LEGENDS BORNE BY LIFE: MYTH, GRIEVING AND THE CIRCULATION OF KNOWLEDGE WITHIN KYRGYZ CONTEXTS

THESIS

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By

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ABSTRACT

*Koshok* is a practice related to lament that is manifest in several types. The first type of *koshok* refers to a lament-like style of vocal music performed by women only and which includes a combination of text, melody and crying-like sounds. This type is performed three days after a death has occurred and on days set aside to mark the passage of time within a year of mourning. The second type of *koshok* refers to a purely instrumental performance that may be played by an individual, typically on the *komus* or by a large Soviet-style orchestra of folk instruments. This instrumental type serves the purpose of spreading the news of a death and may be performed by both men and women. The third type of *koshok* is a vocal performance by a male singer accompanying himself on the *komus*. This type is reserved for the remembrance of persons of high esteem. All three types share qualities of emotion and dialogue and such qualities underlie the decisions made by local Kyrgyz people as to what may be included in the category of *koshok*.

Three months of ethnographic field-research with *koshok* as its central subject was conducted by the author in the Kyrgyz Republic from September 2008 until December 2008. The research took place mainly in the region of Talas and Chui and was informed by prior experience gained in the region of Naryn. Myth, as manifested in local stories and customs, is an emergent material through which an individual interacts with the world and with which he or she can create meaningful acts. *Koshok* is connected to myth in so much as the worlds in which *koshok* is performed are myth-infused. Understanding myth aids in understanding how *koshok* both gains meaning from contexts and adds meaning to contexts.

The feeling and communication of emotion is constructed by the larger social system and the extent to which an individual, whether performer or listener, is embedded in this larger social system influences the extent to which that individual can participate meaningfully in a performance of *koshok*. *Koshok* belongs to a spectrum of activity that includes narratives about sadness or misfortune, activities such as mandatory visits and affective states such as weeping or fainting. This spectrum of activities is covered in the novel, *The Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years*, written by the Kyrgyz novelist Chingiz
Aitmatov, through the stories surrounding a gravesite and description of the activities of a single family as they prepare to bury their father. Not only does Aitmatov write about *koshok*, but *koshok* also played a part in the public remembrance of Aitmatov forty days after his funeral. The *koshoks* presented in a public performance and broadcasted via mass media retained their traditional elements while providing a forum for the negotiation of national identity.
“The history of a nation is made of legends borne by life.” (Imanalieva, 25)
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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND, RESEARCH, METHODS, AND ANALYSIS

From the depths of a strange dream, I heard a cell phone ring and I knew that the call was coming from Taiwan. With eyes still closed, I answered the phone. A voice said “Good morning, Sister. How is going your day?” The familiar syntax of Kyrgyzified English brought me into waking reality. I glanced outside my window. It was still dark, so I replied “The day is not yet going, Nurbek. I just opened my eyes. Not even birds are awake.” “Oh sorry!” he apologized. “No, no” I said, interrupting his apology. “We agreed to talk about my thesis today. Let me call you back, though, because it’s going to be a long conversation and I want to spend my money, not yours.” “Okay,” he said. “I am in the laboratory now. Please, wait ten minutes for me to walk back to the dormitory.” With that agreed, I hung up the phone, went to the kitchen of the same house in Columbus, Ohio that I have lived in since I was a small child and made myself a pot of tea.

1.1 Some Personal History

I had emailed Nurbek the first full draft of my thesis only two weeks before. I had requested that he weigh the perspectives that I presented in my thesis against his own in order to check my thoughts. I had asked that he approve or correct my representation of his words and experiences, as well as those of his family and his community. Ideally, I would have asked each person who participated in my field research to read the representation of him- or her- self, but no one except Nurbek had the English skills necessary for that task. Nurbek had not only the ability to read my work, but also the ability and the desire to relay the content back to his family. In encouraging this process I was acting on a value that I had brought with me into the field. This value was that both research and thesis should be a collaborative project that contributes to processes of peace rather than to systems of violence. Just as Michelle Kisliuk refused to reinforce colonial baggage, for example, by pooling her money with her assistant instead of paying him a salary.
(Kisliuk, *Seize the Dance*, 23), I too tried to form my relationships in the field based on mutual respect and mutual trust. Creating such a relationship often required making myself vulnerable and surrendering absolute control of the research process. This I did when I invited Nurbek to read what I had written. The draft that Nurbek read was an analysis of selections of data compiled during a formal field research project conducted in the Kyrgyz Republic, in the regions of Talas and Bishkek from September 1, 2008 to December 1, 2008. I refer to this data throughout this thesis as “Field notes, 2008.” The data collected through fieldwork was informed by my previous experience of living and working in Kyrgyzstan. I worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Naryn Region from 2002 to 2004 and in Bishkek as an independent individual from 2004 to 2005. During this three-year period I did not leave Kyrgyzstan, except to spend a few weeks in Turkey. I refer to information coming from the experience prior to fieldwork as “Personal notes.” It should be understood that these “notes” refer to pictures, emails, diary entries and reconstructed memories.

This thesis centers around and spirals away from a particular subject of research. The subject of research is *koshok* (defined on page 6) and an associated context of burial and mourning among ethnic Kyrgyz within the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. This thesis explores the idea that *koshok* is the most concentrated form of grief’s expression and that this particular form cannot be fully understood without examining the spectrum of affective responses to grief and grief’s many circumstances and contexts.

Benedicte Grima (*The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women*) uses the phrase “genre of grief” to describe “paxto,” the subject of her ethnography. According to Grima’s analysis of Paxtun (or Pashtun) women, “paxto” (or pashto) is associated with honor in men and righteousness in women. “Paxto” includes narratives about sadness or misfortune, activities such as mandatory visits and affective states such as weeping, fainting, and even publicly shedding the veil. After reading Grima’s discussion, I decided that for my purposes, *koshok* was better conceived not as a musical genre, but rather, as part of a larger “genre of grief.” Grima uses the word “genre” to describe a spectrum of behavior, narratives, and performances connected to and by the predominant emotion of grief.
This way of thinking is very different from that which I presented in a paper written for a 2007 meeting of the Midwest Chapter of the Society of Ethnomusicology, a paper that I had hoped to expand into my thesis. This paper combined retrospective research with the experiences I had gained between 2002 and 2005. A lack of systematically recorded data, however, and the absence of recorded sound required a return to Kyrgyzstan for formal field research. A qualitative difference in the kinds of knowledge gained during these two periods combined with the privileged status of formal research leads me to focus this thesis primarily on analysis of my more recent fieldwork. My fieldwork process, from research to analysis, was enabled, informed, and colored by my prior experience. I have brought that prior experience into this thesis in those instances where it can be used to give background to my thoughts and perceptions. Nurbek had been a significant figure throughout both these periods and his presence brings continuity to two very different experiences.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I was an employee of the United States Government and had the duty of representing my nation at all times under any circumstance. It was my task to integrate into the community, to become an active member of that community, to affect the lives of individuals, and to bring about small, sustainable steps that were part of larger projects of change, such as the propagation of democracy, business, health, and education as modeled by the United States of America. I was very happy when I left the Peace Corps to become an independent individual, free from the bureaucracy of government, and yet, as an independent English teacher, my role became more limited. I felt that I had moved from a valued community member to an interactive resource for English language acquisition. Three years later, as a researcher, I was representing only myself and I had no duty but to research. I was free from many obligations, such as tutoring students, inventing projects, and writing grants. My research was university-funded and I had no need to trade skills for money or services. My financial independence isolated me, however, and there were many days during which I longed for the network provided by being a teacher.
1.2 Engaging the Field

With tea in hand and these thoughts in mind, I returned to my room, and collected my materials. I cleared a space at my table. I took out a copy of the draft that we would be discussing. I took out the same notebook that I had brought with me to Kyrgyzstan, a notebook that held pages of both quickly jotted notes and careful reconstructions of conversations and events. Having organized myself, I picked up the phone and called Taiwan. Originally Nurbek and I had agreed that he would be my research assistant and translator; however, he left for Taiwan only three weeks after my arrival and for those three weeks both he and his family were consumed by preparations for his journey. Thus, Nurbek’s departure plays a significant role in my data as presented in chapter 3.

This was my first time calling Nurbek in his new country of residence. As I dialed the number, I could not help recalling, in a single instant, all the conversations we had had over the past five years: Thanks to the cellular phone, I had talked to Nurbek while he stood on the roof of the family house in Naryn’s freezing weather in order to maintain a clear connection. I had talked to Nurbek while he ran between classes at Naryn State University and as his mother sent him on errands to the marketplace. I had talked to Nurbek while he prepared food in a restaurant until three in the morning. On one occasion I had called him during government elections in which he served as a U.N. volunteer. We talked frequently at the radio station in both Naryn and in Bishkek where he both worked and slept during the years that he was a DJ. Throughout these times, he, his parents, and I thought that the Turkish students whom he had helped frequently would return the favor and find him a job doing manual labor in Turkey. Never in our wildest dreams did any of us expect Nurbek to win a full scholarship for graduate study of English as a Foreign Language in Taiwan. *Boido jaman koz-jaman sozdon alis bolsun!* [Don’t let the evil eye come from these words.] Such words follow a statement about a person’s success so that success is not spoiled by other people’s jealousy. I have included those words here in respect for that custom.
We typically spoke in Russian and this conversation was no exception. Nurbek’s Russian had improved greatly in Taiwan, as had his English. Having only one other Kyrgyz speaker near him and only the most rudimentary knowledge of Chinese, Nurbek relies on Russian and English to communicate in his new environment. In Kyrgyzstan he often chose to speak to me in English so that listening ears would not be able to understand our conversation. I wondered whether it was for similar reasons that he, now in Taiwan, chose to speak to me in Russian or if, on some level, the Russian language facilitated more intimate conversation than did English.

Despite the fact that we spoke in Russian, I made my jottings in English and periodically stopped the flow of thought to back-translate what I had just written down. This enabled Nurbek to correct or confirm my interpretations of his thoughts. The same thing may be said of all my field notes taken throughout three months of research in the Kyrgyz Republic. I have chosen to discuss this particular conversation in detail because it is representative of the style of conversations I engaged in during my field research and therefore offers perspective on the research process itself.

In the course of the conversation, Nurbek and I exchanged information as friends do, as well as polite words on behalf of both our families. What I have laid out here are only those parts our conversation that I feel are relevant to the reader’s understanding of my experience in Kyrgyzstan, my research process, the analysis of field notes and other sources of data, and the product of this process as presented by this thesis.

1.3 Defining Koshok

In the onset of my research I had set out to understand a particular sound that I had heard frequently as a Peace Corps Volunteer but that, ironically, I could not seem to find as a researcher. This sound was the sound of koshok. Koshok is a noun, and it is described by the verb koshy (Field notes, 2008). The word koshy represents the first person ending of a Russian verb tagged onto a Kyrgyz word. Such hybrid speech is so common in Kyrgyzstan that individuals are not often certain when they are using which language or in what ways a language is being used. Still, the speaker’s point can be understood: a koshok
is not read, sung, spoken, wept, or performed. It is *koshok*-ed. The existence of such a verb form points to the performative nature of *koshok*.

As *koshok* is the subject of my research, it is important to establish a meaning for the word; yet *koshok*’s meanings are plural. I will now present a three-tiered conceptualization of *koshok* that I formulated in the field and that reflects categories based on performative characteristics, the gender of the performers, and specific performance contexts. This conceptualization presents a standard of what constitutes *koshok*, although exceptions exist that would bend these categories. Within the field, certain individuals contended my categorizations. These individuals were local researchers and so I cannot simply dismiss their opinions. Unfortunately, I will need to become adept in the Kyrgyz language before I can adequately sort out the fine use of terms and their associated meanings. Throughout my research, *koshok* was a word in the continuous state of re-conceptualization by myself and by the persons with whom I worked in the field. The *koshok*-types that I present here is only an approximate bringing together of the data compiled in the field and they were formulated in order to encompass the diversity of examples that I was being given in my request for *koshok*. These categories are meant only to give an initial meaning to the word *koshok*. I expect the clear conceptualization presented here to become increasingly muddied in the reader’s mind as the discussion presented in this thesis evolves.

In the first tier, *koshok* refers to a genre of vocal music performed by women only. This *koshok*-type may be considered equivalent to lament as it includes a combination of text, melody and crying-like sounds (Mazo, “Lament Made Visible”). *Koshok* is known to have been performed in relationship to weddings, but the present context for *koshok* is more typically the occasion of a person’s death. This type of *koshok* can be performed at any time, but it is typically performed in a funeral yurt during the three days before burial, on the fortieth day after burial and on the one-year anniversary of a death. In this context, a single *koshok* is rarely heard. Usually multiple *koshoks* are performed simultaneously.

In the second tier, *koshok* refers to a purely instrumental genre that may be played by an individual, typically on the *komus*, or by an orchestra of folk instruments with melodies adapted to fit the
style of this Soviet-era invention. Such orchestras of folk instruments were part of an idea promoted by
Soviet cultural policies that ethnicities should be pushed on a path towards progress while retaining ethnic
qualities. One notion of progress was the formation of an ethnicity into a nation through political
consciousness. This “natural” stage of development had to be sublimated so that ethnicities could be
formed, not into one nation, but into an “international,” that is, the Soviet Union (Castillo, “Peoples at an
Exhibition”).

A second notion of progress is that that modernity is defined through innovations in “art,”
“science,” “industry,” and “technology.” “Russian” models have been positioned as the prime example of
modernity and progress. Non-Russian civilizations are seen needing to catch up. In the case of Kyrgyzstan,
such ideas of progress stimulated support for and creation of works in “classical” genres such as
symphonies, concerti, or operas that incorporated Kyrgyz melodies and were set for and played by
orchestras of Kyrgyz instruments. Many of these instruments were adapted to fit better into the Western
tonal system and orchestration, such as the bass kil kayak. (The kil kayak is a one-stringed instrument
carved from a single block of wood and played with a bow.) In The Hundred Thousand Fools of God,
Theodore Levin offers the example of the Uzbek opera Ulugbek for this discussion. Ulugbek was composed
by Alexei Kolovsky in the 1940s with the incorporation of Uzbek melodies, motives, rhythms and
imageries (Levin, 14-22). In Kyrgyzstan such examples might be found among the works of such
composers as Abdylas Maldybaev, whose portrait appears on the one som banknote, or Asanhan
Dzhumahmatov, who is considered to be the “father” of Kyrgyz opera.

Koshok melodies performed by an orchestra are typically performed in a concert hall or for studio
recordings. In both cases they are used for the purpose of spreading the news of a death. Both men and
women participate in this type of koshok and it is performed only on the actual day of a person’s death. The
custom of playing music to inform listeners about a death seems to be very old and linked to a custom of
telling a person indirectly that their loved one has passed away. It was through encounters with this
instrumental koshok-type that I became aware of a necessity to link koshok to a larger set of behaviors related to grief.

The third tier of koshok is a vocal genre in which the singer accompanies himself on the komus. This type is performed by men only and it is reserved for the remembrance of persons held in high esteem. The texts of these koshoks serve to praise and immortalize the dead. This type of koshok is typically performed forty days after a person’s death in a formal and prominent place. Although this form of koshok is perhaps the most rare, it was the first form of koshok that was presented to me in my field research. I believe this is in part because this form is less personal and therefore easier to talk about. From a local viewpoint, it is also easier to listen to than the first form.

All three types share two qualities of koshok that were emphasized to me over and over again. These qualities are the emotion of grief and the perception of a dialogue between the living and the dead. I will note that when I asked the local researchers if samples A, B, and C were koshok, these researchers immediately weighed the samples against a pre-existing mental category which I was not party to, but which I understood involved performative aspects, gender of the performer, and context. They also discussed Kyrgyz terms for the sample, proposing that the each of these koshok-types had its own name. Such distinctions were not made by any other individuals with whom I spoke and I wondered if the categories put forth by the researchers are local terms or Kyrgyz-language terms produced by Kyrgyz-speaking (ethno)musicologists. The qualities of dialogue and emotion were fundamental to the decisions made by non-researchers, as to whether or not such samples could be considered koshok. I will discuss this further in chapters 4 and 5.

“Well?” I said to Nurbek, referring to the drafts he had read. “What did you think? What did you like and what didn’t you like? With what did you agree and with what didn’t you agree?”

“I agreed with all of it,” Nurbek replied,” and the quality is very good. You put in all the details…. he said, she said, all of that… just…”
“Yes…”

“I couldn’t find Farida in your thesis.”

Farida is a koshokju (Kyrgyz: a professional mourner). Nurbek’s father worked very hard to introduce me to her. Although Nurbek was already living in Taiwan when I met Farida, he was not outside the flow of information. Despite my frequent references to Farida in the draft, combined with the use of her name, his comment could not be dismissed merely as a problem with the author’s writing or with the reader’s comprehension. Nurbek’s comment demonstrated to me that, in his mind, Farida must not be represented as insignificant or anonymous because Farida was a person of consequential knowledge and experience. In Nurbek’s mind the knowledge that I gained from Farida on two separate days should be much greater than the knowledge that I gained from his family with whom I spent day and night for two full months. I believe that Nurbek was expecting to read in detail about a video-recording I had made in Farida’s home of a koshok for a wedding, a koshok for a funeral, a komus (Kyrgyz: a four-stringed strummed instrument) melody played by her daughter, and a lullaby, interspersed with numerous questions, answers and commentaries by Farida, her daughter and myself. Unfortunately, this recording was confiscated when my luggage was misrouted from Kyrgyzstan to Mecca and I was left with only my field notes.

The absence of the koshokju’s knowledge was not the only omission in Nurbek’s mind and he followed with another indirect critique: “Do you have recordings of komus?” he asked. Until Nurbek offered to send them to me, I did not understand that he was referring to the specific recordings he had taken from the Kyrgyz National Radio in order to help me understand how a melody could be mournful. His comment reinforced a notion I had developed in the field that komus melodies and koshok performance are somehow entangled. Koshok performance includes komus melodies, but the entanglement between the two is deeper than that. It is said that “the komus can weep” (Field notes, 2008). Unfortunately, exploration of how it is that a komus can weep goes beyond the scope of my research at present and this current thesis.
“Another thing,” Nurbek said, hesitating. “You didn’t explain why, out of all the things there were in Kyrgyzstan to write about, you chose the topic of *koshok.*” For Nurbek and his family, *koshok* is an unspeakable and it was at times difficult for them to think about, speak about or imagine *koshok* as a subject through which their individual selves or their nation could be represented. Knowing this, my interest was piqued when Nurbek continued, “I have an idea of how you can explain this.”

