, power struggles, and questions of economic survival (for the provision of ritual services is also a source of income). The result of current disputes over correct Islam is that local Muslims have developed a heightened awareness of the contested nature of cultural meanings and of supposedly "un-Islamic" beliefs and practices.

In all Central Asian republics, state-sponsored administrations are responsible for the organization and monitoring of Islamic worship and education. These administrations date back to the 1940s (and ultimately, to the Russian Empire), but they now promote the secular, nationalized version of Islam mentioned earlier. In Kyrgyzstan, the Muslim administration, called *Muftiate*, issues *fatwa*s that reflect the Hanafi school of law in Sunni Islam. Hanafism is presented as the traditional form of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, and it accommodates religious practices like the visitation of shrines that are popular throughout Central Asia and now sold as part of national culture. The *Muftiate*, which is formally independent of the state, also sets the curricula for education in Islamic institutes, issues imams with qualifications and appoints them to mosques (usually through its regional subdivisions, the *qaziate*s), and coordinates the pilgrimage to Mecca for citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

Imams and mullahs in the country, however, may popularize all sorts of beliefs and practices. Many of them are itinerant or neighborhood mullahs and thus not officially appointed and bound by the teachings of the *Muftiate*. Moreover, even those who occupy positions in state-sponsored institutions may offer their own views and interpretations. The country's *madrasa*s (Qur'anic schools), for example, receive their curricula from the *Muftiate*, but in practice the teaching in these schools is not monitored. Some teachers are fundamentalists who reject Hanafi views and practices; they may even support radical Islamic parties such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. At the same time, some mullahs have only a rudimentary, self-taught know-