Nurbek began to speak very quickly and excitedly. His mind moved ahead of his Russian language skills so that I was forced to stop him multiple times so that he could clarify his statements. “Sister, Kyrgyz always were. And we had a civilization. We had language and writing. And *komus* was. And *koshok* was. But then came the Mongols and the Turks, and everything changed. They [the Mongols and Turks] changed everything with their coming. Nothing stayed the same except for *koshok* and *komus.* These two are the kernel of our nation.”

“That is a very interesting idea,” I replied, and indeed it is, because it centers music and ritual in the heart of debates on national and ethnic identity. In her dissertation, the Kyrgyz scholar Elmira Köchümkulova (*Kyrgyz Nomadic Customs and the Impact of Re-Islamization After Independence*) uses *koshok,* the funerary context and discussions surrounding both to add to a larger conversation concerning Islam and nationalism in the Kyrgyz Republic. It was precisely the disputed status of *koshok* described by Köchümkulova that alerted me to its importance, and drew me to *koshok* as a topic of research. Köchümkulova describes disputes between members of her own family concerning the value of *koshok* and its relationship to religious and national identity. Chingiz Aitmatov presents a similar dispute through the characters of a novel to be discussed in chapter 4.

With this in mind, I would like to put my conversation with Nurbek on hold, so as to discuss a body of literature that was influential in my retrospective narration of my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer, in my preparations for field research and in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of my experiences in the field. I came into the field with an assumption that the Kyrgyz word *koshok* is equivalent to the English word “lament.” Although I quickly discovered that this assumption was incorrect, it was
ideas about lament in general rather than *koshok* per se, that formed the basis of my research plan. This line of thought is reflected in the following discussion about “knowledge.” Research on *koshok* has led me to a secondary topic of knowledge because in order to understand *koshok* I have had to take into account localized knowledge. This has forced me to consider not only what locals know, but how knowledge is generated and how it flows. I use the word knowledge to refer to a way of “being in the world” and well as a way of thinking about the world because I believe that being and thinking are inseparable.

1.4 Knowledge

My understanding of *koshok* is founded on the idea that individuals synthesize knowledge through interaction and engagement in the world. For this reason, both my mode of analysis and my mode of presentation are constructed with and upon the interactions between tangibles (objects, behaviors, words) and intangibles (emotion, ideas, perceptions), which are housed in individuals and circulate amongst people and through institutions.

In chapter 2 of this thesis, I present casual conversations, stories, rumor, jokes, renditions of epics, poetry and literature, as well as the research of scholars all as valuable sources from which insight and understanding may be gleaned. In chapter 3, I privilege stories as a manifestation of myth and explore the concept of myth as a body of knowledge and as a way of presenting, interpreting, and constructing discursive knowledge. I follow my exploration of myth with a presentation of certain aspects of myth as encountered in order to give the reader the background and knowledge necessary for understanding a world in which *koshok* thrives. In chapter 4, I present a view of emotion as communicated. In order to do this, I look to the work of Greg Urban. Urban developed the concept of “ritual wailing” as a “sign vehicle.” A sign vehicle is a carrier of signs in which the signs interact, like the mechanical parts of a car, to put the vehicle in motion. A sign can simply be an utterance, for example, “Oh,” but a sign vehicle such as “ritual wailing” is made up of countless signs such as words, gestures, pitches, and utterances that resemble crying. In terms of knowledge, both presentation and interpretation of *koshok* as a sign vehicle requires a lifetime of experiences that enables signs to be connected to meaning.
The process that connects sign to meaning is called signification. My concept of signification comes from Julia Kristeva (*The Black Sun*). Kristeva adds to theories such as that of Jean-Jacques Nattiez by conceiving of that which the individual cannot cognize [cognize: to take or have knowledge, understanding, or awareness of something]. For Kristeva this unknowable-undescribable is present in the rhythms of the body in which she calls “mood” and which manifests in “affect”. According to Kristeva, cognizance is impossible until the unknowable-undescribable has been separated from the physical self and abstracted into language. In short, the individual can feel something and that feeling can affect every aspect of his or her life; however, until he or she is capable of naming that feeling, it cannot be traced to its source. As such, no analysis can happen, no alteration can occur, and no healing can begin. According to Kristeva there are two ways to present what is uncognized: through the rituals of psychosis or through the creative act. Kristeva writes:

Naming suffering, exalting it, dissecting it into its smallest components- that is doubtless a way to curb mourning. To revel in it at times, but also to move beyond it…. Nevertheless, art seems to point to a few devices that bypass complacency and, without simply turning mourning into mania, secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing. First by means of prosody, the language beyond language that inserts into the signs the rhythm and alliterations of semiotic processes. Also by means of the polyvalence of sign and symbol, which unsettles naming, and by building up a plurality of connotations around the sign, affords the subject a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning of the true meaning, of the Thing. (Kristeva, 97)

Kristeva’s words point to multiplicities of meaning and complex interplays that occur in circulation between the verbal and the non-verbal, the cognized and the uncognized. It is in a space cognizant and uncognizant that the creative act occurs. I will dwell on and draw upon this space throughout this thesis for I believe that the performance of *koshok* is a creative act that occupies a particular place between raw emotion and abstracted expression that enables the presentation, the construction and the interpretation of myth-based knowledge.
In 1998, I took a course on music and Russian village traditions, taught by Margarita Mazo, in which I learned that lamenting occurs in relation to a death, a wedding or a significant leaving. Since I had no models for analysis of lament in Kyrgyzstan, I decided to assume, until proven otherwise, that Kyrgyz lament was similar to Russian lament. I did not make that decision arbitrarily. My ability to identify the koshok that I heard while living in Naryn as lament was directly related to the information I had retained from that course. Later, in writing the paper for the Society of Ethnomusicology, I concerned myself with the sound of lamenting: I conceived the sound of the living’s lament in relationship to the profound silence of the absent or deceased individual. Although my conceptualization of lament changed through continued thought and research, I still maintained the idea that lamenting (koshok) is related to loss or absence.

A conception of the living in relationship to the dead arose from ideas that I had encountered as a Peace Corps volunteer. I combined the ideas that I encountered in Naryn City with the experiences I had gained as a participant in burial and mourning. With the advice of Margarita Mazo, I used Victor Turner’s conceptualization of a rite of passage to theorize these experiences. According to Turner (The Ritual Process), a rite of passage includes separation, transition, and incorporation. During the time of transition an individual in transition acquires a liminal non-status in which modes of power, such as everyday custom, no longer apply (Honarmand, personal communication). Guided by Turner in my original theory, I had conceived of the dead as being separated from life, transitioned, and incorporated into death through the funeral rite and the process of mourning. Likewise, I had conceived of individuals in mourning as being separated from ordinary life and time, accompanying the dead to a time-place between life and death, and then returning to be re-incorporated into life. I had come into the field thinking that lamenting (koshok) is related to beliefs about the dead; however, I have come out of the field with the impression that beliefs about the dead do not relate directly to the practice of koshok. I am no more comfortable with this second impression than with the first and so I am left with a kind of koan (a puzzle with no solution used in Zen for teaching).
I also theorized that lamenting (koshok) is a performance of ambiguous emotion. Ambiguity in lament may be compared to the ambiguity in laughter described by Michael Bakhtin in regards to the carnivalesque. Bakhtin describes ritual laughter as unrelated to an individual comic event, directed at everyone and everything and “ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11-12). Ritual laughter is also directed at those who laugh. I should note that Bakhtin describes the funeral ritual as “lamenting (glorifying) and deriding the deceased” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 6). I agree that glorifying and deriding the deceased are both prerogatives of lamenting. Like ritual laughter, lamenting is not related only to an individual isolated sorrow, although that too plays a part. Like ritual laughter, lamenting is not directed only at the dead but also at those who mourn and those who are outside of mourning.

In apparent contradiction to the understanding of lamenting as ambiguous, I also accepted the idea that lamenting (koshok) is a ritual expression of personal anxiety, sorrow, and grief that offers catharsis. In her writings on Russian lament, Mazo describes not only the structures and qualities of the sounds involved in lamenting, but also a mixture of emotion felt and emotion performed until it is felt, either by the performer herself, or those who are listening. Mazo offers a hypothesis that the structure of lamenting provides a sense of order amidst personal chaos, which prevents personal collapse and eases suffering (Mazo, “Lament Made Visible”).

In contemplating how lamenting could simultaneously be an outburst of real emotion and an ambiguous performance, I began to conceive of lament as creating a private space within a public forum. Bakhtin’s idea of chronotope (*The Dialogic Imagination*) played in my mind as I wondered how koshok might fit into it. Chronotope is the concept of inseparable space and time. In my observations it was clear to me that koshok was a sound that existed in time, moved through time and defined time as a moment of mourning, grief and remembrance. Koshok also created a space, that is, it designated a place that could be used for many purposes as a space in use for mourning, grief and remembrance. I also converted Saba Mahmood’s conceptualization of “somatic modes of attention” into a concept of space created by sound.
Mahmood (*Politics of Piety*) talks about a piety movement among Egyptian women. One underlying principle of this movement is that the spiritual self can be reached through the physical self, so that good (right) dress and good (right) behavior leads to a good (right) spiritual state. Veiling is only the most surface aspect of “good” (Mahmood). Through veiling a woman creates a space around herself, which a woman can carry with her as she leaves those feminine spaces in which she is concealed by walls and curtains (Honarmand, personal communication). Following from Mahmood’s discussion, it occurred to me that a mourner might veil herself in grief, through lamenting, creating a private space for personal emotion, and that through the outward expression of grief, she can come to feel the inward emotion.

In addition to ideas about lamenting in particular, I also brought with me an idea that the creative endeavor encompasses a spectrum between ritual performance and art (Boydd, *Ritual Art and Knowledge*). This idea became increasingly important as I realized that in order to understand *koshok*, I would need to expand my conception of *koshok* to include more than lamenting. I believe that participation in the creative spectrum offers a way of knowing, understanding, and representing knowledge and so I became interested in relationships within this spectrum. More specifically, I became interested how the work of a great writer, such as the novelist Chingiz Aitmatov, could be built upon local knowledge. Aitmatov was from Talas, Kyrgyzstan and in Talas I saw how the work of Aitmatov could found its way back into the *koshoks* sung upon the writer’s death. Although this subject runs throughout the thesis, it in discussed particularly in chapter 5.

My reading of Maya Deren (*Divine Horsemen*) fed a conceptualization of life as a kind of art. Deren describes how she, as an artist, had set out to collect decontextualized images of Hatian dance for her own creative endeavors. In the process, however, she realized that an image could never be extracted from its context, and indeed, that the context was a kind of art. Thus she turned to an activity more akin to ethnography. Reading Deren’s account of her change in perspective helped me sort out my own thoughts on the way in which aspects of life can be known through participation in art. Boydd also supported this notion in his discussion of the way in which ritual creates a metaphor and allegory in which meaning can
grow, change, be refreshed, or start anew in a similar way as an art-piece can be viewed over and over by
the same viewer with limitless meanings, interpretations, and associations. In addition Boydd states the
parts of a good (deep) artwork are internally related to the whole so that changes in any of them result in an
essential change to the whole (Boydd, 72) and this statement, along with Grima’s work, helped me to
construct the idea of an aesthetic of grief discussed in chapter 4. I took both Boydd’s aesthetic and Deren’s
art into my conceptualization of koshok as part of a spectrum of inter-related creative activity.

A last medium I used for thinking about koshok was a particular a novel by the Kyrgyz author and
diplomat, Chingiz Aitmatov, entitled The Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years. The first time I read the novel,
I was struck by a vagueness in the ethnographic details and the watered-down descriptions of traditions.
However, as time progressed, I began to realize that this science-fiction novel had much to offer. The novel
is about a man, Kazangap, who has died, and his friend Yedegei, who buries him. The title, The Day Lasts
Longer than 100 Years, alludes to the central theme of memory. In the novel, Yedegei, a Kyrgyz-Kazak,
travels through the Sarozek desert to an ancient burial ground, the Ana Beit Cemetery. (Aitmatov does not
make a distinction between these two ethnicities.) The Ana Beit Cemetery is the place where Kazangap
asked to be buried. The funeral procession, so to speak, consists of a dog, an eagle, a camel, a dead man, a
handful of relatives, and a digger (a giant motorized shovel and a symbol of Soviet progress). As Yedegei
travels he remembers the times he shared with his dead friend. He also remembers a number of legends and
tales. These tales are not told by Yedegei. Instead, they arise in the novel as though they are a part of the
reader’s own memory.

Aitmatov uses these legends to create social commentary. For example, he tells the legend of the
mankurt, a man who was captured by the Chinese and made a slave. The way in which the mankurt was
made a slave was that his head was shaved and a sheep’s bladder put over it. The bladder hardened and
became a part of his body. The hair that used to grow out of the mankurt’s head was forced to grow inward
so that he lost all his memory to the extent that he could not recognize his own mother and killed her. The
burial place of this mother became the site of the Ana Beit Cemetery. Unbeknownst to Yedegei, this
cemetery site had also become the site of a secret joint space-rocket defense mission between the United States and the Soviet Union, and so, by traveling to this place, the story of Yedegei’s journey to bury an old friend becomes intertwined with a fantastic secondary plot that I discuss further in chapter 3. Through the combination of these two extremes, Aitmatov brings together images of a mythical past, a present reality and a fantastic future. Throughout my fieldwork, and even in planning out my research, I used Aitmatov’s images and some of his character’s discussions as a medium to think with because Aitmatov presents stories and commentaries that are similar enough to real world experience that the two can be compared. Thus I have been able to weigh the presentation of koshok in the world of my field research against the presentation of koshok in Aitmatov’s fictional world.

1.5 Methods in the Field

Despite the diversity of literature that I had read and the wealth of ideas contained in this literature, I found such ideas difficult to translate into testable hypotheses because such ideas require a more interpretive approach. I employed traditional anthropological methods of data collection in the field. These were mainly interviews that took the form of long conversations and participant-observation, supported by field notes, photographs, and a few audio and visual recordings. I used the works of James Spradley (Participant Observation and The Ethnographic Interview), Michael Agar (The Professional Stranger), and Robert Emmerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw (Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes) as my reference books. These works were not written with musical research in mind and so I had to carefully consider the ways in which the advice given in these books could be useful to me. My field notes were often taken as mental notes, which I logged in my brain through the use of mnemonic devices until that moment in which I could jot them down in my notebook and later expand upon them. I usually wrote my field notes early in the morning when there was light to see by and when no one else was awake to disturb my concentration. I typed these notes up into field summaries when electricity was available, a process that allowed me to review and organize my notes as well as begin to pull out aspects of the data for further
consideration. Nurbek’s family often read over my shoulder as I typed, and although they could not follow my train of thought, they could identify names, which naturally elicited questions: for example, “What did you write about Gulzad?” I would usually verbally translate my written words for them upon request.

Nurbek’s parents, like most individuals of their age, are educated and have written their own Master’s theses. Both have worked as schoolteachers and have had relatively successful, if not lucrative, careers. It was not difficult to explain to them that I was doing research for a Master’s thesis. However, it was difficult to explain how all the pieces of life that I experienced had the potential to inform me as a researcher. Words, looks, habits, gesture, the food on the table, the objects in the room and even the landscape were all my informants. Such difficulties in explanation culminated in a fatherly speech I received from Bakay Saraeivich in which he criticized me for not using quantitative data, saying “You’ll go back to the university and they’ll say to you, you have only looked upon Bakay Saraeivich.”

Bakay Saraeivich’s speech suggested that I needed to make my research process more transparent, so I began to summarize the things that I put into my field notes for Nurbek’s family. For example, one day I commented that Nurbek’s niece had learned to rock a baby exactly like her aunt. When Kyrgyz and other Turkic people in Kyrgyzstan rock a child they pat the child with a slow, even beat and with each beat they pronounce the syllable “lA,” elongating every fourth repetition. This particular woman did not rock her child quietly. She shouted the syllable “la,” something that Nurbek’s four year-old niece then began to do while playing with the wrapped plastic bottle she cradled and fed and pretended to be a mother for.

The mother of Nurbek’s niece immediately corrected me when I said this saying “My daughter didn’t learn that. It’s in her blood. She’s a future mother.” I responded, “I will write your words in my notes, because it seems that many things are in the blood in Kyrgyzstan.” In my mind, at least, her words had connected with other statements I had heard about the acquisition of musical ability, not through learning, but through the blood. The child’s grandmother then joined in and it turned into a family discussion of how talents circulate through a family every thirty years. The grandmother enumerated to me the talents of each family member whom I knew well and explained to me from whom the person I knew
had acquired the talent. She also hypothesized on who would receive the talent in generations not yet born (Field notes, 2008). Another tactic I used in my research was to recount a prior conversation and give details of what was discussed. I followed this with a request to help me understand what was meant or for an opinion on the different aspects that had been discussed. Two months later, I maintained both these tactics in my phone conversation with Nurbek.

1.6 Roles

“Listen, Nur,” I said, “Dr. Mazo asked me a question. She asked me why I chose this particular family to work with. At first I explained to her that it was because you [plural form] were very knowledgeable and you could explain things, and also that you were more understanding of me… but she got into what kind of knowledge, understanding of what, and such so I said, just between you and me, Dr. Mazo, it’s hard to trust a person in Kyrgyzstan, if you are an American. You yourself know, Nur, how can I know who just wants to use me for money or to learn English? But I don’t want to say that…”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to speak ill of the Kyrgyz nation.”

Nurbek, on his part, also had not changed his manner of response. He neither agreed nor disagreed, and yet he added to the conversation:

“You just have to put it in a more literary-like fashion,” he advised. “Paint it up a little… Say that the Nisharapovs were my hosts. They showed me Kyrgyz. They showed me Kyrgyzstan. Through them I met many people.”

The conversation continued in this style, broaching the topic of roles:

“Another thing…. I told Dr. Mazo I was your sister, and she said, perhaps facetiously, that you aren’t really because these things happen through birth or marriage. So I said I think we really feel like brother and sister to each other. And I don’t know what your family thinks, but I feel like they take me as a kelin [Kyrgy: literally, “the one who came,” translated as both bride and daughter-in-law]. I mean, I know
your parents don’t think there is something between us, but I am still a strange girl who came to live in their house, so I am like a kelin. What else can I be?"

In saying this, I was expressing the multiple meanings of the word Eje (Kyrgyz: literally, elder sister) in the Kyrgyz language. The term “Sister” is the proper form of address for any female older than the speaker or of higher status. In this sense, it is used like the English word “Miss” or “Ma’am.” It is also the term for an elder biological sister as well as the wife of a Baikay (Kyrgyz: literally, elder brother). Baikay too has all the same possibilities of meaning. Interestingly, Nurbek never uses the Kyrgyz word Eje when he addresses me. He almost always uses the Russian or English equivalent. It is also important to note that it is only recently that he has begun to address me with the informal “you” used in Russian. He very rarely calls me by my name, although he will occasionally say “Ms. Pritchard” when he wants to tease me.

In accepting the role of Nurbek’s elder sister, I have taken on a position of both respect and responsibility. I have also taken on adjoining roles, for if I am Nurbek’s sister, then I also a child of his parents and should respect his parents as I respect my own biological mother and father. I say this to point out that, as a researcher, I cannot choose my roles entirely. I can only negotiate them. This relationship affected Nurbek’s parents as much as me, as it gave them a sense of responsibility for the success of my work. One evening when I brought home an email from Nurbek requesting his mother’s advice on a topic for his Master’s thesis, she complained to me, as though I were her own daughter: “You children, you think you have so much stress, but you have only your selves to worry about. I, for my part, have to worry about… [she began a long list that included marrying off her children, finding work for her children, and caring for grandchildren among many other things] …and, not one, but two Master’s theses, Nurbek’s and yours!” (Field notes, 2008).
In our phone conversation, Nurbek chuckled at my remarks, saying “Just remember that I was not your only brother.” He said, “There was Brother Chingiz [a Kyrgyz student who was a senior when Nurbek was a freshman] and Brother Adem [a Kurdish man from Turkey who was an exchange student in Nurbek’s class]…”

“Yes,” I agreed, “and Misha [a Russian local]…. It’s true what you say, remember how I wouldn’t even look at you except that Adem introduced us and said you were a good person…”

“Yes,” he continued, “And you can say, Adem found me to help you, and I began to invite you over, and then through Nurbek, you met the Nisharapovs…”

Thus, Nurbek demonstrated the value of connection and we agreed that choosing a relationship is not an individual process. It is a communal one in which circumstance, association, and public opinion play a large role alongside very personal feelings of connection and trust. Each connection that I made gained me access to networks, knowledge, and experiences, while simultaneously barring me from other networks, knowledges, and experiences.
The official name of the country is the Kyrgyz Republic. This name was adopted in 1991. Kyrgyzstan is the unofficial name of the country and yet it is the name that is more frequently used. The Kyrgyz Republic, as a whole, encompasses an area of less than 200,000 square kilometers. It was once one of the sixteen autonomous republics in the Soviet Union. Naryn is one of the five regions within the Kyrgyz Republic. A joke goes that the seventeenth republic was Naryn. This is because Naryn has a reputation for “wildness” and being a “backwoods” kind of place. Each region shares its name with its largest city, so that the largest city in the Naryn Region is Naryn City. Legal borders are all that clearly separate the Kyrgyz Republic from its neighbors, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and China. Ethnically and geographically, the Republic’s borders are blurred. This is due in large part to the fact that these borders did not exist prior to the formation of the Soviet Union. When these borders were set up in Soviet times, they demarcated
administrative zones and honored select ethnicities, such as the Kyrgyz, by naming Autonomous Republics after them. These demarcations did not prohibit the flow of goods or persons. This flow was stopped only recently as the governments of the newly independent Republics began to contest some boundaries and insist upon others.

A significant percentage of the population in the Kyrgyz Republic is not Kyrgyz. Dungans, Uyghurs, Roma, Kurds, Russians, Germans, Uzbeks, Koreans, and Turks, among others, call the Kyrgyz Republic their home. Like many newly independent states in the region, the Kyrgyz Republic faces difficult challenges as it alters its social and political paradigms, inevitably favoring some groups and marginalizing others. Such shifts of power and privilege have direct effects on individual access to jobs, education, and resources.

The use of language provides an illuminating example of these challenges. The official language of the Kyrgyz Republic is, at present, Kyrgyz. However, when Kyrgyzstan was a part of the Soviet Union, the official language was Russian. This means that Russian was the language of government, institutions, and bureaucracies. I believe that before the Soviet era, one might make the generalization that ethnicity and language were synonymous. Out of the three Kyrgyz words for foreigner, bolok, choochun, and chet eldik adam, the third literally translates as “the person of another language.” Nurbek’s mother remembers with pride that her father was like an ambassador because he was one of the few Kyrgyz who could speak Russian. On top of that, he was literate in Arabic script.

As Soviet institutions and bureaucracies were set up, Russian became the language of public communication. Russian was, and still is, used to communicate between speakers of different native languages. In cosmopolitan places like Bishkek, where the population is quite diverse, Russian is still needed for universal communication. Still, there are people of each ethnic group who do not know Russian well and these people fall out of the linguistic universality that the Soviets created. Certainly linguistic marginalization causes marginalization in other categories, such as politics, economics, access, and identity.
Under the Soviet system, schools were set up in which the language of instruction within the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic was either Russian or Kyrgyz. Depending on which school children attended, different opportunities opened to them. As Russian was the language of higher education, not knowing Russian barred an individual from studying at a university. This system of language-based schools continues. At present there is the addition of the Turkish lyceums, in which the language of instruction is whatever language is native to the instructor. Thus, children may be taught in English, Turkish, Russian, or Kyrgyz in any given class. As knowledge of Russian and association with a Russian language school enabled a Kyrgyz student to travel to Moscow in the Soviet Era, so does the knowledge of Turkish and association with the lyceums provide opportunities to go to Turkey in present times.

Immersion is the method of language acquisition used in schools that came into being under the Soviet system of education. In the Turkish system, however, children are given additional lessons in order to learn those languages in which they have not yet gained competency. I am familiar with both systems for I have worked both in a Kyrgyz government school and in a university attached to the lyceum system. Regardless of the system, all teachers face a similar dilemma: no matter what language is chosen for instruction, all students have mixed competency. For example, as a schoolteacher in a Russian school, I realized that many of my students had not mastered Russian nor were the majority of them fully literate in Kyrgyz. In Naryn, it was common to hear a sentence begun in one language and finished in another, to hear the syntax of one language combined with the vocabulary of another and to participate in a conversation in which one person speaks one language and another person speaks another language. I often heard students playing a game in which they would form coherent sentences in which each word belonged to a different language, for example “Oblala menim school idyot.” (Turkish: Sister, Kyrgyz: My, English: School, Russian: Goes to; Total Meaning: My sister is going to school.) As my students were beginners in English, English was also not an ideal language for instruction. I dealt with this in multiple ways, but the method that seemed to have the best results was simply to let the students translate for each other in whatever language was working for the moment (Personal notes).
In Bishkek, where the population is more diverse, students frequently use Russian to communicate to each other and in many cases these students struggle with the language that belongs to their ethnicity. Many Kyrgyz-speaking volunteers complained of an inability to communicate in Bishkek (Personal notes, 2002). As the Kyrgyz government moves to make Kyrgyz the official language of the Kyrgyz Republic, it has to reckon with the fact that not all people, even in the government, can speak Kyrgyz. It will take time to raise a generation that is competent in Kyrgyz and until that time those who speak only Russian, or languages other than Kyrgyz, will feel that they are discriminated against and marginalized.

Since language is very much on everyone’s mind, comments can frequently be heard about regional dialects: In the south, in the districts of Osh and Jalabad, it is often said that the Kyrgyz language is influenced by Uzbek. In the North, in the district of Talas, it is said that the Kyrgyz language is influenced by Kazak. In Bishkek, the Kyrgyz (pronounced “Kirgiz” with no accented syllable) are called Kirgiz (pronounced “Kirgiz” with the first syllable accented), a derogatory term for people who do not know their own language. Although Issuk-Kul seems to me to be more russified, I have never heard any statement made about the way in which Kyrgyz is spoken in Issuk-Kul. The Naryn district, however, is the place in which people claim that unadulterated “clean” Kyrgyz may be found. I, as a non-Kyrgyz speaker, can recognize the changes in dialect between these regions but I cannot make any claims about the significance or the origins of the differences that I hear.

Similar statements are made about the customs coming out each of these regions and the character. It is as though language affects the blood of the speakers: For example, not only do the Kyrgyz in the South speak more like Uzbeks, they also behave more like Uzbeks, and in the minds of individuals in other regions, such speakers are more Uzbek than Kyrgyz. Such statements are laden with prejudices. Views of ethnicity and self are a complexity I cannot hope to untangle, but which I feel that I must address, at least briefly, in the discussion of my field research. I will touch upon this again in chapter 2.

1.8 Locality
Since fieldwork is very often based on locality, that is, on the in-depth exploration of a place or a region, I feel that I must consider the ramifications of using the knowledge and experience of one region, Naryn (2002-2004) to inform the knowledge and experience of another region, Talas (2008). I thought about this question of region a lot throughout my field research and it was on the minds of Nurbek’s family as well. The Nisharapovs were newly arrived in Talas and they made many comments about differences in speech, dress, behavior, custom, and protocol between Talas and Naryn. I noticed, for example, that in Talas women shake hands with men and that men do not touch heads as they shake hands. Nurbek noticed that Talasians greet with Salamatsiz, rather than Kandaisiniz, an equivalent to greeting with the English Hello rather than How’s it going? (Field notes, 2008). These are very fine details of social interaction, and, although they are important, I do not feel that they mark significant regional differences. It may be that were I to spend more time in Talas, I would be able to connect these differences in custom with significant differences in general outlook, but this must remain a subject for future research.

As an unmarried female in a Kyrgyz house, my experience can be related to the complaints of the new bride, who is still learning to adjust to her new role as kelin, and to the peculiarities of a new family, a new set of parents, and in many cases, a new conception of custom. A bride has the responsibility of adjusting her habits to those of her husband’s family. For example, one bride complained to me that in her home region, it was common for a woman to wear pants under her house clothes but in the region of her husband’s family this habit was disapproved of (Personal notes). Every family has its own character and its own enactment of moral and social coding. A bride has to adjust to this and her methods of learning are very similar to those of an ethnographer. She observes, participates and has conversations. In the meantime, she makes an analysis of what is really going on. This is part of her survival and it becomes part of her narrative. Almost every woman talks about the adjustments she has had to make upon becoming a bride in her husband’s house.

So this is one perspective: that families have customs, which brides adjust to and negotiate within themselves. Another perspective lies in the fact that families relocate and as a part of relocation, they also
make adjustments. Nurbek’s father, Bakay Saraeivich, is from Talas. Nurbek’s mother, Svetlana, is from Naryn. Perhaps because of her own experience as a bride, Svetlana is very apt at describing differences between families and regions. The eldest son of the family, Simyik, was raised in Talas, in the house of his paternal grandmother, as is the custom. Kyrgyz say in reference to this custom that the first child belongs to the grandparents (Personal notes). Simyik identifies himself as being from Talas. Nurbek and his twin, Mirbek, as well as their elder sister, Tunuk, grew up near their maternal grandmother in Naryn. Nurbek identifies himself as being from Naryn. However, all of them have lived, as a family, in Talas, Issuk-Kul, Bishkek and Naryn for significant periods of time. During my fieldwork in Talas, I noted that Nurbek’s family was very careful to adjust to the customs of Talas, especially when it came to the reception of guests. Svetlana and Tunuk both told me that community opinion was of the utmost importance. They were very preoccupied with the perceptions that neighbors, relatives, and co-workers might have of them. As newcomers to Talas, they were concerned with gaining a good reputation. This concern was not a matter of vanity. A good reputation is necessary in order to participate in the networks of exchange and support that are essential to individual survival in Kyrgyzstan (Field notes, 2008). Cynthia Werner describes such processes well in her article, “Gifts, Bribes, and Development in Post-Soviet Kazakstan” (2002).

1.9 The Field Site

The majority of information presented in this thesis was collected in the regions of Naryn and Talas. Naryn City is the site of a former Soviet military base. It is located in a narrow space between two mountainous walls and a river, the river Naryn, making it the most inaccessible district in the Kyrgyz Republic. There is only one road and this road is closed each spring due to avalanches. Annual avalanches cut the region off from food and medical supplies for several weeks, with the exception of those who dare to cross over the avalanche on foot or on horseback. Living conditions are harsh due to severe winters combined with inadequate resources. Although few non-Kyrgyz reside in Naryn, in recent times Naryn State University has brought in a large number of Turkish citizens who have come to the Kyrgyz Republic with hopes of gaining a higher education. Outside of a few NGOs (English: non-governmental
organizations funded through foreign donations and grants) and government jobs including education, there is little work to be had and that work is not well paying nor is pay received regularly. Lack of regular pay has more to do with the malfunctioning government, inattention or corruption on the part of superiors than with anything particular to the Naryn region.

My first impression of Naryn City was that of a stark, bleak and unfriendly place. I felt trapped between the mountains. Due to the altitude, it was difficult to breathe and there was nowhere to go except to the left or to the right. Leaving the city was always refreshing, whether it was simply a climb up the side of a mountain in order to look down or a short trip to At-Bashi, a large village only a few hours away where the mountains were more distant and the world seemed round again. It was traveling through the Naryn Region that I first saw herds of horses galloping across the side of the mountain. For me Naryn is simultaneously oppressive and magical. It is a place in which life is a continual struggle and yet where the world is inhabited by beauty. Only in Naryn do people stop a taxi saying “this is my stop” and get out in a place where no mark of human presence can be seen in any direction for miles and miles. Even when I try to watch where these individuals go, my eyes cannot follow them. They just disappear into the landscape.

Naryn is an unusually quiet place. There are no functioning factories and few cars. Even the wildlife is quiet with the exception of crows that gather in large numbers and not only caw, but also imitate the noises of other animals. Sometimes a woodpecker or a finch can be heard alongside cows, sheep, and horses, but very few sounds carry. It is as though the mountains swallow the sound. The only truly loud thing is the music that blasts from cafes at night where people are drinking and dancing. In the time that I lived in Naryn, the airspace was opened and I remember being startled by the sound of a jet flying overhead. I had forgotten about that sound and did not immediately recognize it. A young child and an old man were standing near me and I remember watching them as they both gazed up at this beautiful machine that enables man to fly (Personal notes).

Talas is very different than Naryn. As a district, it is more fertile and produces all kinds of fruits and vegetables. In September huge semi-trucks can be seen in villages, packing up beans for export to
Turkey and Bulgaria. There is a greater sense of vibrancy and sustainability. This is reflected perhaps in the reputation people from Talas have for their boastful regional pride. The mountains there are full of loose rocks and trees are plentiful. As Talas is more ethnically diverse than Naryn, there is a greater tolerance and understanding of persons of non-Kyrgyz ethnicity. Talas City has a life of its own, as a city should. I could hear the city wake up. I could hear the cars start moving and the radio click on. At night, however, there were so many barking dogs that Nurbek and I were terrified to leave the courtyard. When the restaurants shut down and no more people walked around on the street, the dogs too became silent and the streets seemed dead.

Throughout my fieldwork, Nurbek’s family and I took trips to Vodoy, a small village outside of Talas City, where Simyik and his family resided. One day, tired of sitting in the house and cleaning beans, I decided to take a walk. I wanted to take a picture of the village cemetery, which I could see from the road. As I walked, I admired the beautiful woodwork that adorned many windows and balconies. Houses in Kyrgyzstan are made of mud, but in some regions these mud houses are adorned with beautiful woodwork. Bakay Sareivich says that this woodwork is the sign of Russian builders, but I am not convinced, as there is a Dungan mosque in Issuk Kul that is made entirely out of wood (Personal notes, 2003). Interestingly, no such woodwork exists in Naryn. In Vodoy I was not immediately taken for a foreigner. This was very different from Naryn where my walks had been followed by unseen pebble throwers, children who had begged for money and on a few occasions children who had tried to run off with my school bags. In Naryn I was also greeted by children who asked if I knew Kyrgyz or Russian and who wanted to practice a few phrases of English. In Vodoy, on the other hand, I was not even greeted with curious glances. A few individuals called out to me “Hey! Are you buying or selling?”

“Neither!” I called back. “I am a guest.”
“Where do you stay?”
“With Simyik Nisharapov!”
“The school teacher?”
“Yes.”
And thus satisfied they would nod and I would continue on my way. Such interactions demonstrate that it was important for those villagers to know who I was and with whom I was associated. I hope that the reader too has taken notice of both my roles and my associations and that both of these are kept in the forefront of the reader’s mind as I give a very particular presentation of life, beliefs, and practices within the Kyrgyz Republic throughout the following chapters.

\footnote{I am referring here to the notion that all living beings participate in systems of suffering. I take this idea from the works of Thich Nhat Hahn.}

\footnote{I began working on these ideas about knowledge in an analysis of The Diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky, presented for a conference on Affect through the Department of Comparative Studies, OSU, 2007. In regards to the present discussion, Nijinsky describes a way of knowing that comes through emotion and the body in interaction with the world. He writes: “I am the flesh. I am feeling… People must not think me. They must feel me and understand me through feeling. Scholars will ponder over me, and they will rack their brains needlessly, because thinking will produce no result for them…” (Nijinsky, 24).}

\footnote{A lot of real life anecdotes are based on such real life confusion. For example, a Russian man told me a joke: During the Second World War, two comrades were being pursued by some German soldiers. One comrade was Kyrgyz. The other was Russian. The Kyrgyz man dove into Lake Issuk Kul in order to hide and the Russian tried to distract the Germans. He went as far away from the lake as possible and shouted SuDA! SuDA! The punch line was: Every since that time Russians and Kyrgyz have not gotten along. In order to understand this punch line, it is necessary to know that in Russian \textit{suda} means “Over here!” whereas in Kyrgyz \textit{suda} means “In the water.” The Russian was calling the German toward him so his comrade could escape, but the Kyrgyz understood that the Russian was informing the German where the Kyrgyz man had hidden (Personal notes).}

\footnote{I have picked up the phrase “being in the world” from listening to Morgan Liu’s class on Theorizing Culture.}

\footnote{I have come to this conclusion based on conversations in an interdepartmental reading group, Local Worlds. For more information see: \url{http://icrph.osu.edu/collaborativeResearch/workingGroups/groupDesc.cfm?WG=9}}

\footnote{In Naryn stray dogs are shot each spring and so there are fewer of them in Naryn than in Talas.}
CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

David Gulleìte’s dissertation begins with a quote from Muratbek Imanaliev: “‘Kyrgyz’ is not an ethnonym; ‘Kyrgyz’ is an idea” (Gullette, front matter). The aim of this chapter is to explore some ideas related to Kyrgyz identity as seen both by outside observers and by inside participants. In present-day Kyrgyzstan, *koshok* is seen as a marker of Kyrgyz identity. However, “being Kyrgyz” is not defined by *koshok*. “Being Kyrgyz” is a much more complicated idea than that, one that is (and has been) contested historically and ideologically.

2.1 Imbibing the Oriental

In *The Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years*, Chingiz Aitmatov evokes the state of being Kyrgyz through an attachment to place. He writes:

> Trains in these parts went from East to West and from West to East.  
> On either side of the railway lines there lay great wide spaces of the desert-Sary-Ozeki, the Middle lands of the yellow steppes.  
> In these parts any distance was measured in relationship to the railway, as if from the Greenwich meridian...  
> And the trains went from East to West and from West to East (Aitmatov, 29).

Aitmatov has set up a Bakhtinian chronotope, that is, an image of space-time. This image is that of a railroad located in the middle of nowhere. Nowhere is the land of the steppe. The steppe is a place that has already been constructed in Russian literature. The steppe is the land under whose influence the revolutionary in Andrei Bely’s symbolist novel, *St. Petersburg*, produced a make-shift bomb. This anarchist bomb has the potential to overturn all order and to reduce the Russian Empire to zero. Zero is a number as wide and vast and empty as the steppe. Like the steppe it struck terror in the heart of the novel’s protagonist.

The people of the steppe, among which the Kyrgyz are included, were described in a poem by Alexander Blok:
You are millions. We are hordes and hordes and hordes and hordes.
Try and take us on!
Yes, we are Scythians! Yes we are Asians-
With slanted and greedy eyes.

For you, the ages, for us a single hour.
We, like obedient slaves,
Held up a shield between two enemy races-
The Tatars and Europe…
(Blok, 30th of January, 1918)

Although Blok wrote this poem to describe Russia, he constructs an Asian Russia through the use of orientalized images of the people of the steppe. In such orientalized images, the people of the steppe are not heterogeneous peoples, but homogenous hordes.

This homogeneous view of Central Asian peoples was propagated by the writings of Arabs traveling through the region in the 6th Century. Yusef Frenkel (“The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes”) offers no clue as to who Arabs might have been, other than individuals associated with neighboring empires. According to Frenkel, Arabs commonly referred to all the nomadic people they encountered as “Turks” and so it is not at all certain who or what these people actually were. It is only certain that for the Arabs who wrote about them, these people were both religiously and secularly strange and unenlightened.

It is possible to find orientalized images of the free savage and the bloodthirsty Asian incorporated into Kyrgyz images of self. For example, K. Imanaliev states that the “ancestors of the Kyrgyz such as Saks, Gunns, and Usuns were of more hoary antiquity…” (K. Imanaliev, Word About the Homeland, 240). Likewise, Aitmatov makes the main character of another novel, The Place of the Skull, a she-wolf through whom an image of woman and mother is presented, and yet who remains a fierce and deadly animal. The purpose of this chapter is not to refute orientalist depictions, nor to try to create an accurate description, but to explore the realm of historical imagination so as to examine some sources of knowledge and some constructs of self and other.

In The Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years, the orientalized steppe has been tamed by the railroad. The railroad is a symbol of modernity according to which all other distances or forms of progress are
measured. Through the iron ties that link “East to West and West to East,” the railway also becomes a symbol of movement and exchange. Aitmatov spends the first chapter of his novel describing the railway station and the creatures, both human and animal, that inhabit it. In the first chapter, for instance, a vixen is terrified by a rocket that flies over the railroad. This rocket signifies technological progress that will soon overtake the railroad. The second chapter begins with the quotation cited above about the trains that run from East to West and West to East and it is with these words that the novel closes. Throughout the novel, this passage is repeated no less than eight times (Aitmatov, 63, 90, 107, 122, 136, 226, 246, 299). In repeating his description of the railroad, Aitmatov allows for a view of the steppe as a space of movement and exchange.

A view of movement and exchange is also present in scholarship. The Kyrgyz were nomads and it is possible to try and track the paths of herds and horsemen through the artifacts that were left behind and through the records of settled peoples that marked a moment in Kyrgyz passing. The historical range of the nomadic Kyrgyz extended from present day China to present day Afghanistan. The research of Nazif Shahrani (The Kirgiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan) offers insight on how the nomadic Kyrgyz might have lived and how a symbiotic relationship between nomadic peoples and settled peoples might have played out. Yusef Frenkel argues that the nomadic tribes that moved through the steppe served as hunters and mercenaries for settled peoples. Sufism, Jadism, among other Sunni and Shiite schools of Islam, were all present in Central Asia, as were Neostrian Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Tengrism, and Hinduism. All of these systems through which the world was (and is) lived and perceived have left their imprint in artifacts, such as buildings, as well as in beliefs and in practices (Frenkel, “The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes”). Given the difficulty in defining who exactly were the Kyrgyz and whether or not the Kyrgyz of yore were the same as the Kyrgyz of today, it is perhaps more practical to talk about place. In scholarship, names such as Inner Asia, Eurasia, Transoxania, Central Asia, Turkestan and the steppe are used to refer to the same general area associated with the present day Kyrgyz Republic. More than
identifying an actual place, these names identify concepts of space and the inhabitants of the space in a time
when neither borders between places nor ethnicities were well documented or well defined.

One example of a the conceptual space through which the Kyrgyz roamed is offered by Frenkel in
reference to sixth-century writings by Arabs living in the region:

Along what was regarded as the visual dividing line between Turan and
Iran, a frontier between Muslim newcomers and the steppes was created.
One side was regarded Dar al-Islam (the abode of Islam) and the other
as Dar al-Harb (the abode of war). This frontier was not a concrete
boundary, but a virtual line of division between cultures and
religions, and not against an alien people. Rival political and legal
systems governed two sides of the frontier (Frenkel, 204).

Frenkel’s use of the word “frontier” places the area occupied by nomads as an almost liminal place between
two settled areas. There is a sense that this frontier is a place in which both land and people are unformed
and undefined and from the perspective that the present-day world is comprised mainly of nation-states,
this sense in not entirely inaccurate.

A world of ethnic definites rose during the Soviet era under the influence of Soviet cultural
projects in which scholars, intellectuals and the government fostered a double sense of nationhood and
Soviet citizenship. Ethnographers documented and analyzed the traits of groups and these groups began to
become, or, at least, to conceive of themselves as, the peoples whom the ethnographers described. In the
Marxist view, nomads represented a pre-capitalist, pre-bourgeois stage of development. Nomads were
criticized for their “feudalism” and “patriarchalism” and praised for “egalitarianism,” descriptions that later
scholars both supported and problematized (Gullette, *Kinship, State, and “Tribalism”: The Genealogical
Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic*, 67-75). From the time of mass collectivization onward, all of Central
Asia was subject to the same system of power that was manifested in social reforms and repression and that
produced a common Soviet experience.

From pre-Soviet times to the present day, scholars who are not native to Kyrgyzstan have come to
Kryrgyzstan in search of local knowledge, a search that often includes elements of ethnography. Such
research puts the knowledges and perspectives of local individuals, whether or not these perspectives are
acknowledged, into circulation within scholarship. Non-native scholars may engage in collaborative projects in which local people are trained to help non-native scholars in their work. Such projects bring the methods, ideas, and perspectives of the non-native scholar into local circulation. Projects funded by the Aga Khan Development Network in the Kyrgyz Republic are a good example in regards to the field of ethnomusicology.¹ For example, through the Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia, Kyrgyz musicians work on teams with American scholars such as Theodore Levin in order to collect and record samples of “traditional” music. These same musicians also gain opportunities to lecture, to tour, to produce CDs, and inadvertently, to network with other musicians and scholars both within their locale and beyond it. These interactions create exchanges in perceptions, which may be, for instance, ideas about research, tradition, musicianship and musical quality, but may also be ideas about the relationship between an employer and employee or gender categories. These interactions also create exchanges in concrete knowledge, such as exchanges in melodies and techniques. Similar processes happen when locals leave their locality to receive an education, to work or to do business in another place, whether that place is the United States, Europe, Turkey, or Taiwan.

2.2 History

Now that Kyrgyzstan is an independent Republic, some alternate accounts of the past are coming into public discussion. Others, which were once prevalent, are disappearing, while others still maintain their silence. From the perspective of an other, the primary reason for discussing history is to understand how another people, place, nation, and span of time is constructed. However, from the perspective of the self, the discussion of history has a different purpose. For the self, history is “a double plot narrative… of how we were morally, politically, and culturally in the past… and how we should be from this moment on” as we move into the future (Honarmand, personal communication). Through historical narratives individuals and groups are included and excluded and counter-narratives are formed: David Gullette, citing Morgan Liu, describes how Uzbek men living in Osh, a region of southern Kyrgyzstan, feel excluded from
a state that is, at least in part, building its statehood from a concept of Kyrgyz ancestry traced to the legendary hero, Manas (Gullette, 192).

Through the use of the figure of Manas and the epic that bears his name, the former President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Askar Akaev worked to create a common discourse through which a sense of unified nation and identity could be built. Akaev is a published physicist and the first President of the newly independent Kyrgyz Republic. A newly formed state such as the Kyrgyz Republic has a particular interest in creating continuity and a common discourse through such a narrative. More so, an individual has an interest in taking up the common discourse and making the state a part of his or her self. The interaction between individual and state is something discussed in detail by Gullette throughout his dissertation. Gullette approaches this issue through a concept of ancestry that manifests in genealogies.

In regard to ancestry, Gullette writes that according to legend Manas united 40 tribes. Manas is a legendary hero featured in the epic that bears his name. Each of these tribes is honored with a star on the flag of the present-day Kyrgyz Republic. Gullette presents these tribes and associated clans as “genealogy derived relationships” aided by “two mnemonic devices, jeti ata (Kyrgyz: a person’s seven patrilineal ancestors, literally “seven fathers”) and sanjyra (Kyrgyz: genealogical information combined with an account of the past)” (Gullette, 4). Later in his dissertation, Gullette argues that the Akaev-led government… adopted the notion of sanjyra …which formed their representation of the nation’s ancestors… This construction complemented people’s perceptions of their own ancestors, and provided an official set of statements through which they could articulate their relationship to their ancestors and understand themselves (Gullette, 184).

Thus Gullette presents a view of the historical self as that which has a connection to the past through ancestry. This self however, is not only built upon the past; the past is seen through the lens of the self, and here-in lies the complexity.

One way in which the Akaev-led government worked to create a sense of nation through ancestry was to declare “Manas” as “the symbol of unity and spiritual revival of the Kirghiz nation and of its culture and dignity” (Prior, Patron, Party, Patrimony, 37). In doing so, Akaev put Aitmatov’s interpretation of the
epic into effect. As a novelist, Aitmatov was one of Kyrgyzstan’s intellectuals, but as a Soviet writer his ideas and his writing extended from the Russian literary tradition. Like Dostoyevsky, Aitmatov too could claim to have come out of Gogol’s *Overcoat.* I believe that Aitmatov took the Russian cult of literature, as Svetlana Boym terms it, as his model not because he needed a model but because these were the ideas in which Aitmatov was raised. According to Boym, Vissarion Blinsky masterminded a cult of literature in Russian society that can be linked to

the intelligentsia’s quasi-religious cult of culture… the avant garde dreams of a transformation of the world… the Soviet policy of mass culturization… the dissent of underground art. The Russian intelligensia creatively reinterpreted the German Romantic idea of “culture” defined in opposition to the French and English Enlightenment idea of “civilization.” This unique spiritual culture [was] the foundation of Russian national identity [and] was opposed to transnational “Western” individualism and its “civilizing process,” often perceived as “artificial,” “false” and “inauthentic”… (Boym, 120).

According to Boym, Blinsky stated “Our literature has created the morals of our society, has already educated several generations…” (Boym, “Paradoxes of Unified Culture,” 120). I believe that Aitmatov either wished this to be said of the future Kyrgyz Republic or he believed that it was already true, given the strength of Kyrgyz oral tradition.

In either case, Aitmatov’s emphasis “was on the revival of the spiritual heritage of the Kirghiz [through the epic story of Manas] and on staging of an event [in honor of Manas] that would draw international attention” (Prior, 36). Now “the seven principles of Manas” that were constructed by Aitmatov can be recited by any school child. These are: “national unity; a generous and tolerant humanism; friendship and cooperation among nations; harmony with nature; patriotism; hard work and education; strengthening and defense of the Kyrgyz state system” (Prior, 37).

However influential this officially sealed intellectual movement may have been, a sense of ancestry cannot simply be imposed from the top down. It must also grow up. Prior finds that “spiritual guidance is not entirely in the hands of the president or government. In Talas, the legendary tomb of the hero (Manas) draws pilgrims” (Prior, 37). Such pilgrimages demonstrate the value that individuals place on
Manas and a sense that his influence carries despite the fact that he is no longer among the living. I believe that the purposes that intellectuals and the state have put to the epic of *Manas* and to the legends surrounding both hero and epic are not separate from the activities of ordinary people, such as visiting *Manas Ortoy* (Kyrgyz: name for a sacred site that is Manas’s grave and his former lookout). I also believe that the deference given to Manas by individuals or the State is related to broader activities of visiting graves, remembering the dead or knowing one’s ancestry.iii In his use of genealogy both as an object of study and as a method for analysis, Gullette also supports a conception that ideas and behaviors circulate between ordinary people and the state, rather than coming solely from one or the other.

At times renditions of Kyrgyz history take on a genealogical quality. The aim of such histories is to use verifiable evidence to create a narrative in which the Kyrgyz are ever present. One example is a book that I used as a constant reference throughout my research: *Kyrgyzstan: The Word about Homeland*, by Kanaybek Imanaliev, is a book dedicated to 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood. Some scholars and intellectuals found the mention of a people called Kyrgyz in an ancient Chinese historical text to be proof of a Kyrgyz nation. Chingiz Aitmatov supported this conclusion and his support helped to revive the notion among intellectuals and politicians. It was put into effect by Askar Akaev in 2003 with a national celebration of 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood. This celebration has been well documented by Gullette in his dissertation. For my purposes, I have taken K. Imanaliev’s book as a primary source. Although its narrative tends to be in the third person, K. Imanaliev offers a personal view that is very rich in experience, tales, proverbs, beliefs, and customs. Towards the end of the book, the author presents a synopsis of Kyrgyz history followed by a timeline. Although this timeline is a list of dated events, the relationship between these events and the involvement of the Kyrgyz people in these events, is not clearly stated. Rather, the timeline implies, like a genealogy, that over time, one event joined with another until finally the present-day nation was birthed.

In agreement with Akaev and Aitmatov, K. Imanaliev’s version of Kyrgyz history begins with the mention of “Kyrgyz” in an ancient Chinese historical text and the date of 201 BCE. From this point of
origin, Kyrgyz existence is traced by K. Imanaliev through a number of migrating and settled peoples. Some act independently and whereas others are joined and organized. Throughout this account changes of power take place so that the Kyrgyz people are at times in partnership with other peoples and at other times conquered, oppressed, and even subsumed. Kyrgyz presence on the land that would eventually become a part of the Osh region of the Kyrgyz Republic is established as early as the first century BCE with the statement, “Transfer of the capital of the Davan State from Ershy to Guishan-chen City (the city at the foot of a sacred mountain at the place of Osh City).” The presence of the Kyrgyz on a parcel of land that would eventually become the Naryn region is established with the statement, “Transfer of the headquarters of the Kyrgyz khanate from Enisey to Kyrgyz-Nur (Kyrgyz-Kol)” and “Transmigration of Kyrgyz to Eastern Tenir-Too.”

In the meantime, K. Imanaliev establishes the existence of a written Kyrgyz language as well as the presence of a Kyrgyz Khanate. Thus K. Imanaliev demonstrates that the Kyrgyz have a civilization with written language, organization, and power. I believe that these facts are cited to counter notions that the Kyrgyz were illiterate nomads who could only be civilized by the Soviet Union. K. Imanaliev also establishes enemies such as the Uygurs and the Uzbeks. Through these enemies, he demonstrates that this view of Kyrgyz history is a view from the present, looking back in time in order to justify the here and now. A more verifiable history of the Kyrgyz people begins only in 1785 when “Atake-biy sent his ambassadors to Russia” and in 1860 when “Russian soldiers arrived in Chui (Pishpek)” (K. Imanaliev, 238-245).

2.3 The Eternal Self

In light the narrative presented by K. Imanaliev, I now would like to offer some perspectives on history that were made as comments in casual conversation. In Naryn City, where nationalism runs high, I heard some interesting statements made by persons of Kyrgyz ethnicity about the Kyrgyz. In one instance a man told me that the Kyrgyz used to be sari (Kyrgyz: lit. “yellow.” In regards to people it means fair and can include red hair. In old Turkish it can indicate beauty.) According to this man, the Aryan qualities of
the Kyrgyz people were lost when the Mongols took over and altered the Kyrgyz genetic pool (Personal notes). He had said these words in such a way that expressed both simultaneous belief in their truth and in their impossibility. On a later occasion I heard a woman refer to the same story; she mentioned a girl whose appearance set her apart from the others; she had soft brown hair, round eyes, and freckles. It was explained to me that this girl was showing the “real” Kyrgyz blood. Such statements present the Kyrgyz as a people whose past purity has been irreversibly polluted by outside elements and whose present existence is that of a mixture of races, ethnicities, beliefs and practices. References to such stories come up in different contexts and depending on the context and the discussion at hand, such stories are used to illustrate different points. I have found this to be a typical rhetorical style in Kyrgyzstan, and it is the style of rhetoric that K. Imanaliev uses in his publication. I am not interested in looking at the mechanics of such rhetoric here, but I will return to this thought in chapter 3. These stories encompass a notion of the eternal collective self, which, in my own words, I describe as the idea that “we, the Kyrgyz, always were, and even in that time before we were, we were becoming.”

Take for example, the thoughts of a taxi driver who in all sincerity told me that Adem (Kyrgyz: Adam, the first man) was Kyrgyz. After all, he said, who but the Kyrgyz have such a name as Adem? Yeva (Kyrgyz: Eve, the first woman), the driver claimed, was a Jew and between Kyrgyz and Jew all people of the Earth were created (Field notes, 2008). On another occasion, a shepherd informed me that there were Kyrgyz living in America. As the discussion continued he explained to me that the American Indians were actually Kyrgyz (Personal notes). He supported his thought by stating that the Kyrgyz used to live in Siberia and that some migrated down to Kyrgyzstan whereas others crossed the Bering Strait which is believed to have frozen over during the Pleistocene Epoch. According to this shepherd, these people who were Kyrgyz became the American Indians (Personal notes).

Conversely, a Turkish man told me a joke that had the Kyrgyz as its butt:

One day all the Turks decided to ride to Europe and so they told their Kyrgyz brothers, “C’mon, brothers. We are all Turks. Let’s saddle our horses and ride to Europe.” And so both Kyrgyz and Turk saddled their horses and rode and rode. The Turks made it
almost as far as Europe, but along the way the Kyrgyz got hungry and ate their horse so that they were unable to ride any further (Personal notes).

This joke contains not only a physical destination of Europe, but also the idea that Europe is the model of progress towards which the backward, horse-eating Kyrgyz cannot go. Also contained in this joke is the notion of Pan-Turkism, that is, the notion that all the peoples of Central Asia who speak a Turkic language share a common origin, a common heritage, and common traditions and therefore belong to the same people: Turks. Although this notion of Turkic brotherhood is resisted by some Kyrgyz and embraced by others, it influences projects of the Turkish government and thus impacts the Kyrgyz state and its citizens.

2.4 Sources on Kyrgyz Funerary Practices

Much discussion about Kyrgyz identity, both collective and personal, finds a forum in discussions on Kyrgyz funerary practices. The way in which a person is buried is considered an evaluation of how that person has lived and a marker of that individual’s identity in relationship to the collective. Degrees of participation or non-participation in funerals can place individuals in different ideological camps, each of which uses the connections of beliefs, customs, and rituals to imagined histories in order to construct an image of self.

Frenkel mentions some details that are relevant to koshok and that call into question who the Kyrgyz are and whether or not customs, beliefs and self are as closely related in practice as is presented in historical imagination. Since Frenkel is interested in the nomadic people of the steppe as a whole, and not the Kyrgyz in particular, he does not question whether or not the Kyrgyz mentioned in Gardizi’s text (Gardizi is a traveler quoted by Frenkel) are the same people as the present-day Kyrgyz. In considering Frenkel’s description of funeral practices, I was immediately struck by the fact that Gardizi’s description of “the Kirgiz” as presented by Frenkel has no relationship to present-day funerary practices in Kyrgyzstan, whereas other descriptions Frenkel cites, such as Ibn Fadlan’s description of “the Turks” and Rabbi Petakhyah’s descriptions of what may have been koshok are remarkably relevant to present-day practices:

“The Kirgiz people,” reported Gardizi, “burn the dead, like the Hindus,
saying that the fire is the utmost purifying thing, and that whatever falls into it is purified. The corpse thus is purified from impurity and sin.” Others were said to have buried their dead…

Ibn Fadlan describes this custom in detail:

[Frenkel’s italics] If any man of the Turk dies, they dig for him a great pit in the form of a house... then they come with his entire possessions and put them with him in the house. Then they set him down in it and close it by building a cover over him... Then they take his riding beasts and slaughter them all, whatsoever their number... Then they eat the horse’s flesh down to the head, the hooves, the hide and the tail, for they hand these parts up on wooden poles, and say these are his steeds on which he rides to paradise.

[Frenkel’s italics] According to Rabbi Petakhyah:

There it is customary for women the whole day and night to bemoan and lament their deceased fathers and mothers. This they continue until any of their sons or daughters or other members of the family die, and the later lament those that preceded them in death. They teach their daughters lamentations. In the night they groan and howl. The dogs also whine and bark at their voice (Frenkel, 221-222).

In present-day Kyrgyzstan, it is customary to slaughter a horse for both funeral and wedding. Although the sacrifice of a horse may be said to be “for God” and to follow the same logic as that of the sacrifice of a lamb in memory of Abraham, the practice of sacrificing a horse is unacceptable to adherents to strict schools of Islam. Not only do they say that Islam prohibits the consumption of horsemeat, but they question whether the sacrifice is actually made “for God” or for ancestors.

Despite a perception that such funerary practices as well as the performance of koshok are non-Islamic practices, Rabbi Petakhyah’s description of lamenting may offer a clue on how the present day practice has grown to fit with a Muslim identity. If the Rabbi’s description is to be believed, then it is indicative of a change in practice. The Rabbi presents a seemingly endless process of mourning that can only be marked by other deaths. By contrast, the present-day practice of mourning is marked by the
markers of Islam: burial, forty days, and the one year anniversary of mourning. Adherents to strict Islam may disagree with this statement, saying that these markers are not coming from the Prophet himself; nonetheless, these are practices that have their source in practices of Islam, accepted by some Muslims and disputed by others. Moreover, the reading of the Koran has been incorporated in the larger performance of *koshok* and is an indicator of Islamification.

An entirely different view may be gained from examining the description of such practices in epics. The trouble with such an examination is that different recordings of “the same” epic that feature the same hero and the same stories may include very different details. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that these epics are any less accurate than the historical sources. Like any other source, a recorded version of an epic is a product of the time in which it was performed and recorded and, as such, the influence of performer, audience, and patron cannot be trivialized or dismissed. This is the view of the “Manas” epic that Prior takes up in his paper “Patron, Party, and Patrimony.” More importantly, epics hold authority among Kyrgyz who are interested in researching their own past. For the Kyrgyz scholar and intellectual the epic represents a Kyrgyz-language source, one that has not been mutated by translation and which is told and preserved by Kyrgyz people rather than by individuals of other languages and ethnicities. Prior cites Shokan Valikhanov (1856) as having called the Manas epic “an encyclopedic collection of all Kirghiz myths, tales, and legends… the way of life, customs, morals, geography, and religious and medical knowledge of the Kirghiz and their international relations…” (Prior, 6) and it may be said that many intellectuals and scholars view the epic as such.

Indeed, Elmira Köchümkulova, in her introduction to “The Epic of Kojojash,” quotes Aitmatov as saying: “If other peoples/nations displayed their past culture and history in written literature, sculpture, architecture, theatre and art, the Kyrgyz people expressed their worldview, pride and dignity, battles and their hopes for the future in epic genre.” In her own dissertation, Köchümkulova looks to epics as a source of historical evidence in regards to past Kyrgyz funerary practices. She cites, for example, a past practice of hanging the body of the deceased from a tree and later burying the bones. She links this practice
to a present proverb: sööktü koyuu; söökkö tüshüü. In Kyrgyz the first part of this phrase literally means “bury the bones” and implies “not the body.” The second part literally means “falling into the bones.” This refers to a practice of washing the bones. Köchümkulova states:

…Archeological diggings of ancient burial sites show that the Turks scraped the flesh off the deceased’s body and only buried the bones. We find the remnants of this ancient practice in the Kyrgyz epic Manas where we find the following lines: “kimiz menen juudurup, kilch menen kardirup” i.e., she [Manas’s wife Kankey] had his body washed with kimiz [fermented mare’s milk] and had his flesh scraped off his bones… in the past, many soldiers were killed in the battlefields… it was difficult to carry the bodies long distances… In the past, when Kyrgyz lived in high mountains, when a person died in wintertime, they could not bury him/her under the ground because the ground would be frozen. They wrapped the body in a felt and hung it in between the tree branches. The body stayed there until spring and was buried when the ground was soft enough to dig (Köchümkulova, 89).

Other elements of the funerary practice may be found in versions of the epics: the funeral feast, for example, is portrayed in The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy Khan, translated and edited by Arthur Hatto.

Köchümkulova also uses this epic in her analysis, but she cites another version and uses her own translation. In chapter 4 of this thesis I use the “The Epic of Kojojash” as translated by Köchümkulova to explore a conceptualization of koshok as a dialogue between the dead and the living.

Much debate is going on among the Kyrgyz citizens of Kyrgyzstan as to where they, as individuals and as a collective, stand between the Islam of the world today and the present customary practices. This debate, which is laid out in detail by Köchümkulova, concerns present-day practices of Kyrgyz people that are seen by some segments of society, and by many people outside of the society, to be practices that are not only non-Islamic, but that go against the practices of Islam. It is a debate that has caused many Kyrgyz people, not just scholars, to look into their past. For some, like Köchümkulova, this is a pre-Islamic past, a past that may be seen in a positive or a negative light. For others, like the Nisharapov family, this is an Islamic past, but a past in which the view of Islam was different from the present view, as the Nisharapovs perceive the present view as coming from outside Kyrgyzstan.
The Nisharapovs’ view became apparent to me in the course of an interview with a moldo (Kyrgyz: mullah, the man who serves the mosque, prays with and for the people, educates himself and others in Islam) in which Nurbek’s sister, Tunuk, served as my translator. During this interview Tunuk began a discussion with the moldo: “You [the moldo] say these practices [such as koshok] are against Islam. However, our grandfather was moldo, as you are, and he [our grandfather] found no contradiction between Islam and these practices” (Field notes, 2008). Later when Tunuk recounted the conversation between herself and the moldo to her relatives, her parents and brothers expressed support for and agreement with her words.

In order to present yet another view of how Kyrgyz history might be constructed, I would like to offer the view of Asan Kaybila Ulu, the author of Küü Bayanı (The Melody of the Story). Kaybila Ulu’s book is about the history of Kyrgyzstan which he feels can be heard through komus melodies. This is a fascinating premise and particularly appropriate in light of the fact that the komus has come to considered the national instrument of the Kyrgyz. The komus is historically the instrument of the akin, the Kyrgyz poet-singers who I talk more about in chapter three. Unfortunately, I am unable to read Kyrgyz and I can only know Küü Bayanı and Kaybila Ulu’s theorizes about the link between melodies and history through the personal discussions I had with Kaybila Ulu concerning his own research.

In one such discussion, where Köchümkulova was also present and translating, Kaybila Ulu said:

Do you know when Islam came to Kyrgyzstan? It came when the Prophet Ali came to Samir Khan [chuckling] Actually Ali never came to Samir Khan but he did in the legends and that’s what’s true in the people’s imagination, so that’s when Islam came to Kyrgyzstan (Field notes, 2008).

With these words Kaybila Ulu presents a view of a history that is grounded in an imagined mythical past. The part that myth plays in the present, however, is a topic for the following chapter. The impact of this chapter’s discussion is that it offers a critique of Nurbek’s idea, mentioned in chapter 1, that koshok is the kernel of Kyrgyz tradition and that the Kyrgyz, like koshok, are, were and always will be. The idea of an eternal self co-exists with the idea of a self-that is always changing and ideas about a self that has changed.
All of these contradictory notions come up at once when an individual identifies him- or herself, or someone or something else, as “Kyrgyz.”

\[\text{i}\text{For more information about the Aga Khan Development network, see the official website: http://www.akdn.org/}\]

\[\text{ii}\text{Ginsburg explains this statement saying “In Russian Literature there is an extraordinary continuity of tradition… the past is constantly and powerfully present. Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky are not… writers who lived and wrote in a remote and long-vanished past. They continue to be vital, undimmed presences, contemporaries, a living part of awareness of every literate Russian. In major, significant literature, the thread is unbroken, and virtually every writer of talent and substance has worked in close communication with those who have gone before. The giants themselves have been aware of this. Dostoyevsky is quoted as saying “We have all come out of Gogol’s “Overcoat” (Platonov, Kotlovan 1994 translation by Mirra Ginsburg, x).}\]


\[\text{iv}\text{Köchümkulova is also spelled Kuchumkolova (Russian) and Köchumkulkizi (Kyrgyz). I have adopted this particular spelling at Elmira’s request. I have maintained the spelling of her name as published in the bibliography.}\]

\[\text{v}\text{http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/epic/kojojash/kojojash.html}\]

\[\text{vi}\text{I have changed the transliteration into the Turkish alphabet for consistency. I have also corrected some more obvious spelling and grammatical errors.}\]

\[\text{vii}\text{In an email, Nurbek wrote: “Küü Bayani” means “The Melody of the story— any story. It can be a love story or about a broken heart, … Mother’s story who miss her son [who] died in war….or e.g., I can play komus… and tell a “bayan” about Chingiz Aitmatov… (Personal communication).}\]

\[\text{viii}\text{With this phrase, “is, was, and always will be,” I am making a direct reference to a statement about Chingiz Aitmatov, that Aitmatov “lied, lives, and will live.” This statement is part of chapter 5’s discussion.}\]
On the way to Talas, Nurbek and I passed the time talking. Frequently throughout the eight-hour taxi-ride, he would point out items on the landscape and tell me what he knew about them: “Do you see those small hills?” From our taxi window, Nurbek indicated an even row of mounds of equal size and height. At that point we were still in the Chui Valley, near Bishkek. “They are graves,” Nurbek stated. “There are skeletons inside along with armor and gold. They are usually grouped in 7, but in Talas I counted only five… Some heroes from the epics are buried in At-Bashi [one of the larger villages in the Naryn Oblast] and that’s why At-Bashi is a holy place. There are no typhoons in Kyrgyzstan despite the amount of water, or earthquakes, because those Great Heroes watch over the land and protect the people. The graves are so large because at that time, the time of the epics, people were giants….”

In this chapter, I will recall many such stories encountered in the field. I do this in part because it was through such stories that I learned how to think about life in Kyrgyzstan. Long before I began my fieldwork, friends and acquaintances in Kyrgyzstan had begun to guide me through the world with tales and I began to learn how the weaving of a tale can become a way of conversation. Tales do not represent a fiction. They represent a reality. Like gathas [Buddhist verses and prayers] such legends can arise in the mind, referentially, in any instance, causing an individual to find a relationship between the moment and the story. Likewise, in hearing a tale for the first time, as in the following case of Kyrgyz gold, a commentary can be created through the relationship that has been created between moment and tale. As I will discuss shortly, this is precisely what Aitmatov does in the tale of the mankurt; however, my point here is that this is not only a matter of artistry in literature. It is a way of speaking and thinking that is present among individuals for whom tales are still very much alive.

As we neared Talas, Nurbek continued, saying “In Talas there is a place, a large artificial hill where Manas used to keep a lookout. Inside of the hill is gold, the gold of Kyrgyzstan. The President has
even opened it to make sure. It is said that if anyone removes the gold chaos will happen in Kyrgyzstan, and so they keep it there. It is protected by a large snake, a dragon. People have seen it…” At this point Nurbek paused to confirm these “facts” with our fellow passengers, all middle-aged men from Talas. Each man nodded in confirmation.

“So are we going to camp out near this place and look for this dragon?” I teased him. “I brought a video camera.” Internally, however, a different dialogue was taking place: As I considered the case of Kumtor, an open-pit mining operation managed by the Canadian Cameco Corporation, I commented to myself that if there was indeed such gold, the government had probably sold it. The operation has been criticized for the environmental damage caused by chemical spills and the human costs of dangerous work conditions. It has also been criticized for exploitation of Kyrgyzstan’s few natural resources. An editorial in Asian Pulse Data Source states:

When Kyrgyzstan and the Canadian company Cameco started their joint exploration of the deposit, Kyrgyzstan’s share in the joint venture was 67 percent and the board of directors included nine members, with six of them representing the Kyrgyz side… However, in 2004, as a result of the restructuring of the Kumtor Gold Project, the Kyrgyz government gave its assets to the Centerra Gold Inc., Company, and KOC became a structural subdivision of Centerra, said the expert. Currently, Kyrgyzstan has 33,869,151 shares in Centerra Gold Inc., or 15.66 percent of the total number of shares, which means that we have been thrown out of our native Kumtor valley! In August 2007, Cameco and Centerra discussed new conditions, governing the deposits development, with the Kyrgyz government. The production became free from VAT. It means that paid taxes for the import of mining equipment, cyanides, explosives, and other goods and services are given back at the expense of the national budget…

(http://www.zibb.com/article/5084616/Exploring+debate+around+Kumtor+mine)

Regardless, Kumtor provides 10% of Kyrgyzstan’s gross domestic product. Upon hearing the tale told by Nurbek, I reflected that Kyrgyzstan had indeed given up its gold and that chaos had already begun in Kyrgyzstan. Day by day, life was becoming harder and harder. Electricity was being rationed, food prices were steadily rising, tensions were growing between the North and the South, and the disappearance of deputies was becoming an everyday affair (Field notes, 2008). The story about the graves and the gold and my own response brought an idea to my conscious mind that myth was very much alive, tangible and interactive, within Nurbek’s world.
3.1 Myth and the Discursive Process

In the course of conversations similar to the one described above, I gained an impression that legends and tales were a part of the understanding of daily experiences. Over time, I began to examine that impression more carefully and concluded that such a mixing of legends, tales, and everyday life was both subject and material for Aitmatov’s novel, *A Day Lasts Longer Than 100 Years*. Although there are many examples, I present two that are pertinent to the topics of graves, ancestry, and sacred places that will be discussed within this chapter. This chapter is not about *koshok*, per se. The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of customs and beliefs that relate myth to everyday practices. In order to understand *koshok*, we must understand the symbolic world in which Kyrgyz people live, for the myths that explain everyday rituals also illuminate the grief-ritual of *koshok*. The panoramic view of the world given in this chapter will become increasingly more focused in following chapters, so that chapter 4 will take only that part of the world that has been colored by grief, and chapter 5 will focus almost exclusively on *koshok*, its presence in Aitmatov’s novel, and the role that it plays in the mediation of identity on the occasion of Aitmatov’s funeral.

In Chapter 1, I gave a general summary of the novel, saying that the primary plot concerns Yedegei’s two day journey through the Sorozek desert to the site of the Ana-Beit Cemetery, the place where his friend, Kazangap, had requested to be buried. According to legend, the site became sacred when the body of Naiman-Ana was interned there. Naiman-Ana had been killed by her own son who had been turned into a *mankurt*, a memory-less slave, incapable of thinking for himself or recognizing anyone but his own captures to whom he had become loyal. In her book, *Myth in the Works of Chingiz Aitmatov*, Nina Kolesnikoff notes that “the myth of the *mankurt* helps to clarify some events and characters” in *A Day Lasts Longer Than 100 Years*. Whereas Kolesnikoff is writing to present and explore Aitmatov’s novel, Aitmatov is writing to present and explore aspects of being Kyrgyz in the world. With the help of Kolesnikoff’s discussion of how Aitmatov uses the legend of the *mankurt*, I have extrapolated a picture of discourse so as to explore a relationship between myth and discursive processes. Not unlike Foucault, I
conceive of discourse as the limits and bounds of what is knowable and I accept that particular constructs are made within these bounds. However, I am not so much concerned with the limits and bounds as I am with the way in which relative knowledge, that is, ways of understanding or “knowing” the world, manifest and circulate. People present knowledge through stories and rituals and both story and ritual are used to create commentaries and to produce new stories and new rituals. I refer to this complex creative interplay as the discursive process.

According to Kolesnikoff, Aitmatov presents a legend of the *mankurt*, the man who is made into a zombie-like slave, so that Aitmatov can then present the character of the *mankurt* in more contemporary manifestations. The first manifestation described by Kolesnikoff is Sabitzhan, “Kazangap’s only son, who has lost his Kazak heritage and become a worshipper of modern technology. For Sabitzhan the ultimate symbol of technology is a system of radio-operated transmitters that control people’s behavior” (Kolesnikoff, 71-72). Sabitzhan is compared throughout the novel to his brother-in-law, who, although remaining a useless drunk, manages to show greater respect to the dead and to custom. The second manifestation of the *mankurt* is a secret police officer who had interrogated Yedegei without due cause. Kolesnikoff writes “A *mankurt* himself, the interrogator tries to destroy people’s memories of the past and of their cultural heritage” (Kolesnikoff, 73). Finally Kolesnikoff finds an allusion to the sheep’s bladder that enslaved the *mankurt* in “Operation Hoop.” “Operation Hoop” is the code name for the ring of satellites that are being blasted off from the Sorozek desert throughout the novel’s secondary plot. By encircling the Earth these satellites “prevent human contact with a more advanced civilization…” erasing “the memory of the future” (Kolesnikoff, 73). Following Kolesnikoff’s analysis, it may be that the *mankurt* is a symbol of a loss of memory and that the loss of memory represents the loss of knowledge. Indeed, Aitmatov’s novel is usually read as a commentary on a loss of Kyrgyz national identity. The total loss of knowledge may also represent a complete estrangement from any form of discourse, not just national discourse.
In losing his memory, the first *mankurt* has lost his relationship to a place, a people or a time. He has lost a connection to any discursive construct and as a result, he has lost his humanity. The second and third *mankurts*, Sabitzhan and the secret police, are not complete zombies. They are connected to a new construct. This construct is that of science, modernity and progress, which demean previous story-based ways of knowing represented in the person of Yedegei. Yedegei’s knowledge takes the form of memories of lived experience and stories. He uses stories, memories and lived experience both to present knowledge, to create commentary, and to synthesize new ideas. All of this is formed upon the authority of the past. The past is encountered through legends concerning ancestors and objects, such as graves, that survive as “proof” of the story. In contrast, “Operation Hoop” stands as the most troubling representation of knowledge. “Operation Hoop” presents the horrific possibility of a “false” discourse. A “false” discourse is that of a stagnant truth which represents knowledge through a single discursive construct and suffocates creative activity. Through creating such characters, Aitmatov taps multiple constructs simultaneously and bring them together into a single discursive novel. In presenting the legend of the *mankurt* in relationship to knowledge and discourse, I propose that myth is the knowledge tapped by Aitmatov and his character Yedegei and that Aitmatov uses the relationships of his characters to myth to set up multiple discursive constructs.

With the help of Kolesnikoff’s discussion a reader may see that both Aitmatov and his character, Yedegei, use legends to lend meaning to the present. Through this style of narration Aitmatov asks his readers to use these legends in connection with Aitmatov’s stories to understand a world that extends beyond the novel. Perhaps with this in mind Aitmatov ends the novel with the image of Yedegei’s scattered caravan and yet another revival of the *mankurt* legend:

> The sky seemed to be falling about their heads… The man, the camel, the dog… ran off, terrified out of their wits… And suddenly it seemed to Yedegei that out of nowhere, on one side of them, appeared that white bird which, once upon a time, had formed from Naiman-Ana’s white scarf when she fell from the saddle, pierced by the arrow fired by her *mankurt* son…” (Aitmatov, 351).
In this it seems to Yedegei that the white bird flies over the desert, asking Yedegei the same question it had asked the mankurt: “What is your name? Who is your father?” The bird answers itself in its call as it had “ever since that time, so they say,” saying “Your father is Donebai, Donebai, Donebai…. And its voice could be heard for a long time yet as the darkness closed around them…” (Aitmatov, 351).

Kolesnikoff, for her part, presents ideas about myth that have been fostered by Freud, Jung, Kluckhohn, Kirk, or Malinowski in order to set up her own argument (Kolesnikoff, 9-10). My idea of myth is closest to Kolesnikoff’s presentation of Freud and Jung as these ideas relate best to those which I have taken from Kristeva on literature (Black Sun) and from Deren and Boydd on art and ritual as was discussed in chapter 1. Kolesnikoff sees Freud as linking myth to the unconscious, to repressed impulses, and to the symbolic language of ritual and art and Jung as linking myth to the collective unconscious, transindividual ideas, and recurrent themes in human thought (Kolesnikoff, 11). In my mind, this places myth in a cycle between verbal and pre-verbal. This is exactly the view that Kolesnikoff rejects and which I embrace. I embrace this view because myth is not what an individual knows, but that through which an individual can know. It is the emergent material through which an individual interacts with the world and with which he or she can create meaningful acts.

Among those individuals with whom I spoke in Kyrgyzstan, myth does not stand opposed to reality, absolute, distant and unchanging. Rather myth is experienced and through “conditions of external and internal inter-illumination” (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 13). That is to say, myth sheds light on itself. It is its own commentator. More so, myth is “reborn, becoming qualitatively different things for the consciousness that creates in it” (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 13). Myth not only regenerates. It mutates. Presentation and commentary, construction and deconstruction, generation, degeneration and regeneration, as well as mutation, evolution and decay are all aspects of a discursive process. This chapter, and perhaps this thesis, not only takes such processes as its subject, it also recreates such processes in both the choice of included or excluded information and in the style of presenting information.
3.2 Words

In the long conversation between Nurbek Nisharapov and me presented in chapter 1, Nurbek and I had wandered off the topic of this thesis and onto more personal matters. He told me that his family had lost their home. Tenants have no rights in Kyrgyzstan and it is not uncommon for a landlord to ask a family to free-up the home that they are renting so that a relative of the landlord can take their place. This marked the fourth time his family had been forced to move since I had known them and Nurbek’s statement sparked an angry litany from me. “Oh this woman!” I complained, “She came into our house late one night when there was no electricity and made Tunuk move everything by candle-light. The curtains, the shelves, the sink. She even took the fur tree from the front yard! And then she saw me [a foreigner supposed to be wealthy] and raised our rent….”

“Sister, Sister!” Nurbek interrupted me. “Calm yourself. Everything will be okay. We must believe it. This is the Kyrgyz understanding. I told them [his parents] I will earn money in Taiwan. We will buy a house. They [his parents] will even have a car.” At that moment I interpreted Nurbek’s words as recounting a *bata* (Kyrgyz: a request made to God or to ancestors; *du‘a* in Tajik) he had made for his parents. I also believe that his cessation of my litany of negative things and the replacement of the negative with the positive stemmed from an idea that what is said will become so.

As I was interpreting Nurbek’s words, I had a flashback to another conversation documented in my field notes: I had asked Farida why Kyrgyz perform *koshok*. She had answered “We Kyrgyz cannot live without a song” and “Kyrgyz people value words.” When I pressed her to further explain what she meant by those two statements, Farida had answered with a story: “A long time ago, tensions were rising between two groups. One group decided to go to war against the other, but there was a man among them who sang a song. His words were so good that people decided to listen to him and not go to war.” Farida felt that her story held the answer to my question however, she did not point out the answer to me. Perhaps she could not. Instead, she left me to find or create the answer myself. With her method of explanation, Farida, like
Aitmatov, had inadvertently required me to enter into a conversation with her story and to relate those things that I have known and I have experienced to that which she chose to tell me.

In seeking out an answer, I have taken up the words of Toktorbay, whom K. Imanaliev calls an “orator.” I believe that “orator” is a translation of the Kyrgyz word akin (Kyrgyz: an individual who is recognized as having become a master in the Kyrgyz musical tradition). This translation is accurate in the sense of the function of an akin. Akins tend to display their skill with clever words, which may or may not coincide with an ability to recite an epic. What is misleading in the translation is that oration in English has a connotation of spoken word, whereas in Kyrgyzstan, an akin combines words with melody, rhythm and accompaniment. A better translation of akin is probably bard or professional musician. According to Farida and Svetlana, akin is a title is given to an individual who is proficient in all forms of music and who would even be able to perform koshok (Field notes, 2008). I should add that, according to Asan Kaybila Ulu, “there are akin who play [music] and there are akin who write” (Field notes, 2008). Kaybila Ulu thinks of himself as among those who write. Both are bearers of wisdom, and this is the real qualification for holding the title of akin.

According to K. Imanaliev, Toktorbay performed at an aytish (Kyrgyz: a game or competition between akins in which verbal skills and musical talent are displayed). In this aytish, he played against the Kazak akin, Chakyrbay. Here I should note that despite clearly delineated ethnic categories fostered under the U.S.S.R., Kyrgyz and Kazak have more in common than in difference and joint competition in aytish is just one example of fraternity between these two peoples. Thus K. Imanaliev retells the words of the Kazak akin Chakyrbay who began the topic of that which is transient and that which is eternal. Chakyrbay said (sung):

Life is a weed, which does not blaze but smokes; life is a fading fire. A dream is an elusive bird, and a word is a bullet shot from a gun. Everything goes away from this world as water into quicksand. Grass will fade but mountains will remain. Heroes will be gone but the folk will stay… Only three things will remain everlasting in the world: the great land, high mountains and running water… (K. Imanaliev, 50).

In his commentary Chakyrbay presents a kind of rhetoric that uses metaphors from nature as well as
proverbs to make a point. I found the phrase “a word is a bullet shot from a gun” particularly telling for it indicates not just that the word is powerful, but that it is deadly. According to K. Imanaliev, Toktorbay answered Chakyrbay by saying (singing):

Yes, that is true. Everything that you hear is a fairy tale; everything that you see is reality. If folk do not realize the essence of a word, where will orators come from? If there are no good answers to questions, why do we have language then? If a man does not become wise then why does his old age come?... You assure us that there are only three everlasting things; land, water, mountains. Land gets frozen under snow which never melts, and dies. If a well freezes, water dies in it. If black clouds cover a mountain for a long time, they will die. If a hero makes a mistake, he will lose his life. If an orator makes a mistake he will lose his dignity. Truth is the only everlasting thing… (K. Imanaliev, 50).

In his sung-argument, Toktorbay counters the metaphors that Chakyrbay established with practical examples. In this way Toktorbay sets up a commentary that operates as Farida’s and Aitmatov’s do, through storytelling. I have chosen to use his words as commentary on this discussion of myth, knowledge, and the discursive process.

Toktorbay said that “Everything you hear is fairy tale; everything you see is reality.” In the context of this thesis, Toktorbay’s words can be interpreted as meaning that all the stories that exist in an individual world feed knowledge, become a part of myth and recirculate through the discursive process. Toktorbay also said “If folk do not realize the essence of a word, where will orators come from?” I understand Toktorbay’s question as a reference to the akin as a person through whom knowledge is channeled, and of the dialogue that the akin helps to foster amidst those who hear his words. Indeed, another atish occurred in the first month of my research and the words exchanged between competitors were a topic of discussion at every house that Nurbek’s family and I came to as guests. The exchange between these akins and the conversations that such exchanges create among listeners is only one aspect of the importance of words. A second aspect becomes evident in ritualized conversations, toasts and parting words.
One example of a ritualized conversation is greetings. In Naryn I often observed a man cross the street to shake hands with another man going in the opposite directions. My friends would sometimes complain, in half-jest, about how it would be possible to get reach a destination very quickly if only it wasn’t necessary to shake so many hands along the way. As a newcomer I initially offended a number of acquaintances because I did not recognize them in passing and therefore did not stop to greet them or even to say hello. In a proper greeting seven questions should be asked, starting with “How are you?” and “How is your health?” However, these questions are asked without the expectation of a reply so that sometimes the greeter will incorporate the assumed answer in their greeting. While living in Naryn my elderly neighbor made me realize the nature of the interaction. She spoke only Kyrgyz and I spoke only Russian, but whenever we met she would say (in Kyrgyz): “How are you? Good? How is your health? Good? How is your family? Good? How is your work? Good?” Interestingly, when I would ask Farida these polite questions she would always answer in the negative, for example: How are you? I could be worse. How is your daughter in law? She could be worse (Field notes, 2008). I do not have the experience to judge whether this is something peculiar to Farida or if it is an alternate formula for ritual conversation.

The most extreme example I have seen so far of this custom of greeting was in a region of Bishkek called Baitik. I was waiting for someone and as I stood under the shade of a tree I saw a boy, perhaps six years old, running after a car and waving his hands wildly. The tinted windows and red lettered license plate indicated to me that a government official was driving. The car stopped and a man in dark sunglasses got out. “What happened?” he asked in Kyrgyz as the boy ran up to him with extended hand. The two shook hands and the man noticed that I was observing them. “All of that just so that he could greet me!” the man commented, with affection in his voice. I smiled in response. Then the man got into his car and the boy continued on his own way (Field notes, 2009).

Toasts are another source of ritual speech. I believe that toasts are directly connected to the custom of making bata or prayer-like wishes. Toasts are most frequently said at a toi (Kyrgyz: a large, formal celebration such as a wedding) but also occur at smaller celebrations. Toasts are typically accompanied by
drinking alcohol and guests are usually pressured to drink. However, throughout my fieldwork, especially in Talas, there were occasions in which sparkling water was substituted for alcohol. Whether alcohol is consumed or not, the practice of making a toast remains the same. A toast is a forum for good wishes and, as people say in Naryn, “One toast breeds another.” It is common to wish a person success and happiness in those situations that are specific to the individual’s age, status, and goals at the given moment. For example, as an unmarried woman I typically received a wish that I find a good husband who is wealthy and who can take care of me and that I have many children.

A particularly good or meaningful toast may be answered with *omin*. *Omin* is a Kyrgyz word that functions like the English word “amen,” but which carries an altogether different referential meaning. In English, “amen” is used to assert belief and the feeling of truth. *Omin*, however, references “the end” whether it is the end of an activity, a prayer, or a life. The word *omin* is accompanied by a gesture of passing the palms of the hands across the face, from eyes to lips. Curses may also be followed by *omin* and this too seals the recipient’s fate.

Parting words are yet another example of ritual speech. Like toasts, parting words are also linked to the idea of *bata*, but they also serve another important function and this is making peace. Good words said upon departure make up for any misunderstandings that may have happened during a guest’s stay. It is assumed that these words will be carried home with the guests and so, for example, as I was leaving the Nisharapov house Bakay and Svetlana gave their good wishes to me and extended them to my parents as well. Acceptance of such good words ensures the continued good relationships between individuals and families.

Thus, words are connected to myth in a direct way in as much as there is a belief that ritual words have a direct effect on life, through managing relationships and through perceived supernatural effects. Words are also connected to myth in a more roundabout way and that it is through words, such as those written here in this thesis, through which myth manifests, circulates, and is reinvented.
As we have seen, discourse, myth, and knowledge are deeply intertwined in Kyrgyz systems of belief. I turn now to the present certain elements of mythical knowledge that are relevant for our study of koshok. In this presentation, I do not offer the multiplicity of perspectives that I have up unto this point. My aim here is to take up a particular view in order to consider more closely the perceived continuity in relationships between the living and the dead and to understand how this perceived continuity affects the construction of music and musicianship in present-day Kyrgyz society.

3.3 Farida

When I was in Talas, Farida invited me to an ash, a memorial celebration that will be explained and described in detail in Chapter 4. Afterwards she took me with her to her uncle’s eightieth birthday party. Farida Chynybaeva Suyunbenovna is a librarian and a theatre director by profession. She says that both of these professions have assisted her in becoming a professional mourner. As a librarian, she has had a great deal of literature at her disposal. “It’s too bad you can’t read [Kyrgyz]” she told me, “There are a lot of people like you who have written about these things.” As a theatre director, she said she had to teach actresses how to perform koshok, among other things.

At the time of our meeting, she was around 65 years old and working in the children’s library in Talas City. In my first session with Farida, she sang a koshok that her mother had sung upon coming to the house of Farida’s husband’s family to mark the birth of Farida’s first child. Although performance of a koshok for a wedding is a ritual, the situation in which this koshok arose gives this ritual special meaning: Farida told me that she had been kidnapped by her husband at the age of 17 and that she did not see her mother for one full year after the event occurred.

Kidnapping is a relatively violent custom that involves a girl being snatched off the street or out of a classroom by a group of men whom she does not know. These girls are often rolled up in rugs or blankets and thrown in the back seat of a car. The men are usually drunk and I have heard horror stories of girls who have protested too much and were thrown out of a moving vehicle to their death along the Doland, the mountain pass leading out of Naryn. Rape may also be involved and the loss of virginity
immobilizes the girl who feels then that she cannot return to her family out of shame. Such girls have been known to commit suicide.

Bride kidnapping is illegal in Kyrgyzstan and both scholars and human rights activists are puzzled by the persistence, prevalence, and some say increase of the custom. I am not certain what motivates the actual act of kidnapping, but the surrounding customs, beliefs and rationales fit within the larger combination of myth and knowledge. I have included the following description because details presented here, concerning the weight of ritual behavior, words, times, and objects, a tension between those values of the community and the actions of the individual, and the use of Islam as a counter-discourse appear throughout all contexts of Kyrgyz life, including the context of funeral.

The custom of kidnapping is upheld not only by the oppressors but by the victims as well. In order to fight kidnapping, and really any form of systemic violence, an individual must fight that which is known to be true and acceptable. For example, I spoke with one girl who managed to talk her way out of kidnapping through tapping into Islam as a counter-discourse. When neither screaming, kicking and biting, nor threats to take legal recourse had any effect, the girl resorted to Islam saying that at the wedding, the moldo will ask her if she was willing to be married. She told her captors “If you force me into this, then when the moldo asks I will tell him I am not willing. I was kidnapped. And he will not marry us.” In a similar fashion, a male friend of mine told his girlfriend, “If another man kidnaps you, just come back. Even if he rapes you, it [the loss of virginity] doesn’t matter. You can come back” (Personal notes).

According to custom, a kidnapped girl should be treated well and given three days to choose whether she will stay with her new family or leave. The girl’s family should be contacted and a female representative, for example, an aunt, is sent to negotiate for the girl. Unlike the previous two examples, this hypothetical aunt upholds the status quo. She does not question the legitimacy of kidnapping or insist that her niece be taken into marriage in an alternative fashion. Rather she sizes up her new in-laws and negotiates for the better conditions of her niece’s staying. I know another woman who was kidnapped, raped and regularly beaten by her new husband and abused by her mother-in-law. This woman was an
orphan and, having no family to negotiate for her, she came to my landlord, a woman from who she had also rented a room in the past. The landlord spent several weeks negotiating with the husband and his family. She said that the new bride could stay on the condition that the husband gave up drinking and stopped beating his bride. He did not and in the end she helped the woman to run away from the family and from Naryn (Personal notes). The landlord criticized the character of the kidnappers, describing them as “very bad people,” but she never criticized the custom itself. Her silence implied that the girl could have been kidnapped into a good family and could have found happiness there.

Losing a new bride is a great shame on a family and the kidnapping family who respects the custom of offering the girl a choice tries every tactic possible to convince her to stay to stay. Promises and threats of curses are used. Many of my female students said they would never leave the house of their kidnappers because the elder women would say “Let you never have happiness” followed by an “omin” and the girls believed that the words of these elders would become their reality. The girl’s exit may also be barred by placing borsok (Kyrgyz: tufts of fried bread) in the doorway. Bread is sacred and cannot be stepped over or walked upon. The old women may also lay on their stomachs in front of the door saying “If you want to leave, you must walk across our backs” (Personal notes). This tactic works because no girl with half a conscience would be capable of treading on the elders who are as sacred as the bread.

Since these unions begin with violence, there are often unforgivables that exist between a husband and a wife that a woman may or may not ever make peace with. I did not have the chance to talk with Farida about her personal experience as a kidnapped bride. However, she did tell me that she “almost died of missing [her home and her mother]” and so for Farida, her mother’s performance of a koshok in which Farida sat face to face with her mother, weeping, was a very moving and powerful experience. Farida reenacted this performance for me with the help of her own daughter. In the performance mother and daughter were concealed under a large shawl. I had filmed the performance and while doing so I was struck by the fact that there was nothing to see. I could not see into the private space the two women had created for themselves. The text of the koshok consisted of a verse addressed to the mother-in-law, saying “I have
given you a delicate bird. Treat her carefully,” and a verse addressed to the daughter saying, “My daughter, pay attention to your words. Don’t make them [the husband’s family] think that you think yourself too good for them.”

Despite whatever difficulties Farida may have experienced during that time, in retrospect she seemed to be happy with the progress of her life and her marriage. Her husband had been a musician and had encouraged her talents. The two of them were active in all aspects of theatre and had played many roles opposite to one another on stage. I was surprised to discover that she kept a cat as an indoor house pet. iii

With a son who works in Moscow, a son who works in Bishkek, a son who lives with her, and a daughter-in-law who bears the weight of most domestic tasks, Farida lives in relative comfort. The mini-van driven by her son attests to the family’s status. In Naryn, they would be considered quite wealthy, but I believe that, in Talas the correct descriptor is “established” as the standard of living in Talas is significantly higher than in Naryn.

Indeed, it was Farida’s love for theatre that gave her little time to help me in my research. For the first two months that I was in Talas, she was occupied by preparations for a children’s puppet show in honor of Chingiz Aitmatov. However, I wanted Farida’s help in particular because she is widely recognized in the Talas Oblast for her skills as a koshokju (Kyrgyz: professional mourner).

3.4 Graves as Sacred Sites

On our way to a birthday party, Farida stopped at the grave of her late husband. Her three sons and her only daughter were with us. In order to enter the graveyard, each of us passed, in single file, through a turning gate. Immediately upon entry I was impressed by the tall grave that stood before me. It seemed different than other graves I had seen. The grave was of gargantuan size and made of brick, rather than of mud, and yet it was formed from the same two shapes that make up the majority of graves in both Naryn and Talas: tower and dome. Mosques are the only other places in which I have observed these two shapes in similar combination. Some graves place the dome inside the tower, so that the dome appears to be boxed. Others separate the two shapes entirely. In this grave, however, the tower and dome were fused so that the
dome seemed to be extending from the tower’s back. The tower itself was flat faced and featured an opening that was too tall and too thin to be meant for human passage.

The following painting shown in figure 2, which Nurbek told me he had photographed in an outdoor gallery in Bishkek, shows the shapes of tower and dome clearly. According to Nurbek, these two pictures are “the death of the sun.” He was unable to provide any information about the artist. The image of a boz oi is clearly depicted on the reader’s left as well as that of a dead body, bearers of that body and witnesses. On the reader’s right are towers and domes that may be found in any Kyrgyz cemetery complete with the moon that marks the towers as Muslim.

![Image of the painting](image)

**Figure 2: Death of the Sun, artist unknown**

I interpret the faint image of a man in the background on the reader’s right as a dead person, that is, an ancestor or a ghost associated with the tower that displays the same shape as the man. However, this is only my personal understanding in light of this present research. The symbolism of the sun is a very interesting
choice given the light that streams into the opening of a yurt through the tuyunduk, a symbol that I will
discuss later in this chapter.

During my visit to Farida’s husband’s gravesite, a woman’s portrait hung over that opening and so
I understood that this was not the grave of Farida’s husband. It was here, however, that the three men
squatted to read the Koran. Reading the Koran requires no book, as by definition the Koran is read through
the recitation of verses. In Kyrgyzstan these verses are followed by bata and Omin. Kyrgyz women do not
typically read Koran or even shape the words upon their lips. However, Farida squatted there with her sons
while I lingered closer to the gate. Perhaps because of my own tradition, I expected that we would walk
over to her husband’s grave to place something upon it or to touch it with our eyes. However, we did not
even approach the grave. We left the moment the omin was said as though we had no business loitering
amidst the dead. I saw tears in Farida’s eyes but, as we continued on our way, her mood turned from
sadness towards celebration (Field notes, 2008). Although I had heard from many individuals that such
grave visits are made in order to pay respect to the dead and to receive the dead’s blessing, this was the first
time I had ever witnessed such a visit.

The work of Enseign Ho (The Graves of Tarim) provides a useful theory of graves as a site of
pilgrimage and discourse and as a symbol of both absence and presence. In The Graves of Tarim, Ho tells
the story of “a society of persons dispersed (strewn, disseminated, scattered, settled, lost, found, drowned)
across the Indian Ocean… We can give this society a name. This place is the region called Hadramawt in
present-day Yemen, near the South Arabic coast…” (Ho, The Graves of Tarim, xix). Ho’s research on the
Hadarim has caused him to theorize absence and connectedness. Ho looks at Hadarimi graves and the acts
performed upon them, such as pilgrimage and desecration, in order to understand Hadarimi concepts of
self. He enriches this through genealogies in which the grave presents an excerpt of a larger text. In
theorizing Hadarimi graves, Ho writes: “A gravestone is a silent place that marks an absence” (Ho, 3). Ho
goes on, however, to discuss how the writing on the grave and visits to the grave in order to say prayers
also make the grave a site for discursive processes.
In Kyrgyzstan, it is exactly such an absence that motivates the performance of koshok, as demonstrated by Farida’s tears. Nevertheless, customs kept by most Kyrgyz such as never pointing at a grave, not adding to a grave after the initial period of mourning, not walking over the grave so as not to disturb the dead, saying omin when passing by a cemetery, and making special visits to say bata are motivated, not by the absence of the dead, but by their presence. This seeming contradiction, that the dead are simultaneously absent and present, may be better understood through Nurbek’s words: “…for the dead, that world [death] is real. This world of ours [life] is a Fantasia to them, just as death can only be a Fantasia for us…. And still, the dead wait for our omin…” (Field notes, 2008). Indeed, Ho follows his statement with a series of question that approach Nurbek’s point: “Is the absence of the dead forever? Will they come back, or will we join them…” (Ho, 4).

According to Ho, the Hadarim, like the Kyrgyz and many others influenced by Sufi beliefs and practices, have come to make the grave a site of pilgrimage. In this light, Ho portrays the grave as “a site of increase” (Ho, 8) “where mobile persons and mobile texts meet” (Ho, 7). Ho sites these texts as being “pilgrimage manuals and prayer litanies compiled from other texts—such as the Qur’an, poetry, genealogies, and biographies— that connect the names of the saint to others” (Ho, 7). I believe that actions performed at the grave serve to connect the lives of the dead to the lives of the living, regardless as to whether the dead are perceived as saints, heroes, or relatives. In support of this, Ho compares death and departure through absence over and over again, saying that both “cause obituaries and genealogies to be written, as they do tombstones. Etched on paper, names become mobile and acquire new lives, circulating beyond the grave” (Ho, 4).

3.5 The Boz Oi

I saw a beautiful illustration of Nurbek’s “Fantasia” in a music video clip shown on ELTR, the only television station produced in Kyrgyzstan by and for Kyrgyz speakers. The clip was called “Alma Gulu” (Kyrgyz: Apple Blossoms) and was performed by the Kiz Burak Ensemble. Svetlana Nisharapov explained to me that the singer was singing about how, when she was a child, her mother had died during
the season for harvesting apples then, the following year, her father had also died at the same time. This pop clip shows a meeting of the living and the dead through memory, presented in song alongside the mixed imagery of a happy childhood and a place of mourning. The clip depicts a child swinging on a swing. It also shows a woman and a man, dressed in white. The child was also dressed in white and the world that they were in was white. Moon and trees were present there and there was a strange triangular opening in the “sky” through which stars could be seen.

I recognized this shape from having sat inside a boz oï (Kyrgyz: yurt. A yurt is a framed felt tent that was the home of the nomadic Kyrgyz). I will discuss the yurt itself in more detail presently. The triangle was immediately recognizable as the flap of the opening of the yurt. A stream of colored light came from directly above the singer. This stream of light was the light streaming from the tyundyuk (Kyrgyz: the opening in the top of the yurt, also the national symbol of The Kyrgyz Republic) and this light is considered to be blessed. The presence of both tyundyuk and the entrance place man, woman, child, moon, trees and swing inside a boz oï. This setting is enriched by the symbolic value of the boz oï in reference to its past and present functions.

The boz oï was the home of the nomadic Kyrgyz. In the past, it was the place where individuals were born, lived, and died. In the present day, the boz oï has not been completely abandoned as a living space: it is still used by hunters, herders, and families who make a living off of selling kumuz (Kyrgyz: fermented mare’s milk). It is also used by individuals who sell things in the stretches of road between cities. Alongside its practical function, however, the boz oï has come to be viewed as a more sacred space, where certain rituals are performed: Elmira Köchümkulova offers a good description of her own wedding that took place in a boz oï. Most mourning activities also take place within and in relationship to the boz oï. Some families have taken to putting up a permanent iron framed boz oï, whereas others prefer the lighter wooden frame.
Figure 3: A wedding procession visits the Eternal Flame in Bishkek whose structure is meant to evoke a yurt. Maureen Pritchard, 2008.

Just like an immobile house, a *boz oi* is decorated or stripped for a given occasion. The walls of a *boz oi* are made of pressed felt that is neither bleached nor dyed, retaining the natural color of the wool. When a *boz oi* is used as a place of mourning, it is described as “grey” as no colors are used to decorate the natural felt. A *boz oi* erected inside of the wall of a gated courtyard signals a death within that household.

When a person dies, the closest female relatives to the deceased have the responsibility to sit with the body inside the *boz oi* for three days until burial. During these three days a light is kept on within the
boz oi. I was told by Nurbek that this is because the dead are “freshmen to death [a place].” The dead are not yet used to the new world that they have entered and so the living should keep a light on for them so they will not be afraid. As mentioned in the introduction, koshok take place within the yurt. Thus, at least for the occasion of death [the state], the space of the boz oi combines with a very specific sound. I was told that the boz oi should be kept up for 40 days after burial, but that most people did not have a boz oi of their own and cannot afford to rent someone else’s for such a long time. Similarly a boz oi should be put up for the ash, a memorial feast that marks one year after a person’s death.

In the music video “Alma Gulu,” the Kiz Burak Ensemble makes use of the symbolic value of the boz oi as both a place of life and a place of death, combining a text that tells about the death of a child’s parents with the images of a happy family. A similar idea was taken up by our taxi driver as he took Nurbek and me to Talas in the first few days of my research. It wasn’t until much later that I realized the value of the driver’s words. This driver had been telling us about a business he planned to start up. This business, he said, was a series of treatment centers “where there wouldn’t be any doctor,” just the healing energy of the earth and the sky, channeled through the space of the boz oi. “The boz oi is more than a living space,” this driver said. “It is a cosmos” (Field notes, 2008). The ability of the boz oi to be a cosmos lies in its former function as a home and its association with all aspects of life, both ordinary and ritual, both sacred and profane.

3.6 The Color of Death

In Kyrgyzstan, the color white has a direct connotation of death and I can only offer Muslim associations with physical and spiritual cleanliness as a reason. It is no coincidence that the man, woman and child depicted in “Alma Gulu” were wearing white, as this image is part of the collective imagination of death as a place and the dead as a society that functions not unlike the society of the living. This image is further exemplified in the description of an individual who was known for a special gift of seeing the living and the dead simultaneously. I shall call her Gulzada. One day, while preparing the family meal, Zarina told me about a childhood friend. Later both Zarina’s father, Tursun and her mother Patia, confirmed these
stories. Gulzada has a gift that enables her to see both the living and the dead. She is accompanied by the spirits of animals and she knows things that she herself has not witnessed. Zarina told me that in the past, when the gift was still new, Gulzada would become confused and acknowledge people who no one could see. It took time for her to learn to differentiate between the living and the dead. In order to nurture her gift, Gulzada spent nights in cemeteries “and other sacred places.” Her description of a nighttime cemetery was contrary to that of most people: Zarina said that for Gulzada “a cemetery is not a scary place. It’s beautiful and bright. Everything is white, and angels flit in the trees” (Field notes, 2008).

Zarina was a woman of mixed Uyghur and Karachay background. I stayed with her family when I first came to Kyrgyzstan as a Peace Corps volunteer and at that time I could only speak a few words of Russian. No longer willing to bear the cold and hunger that I was experiencing with the Nisharapovs, I again came to the Bakirevna household on the outskirts of Bishkek. The household includes Zarina, her parents, her brother, her husband, her son and her brother’s son, and a constant stream of relatives, friends, and guests. Although Zarina’s parents speak Uyghur and Karachai respectively, the household is Russian-speaking and the mother of the family is a Russian language teacher as well as a seamstress. One thing that I learned through spending time with Zarina and her family, was that the beliefs which I am presenting in this thesis as “Kyrgyz” beliefs are not limited to Kyrgyz people. These are common beliefs that circulate within Kyrgyzstan among people of varying ethnicities, but they circulate mainly among those who consider themselves to be Muslim. It is possible to present these beliefs as Kyrgyz only because for the Nisharapovs and many of the other individuals with whom I spoke, these beliefs are wrapped up in the concepts of “Kyrgyz understanding,” that is, in the Kyrgyz way of being in the world. Practices that are practiced only by individuals of Kyrgyz-Kazak ethnicity, such as putting up a boz oi and performing koshok, are often imbued with such beliefs.

Considering that both for Gulzada and the Kiz Burak Ensemble, the dead wear white and death is a white place, then it is interesting that “white” comes up again in a popular song called “Jol” (Kyrgyz: road), sung by Azar Kasimov. White not only designates a color, it also designates “intensity” and so it can
also be translated as “bright.” One example of the use of white as bright is the name of Bakiev’s political party, “Ak Jol” typically translated as “Bright Way.” In this way white can connote the light of the tyundyuk and, from a Muslim standpoint, with the light of Koran that can even reach into the darkness of the grave. The lyrics of “Jol” describe “a white (bright) road” which “Manas went down… Toktogol with his komus… Sepek… Kochero… and my father too…” This road was explained to me as being a metaphor for life (Field notes, 2008) and yet, it is also a metaphor for death in the sense that each one of the people mentioned in this song has died. The text presents a genealogy of humanness, in which one human after another passes into death, regardless if he was hero of the epics like Manas, a great musician like Toktogul Satylganov (1864-1933) or the unnamed father of an ordinary man.

3.7 Maintaining Relationships between the Living and the Dead

In line with the image of a road between the place of life and the place of death, I find it helpful to imagine the dead and the living as members of the same community who came from one place and migrated to another so that the dead are immigrants from life. In this metaphor, the social systems, beliefs, and customs of the living community are brought to death by individuals who migrate there. Thus the social systems and the customs of the dead retain a similarity to those of the living. Some aspects of the social system, belief and customs may lose their relevance in the new world and be discarded or may change in meaning or form. Others may be continued and be adapted. Relationships made in life also continue into death, alongside responsibilities. Dreams are the primary mode of communication between the living and the dead.

For example, Nurbek’s sister, Tunuk, told me “Before dying, a person will often say I want this or that to go to such and such person. So if, for example, a dead person leaves you her shawl and instead of keeping it somewhere safe, you use it as scrap cloth, that dead person will appear not to you in a dream, but to some of your relatives saying, with or without words, I’ve lost my shawl and I’m cold” (Field notes, 2008). Thus the dead remind the living of their responsibilities by way of dreams, while at the same time, the living express their needs to the dead through bata. This perspective is supported by a story that
Kaybila Ulu told in describing the research that went into his book *Koo Bayani: Birinjj Kitep* (Bishkek, 2000).

In the course of my field research, I took Elmira Köchümkulova to meet Kaybila Ulu and to talk to him about his book and the possibility of publishing it through the Aga Khan Foundation. In the course of observing Kaybila Ulu’s interactions with Köchümkulova, I gained information that I would never have been able to gain by myself. Kaybila Ulu first checked Köchümkulova’s credentials. She could speak Kyrgyz. She had attended a Kyrgyz-language school. She had been raised to know Kyrgyz customs and traditions and she was a skilled musician. In addition Köchümkulova holds a Ph.D. from the University of Washington in Seattle. Köchümkulova had an advantage that I did not: Köchümkulova could speak Kaybila Ulu in Kyrgyz, the language that he not only loved, but also taught. Without understanding his words, it was immediately apparent to me that through the Kyrgyz language he was more capable of expressing himself in such a way that reflected the richness of his thought and the wealth of his spoken skills. Only two days previous I had come to his house in order to set up the meeting and found Kaybila Ulu unable to get out of bed. For this meeting with Köchümkulova, however, he was full of energy. With Köchümkulova as both interviewer and translator, Kaybila Ulu read us excerpts from his book and retold pieces of chapters in an animated style. He carefully captivated his audience, Köchümkulova and I, who were both potential “sponsors” for his future publication.

As part of this conversation, Kaybila Ulu told us about a project that he had begun in the television-radio archives. The nature of this project was to sift through a enormous number of recordings that had been thrown out with no regard to their content. Kaybila Ulu wanted to salvage, restore, and document those recordings that he deemed valuable. Many of these recordings were of performances by classic komus players. Kaybila Ulu and his colleagues spent so much time together on this project that many began to complain of dreams in which these renowned and respected musicians appeared to them. On account of the number and the frequency of the dreams, Kaybila Ulu and his colleagues decided to hold a memorial feast for the dead in which the Koran would be read. Dream-visitations from the dead are always
dangerous because a living person may decide to follow the dead visitor into death. When the dead become too active in the lives of the living, they should be calmed, reassured, and perhaps pacified by prayers and feasting. In Naryn I was told that the dead, upon dying, do not realize that they are dead. Rather, they gather amidst the mourners and also join in the grief. Only through the process of mourning do the dead realize it is they who have died. In Naryn I also heard that such feast as the one in which Kaybila Ulu held are important because the dead enjoy the company of the living and are satisfied by the living’s participation in prayers and feasting (Personal notes).

Although these beliefs and practices are known throughout Kyrgyzstan, they are not shared or practiced by all Kyrgyz to the same degree. For some Kyrgyz and non-Kyrgyz these beliefs and practices make up the understanding and vitality of their world, and it the understandings of such people that I have privileged here in this thesis. However, other Kyrgyz whose views may be influenced by rationalism or a difference in faith are skeptical of both these beliefs and the associated practices. On one occasion a moldo expressed his disagreement with these beliefs and practices as superstitious and un-Islamic. Later I presented the moldo’s view to a Kyrgyz man, asking whether or not he agree. The man answered “The moldo said that? Oh moldo, moldo…” I didn’t know what to make of these words and so I repeated my question. This time the man answered directly “I don’t believe in these things.” I did not yet know that I was speaking to a Christian.

Insertion of a faith other than Islam places much of what I will say in this body of work under a different light. This is because in many ways Islam has become tied to “being Kyrgyz,” both in the minds of many Kyrgyz and in the minds of many scholars. Religion is frequently viewed as an ethnic marker rather than as a personal faith. I cannot say that there is a prejudice against people of other faiths, as it is assumed, for example, that Jews will be Jewish and Russians will be Orthodox. However, faith is not something a person chooses. It is something he or she is born into as demonstrated in the following statement: “Changing your religion is like changing your parents. You can do that, but their blood still runs through you” (Personal notes).
The question of religion, especially Christianity, is relevant to my research because, as one woman told me: “They [meaning other Kyrgyz] would never allow a Christian [meaning a Kyrgyz who has converted to Christianity] to be buried in [village] cemeteries, nor to bury their parents there.” She explained that such prejudices cause Christian dead to be buried in distant places, far from the *omin* of a passer-by, or in the family courtyard where perhaps, with soil that must be tilled and playing children, the dead cannot rest so easily (Field notes, 2008).

### 3.8 Knowledge and Musicianship

Another aspect of dreams is the transmission of knowledge. This mainly occurs among musicians, in regards to the Manas Epic. Prior states that “claims of dream-inspiration are recorded from bards of the past such as Sagimbay (1867-1930)” and suggests the possibility that dream transmission of the epic was a way of a musician to create a space around himself that would be help to protect against Soviet anti-nationalist repression (Prior, 36). I, however, feel that tales of dream-inspiration stem from the more general notion of dreams as a meeting place between the dead and the living and that by appearing to a musician in his or her dreams, that dead musician offers his ancestry and with it, a lineage through which talent can be transmitted. Even within *Manas* and other the epics, dreams are powerful forces that offer knowledge and foreshadow fates. Interestingly, it is usually women tell their dreams, both in epics and in real life.

By the logic of dreams, the spirit of the hero Manas lives through the epic. Manas lends his ancestral power to the Kyrgyz as a people and nation through the knowledge drawn out of the epic and relayed in performance. *Manaschi* (Kyrgyz: singers of the Manas epic) are individuals who carry a much revered gift and who hold a direct connection to the source of ancestry through both dream transmission and knowledge. I have been told that *manaschi* perform the epic as if they were possessed: “You can throw water on him [the manaschi], beat him, yell, but it will not affect his recitation.” One *manaschi* reportedly said that he can recite the battle scenes in such detail because he sees them before his very eyes as he performs and thus while performing he is simply telling what he sees (Field notes, 2008).
As the gravesite stands as a marker of both the absence and presence of the dead, so is the absent-presence of both the hero Manas and manaschi of prior generations manifested in the towering statue of Manas (figure 4) and in the busts of four singers of his epic (figure 5) that a person must walk by upon entering the Bishkek Philharmonic. The relationship between living musicians and dead musicians follows the same lines as all other relationships between living and dead: they are still performing together, learning from one another and exchanging stories and knowledge despite the separation of life and death.
The transmission of knowledge between generations of musicians can be found in the following story told to me by an older komus player from Talas, named Tazibek, and it richly displays the complexities of coming into musicianship. During the segment of our interview that I will retell here, I had lost my role of a critical researcher and had become totally entranced by a well spun tale.

When Tazibek was a very young boy, some musicians came to his village. It must have been before the Second World War because that was the war in which Tazibek’s father died and he was still very much alive in this tale. The musicians were traveling from village to village, which, according to Tazibek, is what musicians used to do back then. These musicians were greeted as honored guests and they stayed in Tazibek’s home. An enormous feast was held in their honor and everyone in the village crowded into the
house to hear them play. They played all night long and Tazibek said, even though he didn’t understand much about music then, he had no desire to sleep and he sat with the others listening throughout the night. Thus Tazibek has set up a tale in which strangers came as guests and brought with them a magical object.

Despite being young, Tazibek’s interest in the komus was evident. Early in the morning both musicians and guests are tired and one by one musicians and villagers go to sleep. Eventually, everyone is asleep except for one small child, Tazibek, who cannot stop thinking about the lead musician’s komus. Tazibek takes the komus from the sleeping musician and stashes it in the roof of the house which, in Talas, are open areas filled with hay so that horses, cows, and donkeys will have food throughout the winter. When the musician awakes he is horrified to find his instrument missing. Like most magical objects that are stolen, a lot of trouble comes of it: A village meeting is called and Tazibek’s father pleads with, curses, and threatens the unknown person who has stolen the instrument. Everyone in the village is ashamed that such a thing could happen in their village and Tazibek’s father is even more ashamed that such a thing could happen in his own house. The musicians have no choice, however, but to continue on their way and Tazibek’s father promises to send them the instrument when it is found. Tazibek said he was too terrified to confess, but after some days passed he forgot his fear.

I was a little boy,” Tazibek said, “and so I didn’t think about it any more. I went up into the roof and I picked up the komus [He shows the action as he speaks, looking in his hands as though there is a komus there] and I play. I didn’t know how to play but I played something [He squeezes his eyes shut and shows fast and unlearned strumming. Then he opens them again and looks at me.] and you know, my playing wasn’t so bad…. [He shakes his head] Oh but my parents heard me. [He looks up and points, playing the role of his parents.] They heard a komus coming from the roof of the house. [He starts to laugh.] My father called me. “Tazibek! Come down here and bring the komus with you! Did you steal this komus?” [He lowers his head repentantly, playing each character as he speaks.] “Yes.” “Does a good child steal the belongings of a guest?” “No.” [laughs] Oh he beat me for that! [Tazibek plays the part of his father, pulling off his belt and beating his son, all the time laughing.] “Are you going to steal again?” “No.” [gesture of whipping a child with a belt] “Are you going to steal again?” “No.”… After that I still had a strong desire to play, but my parents didn’t really support me. The komus players appeared to me in my dreams. I told my mother but she said it didn’t have any meaning… Later, after my father died, we had nothing. It was the war. My mother gave me a little bit of money and sent me off to Bishkek, saying, “Tazibek, go find your own fortune. One day, I was walking around and I was hungry. And I saw an advertisement that the music conservatory was holding exams and that anyone who was accepted as a student would receive a place to live and meals for free. So I thought to myself, “Tazibek, you have
to go there. You won’t be hungry”… They [the conservatory staff] asked me to play the komus and I played it, and the guitar, so I played it, and the balilanka [He says this with a dismissive gesture]. Then it came time for the exams, so I did okay in math, but there was this Russian woman for history, and when she asked me a question I didn’t understand. So I said *Ya ne gavarish po ryski!* [In this sentence Tazibek has paired the first person subject with the second person verb, so that in his mind he is saying “I don’t speak Russian.” The subject of a Russian sentence can always be dropped because it is contained within the verb and so the Russian woman understands “You don’t speak Russian.”] Oh that Russian woman got really mad. She almost kicked me out of the exam, but finally she realized I didn’t speak Russian [laughs]… I was accepted into the conservatory… (Field notes, 2008).

In his narration Tazibek implies that the whole thing started with the arrival of the musicians, and that the rest, was destiny. Despite the fact that he knows nothing, neither music nor language, and can do nothing right, he succeeds at everything. Despite the fact that he is the worst, he becomes the best, as though a hidden magical ability had been unlocked in that first moment that he held the komus in his hands so that afterwards no obstacle could stand in the way of his success. Tazibek’s narrative offers insight into Kyrgyz views on musicianship, that is, how a person comes to be a musician. His narrative also demonstrates a sacred quality to music in the sense that musicians form their own spiritual ancestry in which performance replaces blood.

3.9 Departure

As described in Chapter 1, before I had even arrived in Kyrgyzstan, Nurbek Nisharapov was preparing to go to Taiwan and as he was struggling to gather all his documents, his family was struggling to come up with money necessary for a plane ticket and initial expenses. During this time both father and son practiced namaz (Arabic: prayer prescribed by Islam that includes a physical activity in addition to words). A number of relatives came to the house to remember the dead with the family by reading Koran, and, in turn, Nurbek’s father and mother went to other houses to do the same. These activities may also have had something to do with the family’s recent arrival to a place whose dead they had not yet had a chance to visit and give their respects to in quite some time.

Nurbek and his elder brother paid a visit to their grandparents’ graves in order to ask the grandparents’ blessing and help in the journey’s success. Despite the family’s knowledge of my topic of research, I was never included in any of these activities and I am not sure why this is, except, perhaps, that
too much was at stake in these activities to allow the possible disruption of a stranger’s investigation. On the morning of his departure, Nurbek and his mother made a special trip to Manas Ortoy, the hill where Manas had kept a lookout over the Talas Region. In this way Nurbek was able to fly to Taiwan. The airplane may have been made by the advancements of science, but it was the wind generated by the goodwill of Allah, Nurbek’s grandparents, and the hero, Manas, that carried Nurbek safely to his destination.

Before departing, Nurbek used my camera to make a film. For the sake of analysis I will first describe the film as though the characters are unknown to me. The film shows a tall man with broad shoulders and a big belly sitting in the tiled corner of a room. The man is singing in Kyrgyz and accompanying himself on the accordion. The melody is unornamented and the man’s voice has been made tinny from bouncing off the tiles. I can’t understand the lyrics in their entirety. I only understand that this man is singing about a place of unknown distance called Taiwan. A lace curtain conceals another room behind the singer. The camera does not stay on the performer but pans to the performer’s right, showing two women. One is older. One is younger. The older woman is sitting at a low table. She does not acknowledge the performer, the camera or the other woman. Rather, she focuses her gaze on the tea that she is drinking, occasionally passing her hands across her face. The younger woman leans with one shoulder against the tiled wall. She glances momentarily at the camera and then focuses her gaze on the performer. For an instant the camera eye turns back on itself and a young man peaks around the corner, arching his eyebrow mischievously. There is a moment when the singer, visibly, not audibly, seems to be holding back tears. When the singer stops the three audience members applaud and the performer grins (Field notes, 2008).

This tall man with broad shoulders is Nurbek’s father, Bakay Sareivich, the son of a moldo, who in his lifetime has worked as school teacher in mathematics, as a KGB agent, and as a financial consultant for FINCA, a U.N. supported credit union.¹ Bakay is sitting in the living room of the Nisharapovs’ new house. The lace curtain conceals an indoor well and the entry into a room designated for receiving guests.
Bakay is playing the instrument that he learned when he himself was still a child. I believe that he is improvising lyrics by altering a known song and text. The older woman who sits at the low table is Nurbek’s mother, Svetlana. Svetlana’s grandfather owned two yurts in order to keep two wives and gained prestige for his ability to translate between Kyrgyz and Russian. In moving to Talas, Svetlana was forced to turn down a promotion to Director of Special Needs Children in the Naryn Oblast, something that she expressed deep bitterness about throughout my stay in her household. Svetlana now sits at home with her granddaughter, Nurjamal, who cannot attend preschool because she has difficulty walking due to malnutrition in her infancy. Svetlana’s daughter, Tunuk, is recently divorced and, rather than sitting home with her child, she needs to work in order reestablish herself and find a husband.

I do not know precisely why Svetlana is sitting alone at that low table where the entire family usually gathers to eat breakfast, to drink tea, and to watch television. I do know is that when I, the younger woman who leaned against the tiles, saw her sitting there, I felt that she had established a space of solitude for herself that I should not intrude upon. She looked sad and exhausted that I felt that she had begun grieving for the son from whom she would soon be separated.

How could she not when Nurbek’s leaving was of such significance to the family? Nurbek is the youngest. He is a twin who came out second and with his feet first. As the youngest son he is duty bound to live with his parents until the remainder of their days. His mother readily admits that Nurbek is, and always has been, the child for whom she has the most protective instinct. On his part Nurbek says he is his mother’s best friend. Nurbek’s parents have gone into great debt to send him to Taiwan and it will be up to Nurbek to finance his own return.

Following this performance, Bakay, Svetlana and I made a trip to Bishkek in order to see Nurbek off. In an unusual display of public affection, Bakay put his arms around Svetlana as we sat in the mashrutka (Kyrgyz: mini-bus). In Bishkek we met with Nurbek’s twin, Mirbek, and his uncle who I know only by the nickname “Arnold.” The family brought juice, nan (Kyrgyz: round, flat, leavened, bread), and candy with them to the airport. After Nurbek passed through airport security, he and his family held a
mimed conversation through the glass until Nurbek passed his hands over his face in *omin*. After making this gesture he went and sat with his back turned to us.

We went and sat with our backs turned to him in kind, and without appetite ate bread, drank juice, and tasted candy. Tears streamed from his father and mother’s eyes and no one spoke. Finally, when all the bread was eaten and all the juice was gone, Nurbek’s parents made *bata* by speaking quietly into their hands and passing them over their face in *omin*. Only after that did they get up and go back to the security glass to have one last moment with their son.

In those moments in the airport I realized that all the elements that I had been grasping at in the context of funeral, elements such as food and prayer; song and tears; ancestry and stories, are not essential to funerals. These elements are essential to life and to a way of being in the world that is myth-infused and which, in turn, infuses myth. The behavior, material objects, beliefs, and stories that surround funerals, and that occur within a funerary context, only do so because they, like death, are a part of life. In this chapter I have examined a panoramic view of Kyrgyz life and life in Kyrgyzstan for the purpose of gaining a perspective on the inter-connectedness of all contexts. In the next chapter, however, I will narrow the view so as to examine the specific context of grief.

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1 The Russian philosopher Fyodorov (1827-1903) also set out a similar scheme to control the electromagnetic fields of the universe by building a series of moveable rings around the earth, allowing man to have complete control over temperature, precipitation and light. Fyodorov’s plans to regulate nature did not stop at the external world. The philosopher believed that “regulating the outer forces of nature, will permit a psychophysiological regulation which would eventually reduce and replace sexuality and lust, and therefore increase one’s love for one’s parents.” (Ayleen Tesky, *Platonov and Fyodorov*, 1982) Fyodorov’s vision may be said to have influenced many Russian writer such as Platonov, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy as well as Soviet intellectuals and social engineers. It may be that in creating the character of the *mankurt* and “Operation Hoop” Aitmatov is referencing to Fyodorov critiquing his vision: In the case of the *mankurt*, the regulation of nature causes the mother to be killed rather than cared for.

2 Bakhtin is actually talking about language. I have appropriated his wording.

3 In Naryn, dislike for cats is frequently explained with the following words: “A dog always wishes that a household has children so that the children will feed him bones and scraps of meat; a cat always hopes that its owners will remain childless so that he be the sole recipient of household attention.”
For more information see “My “Fairy Tale” Kyrgyz Wedding”:
http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/wedding/wedding.html

For more information see the FINCA homepage:
http://www.villagebanking.org/site/c.erK12PCloE/b.2394109/k.BEA3/Home.htm
CHAPTER 4

COMMUNICATING GRIEF

From Taiwan, Nurbek sent me a picture. I had asked Nurbek to take all the bitter sorrow and the homesickness that he felt and draw a *koshok* for me. In this picture Nurbek depicts many of the ritual elements discussed in chapter 3. The round red object at the top of the picture is the *tyundyuk* through which light can be seen streaming onto the corpse. The hash-markings are representative of the inside of the yurt. The corpse is white and the mourners are black shadows. A pencil line with musical notes represents the sound of *koshok*. Nurbek had presented me with three versions of this picture that at first glance seemed identical. After asking Nurbek about it and taking a second glance, I realized that one painting depicted a moment of silence through the absence of the pencil lines.

Figure 6: Oil Pastel by Nurbek Nisharapov, Taiwan 2009. Reproduced with artist’s permission.
I had not expected such a depiction of koshok. The style is very atypical for Nurbek, who usually mixes oil pastels with watercolor to create a polished textured style. Usually he brings out the richness and depth of a landscape’s coloring and captures the details of individual characters, whether human or animal. When compared to Nurbek’s other works, this particular painting demonstrates a different aesthetic, one in which form and detail have been eclipsed by sorrow and in which the palette has been altered by grief. I believe that such an aesthetic exists in life as well as in visual art, and it is this point that I will argue, explain, and explore throughout this chapter. As I stated in the first chapter, I believe that koshok can only be understood when considered in relationship to a larger spectrum of grief.

In explaining this, I would first like to recall how in the previous chapter Svetlana Nisharapov had already begun to grieve for Nurbek prior to his departure. She had sat at a low table and had not acknowledged the performer, the camera, or me. She had focused her gaze on her teacup and occasionally passed her hands across her face. I had felt a tenseness in the air and noted that she seemed sad and exhausted. In this moment, Svetlana had taken on some of the qualities of grief that I will discuss throughout this chapter.

4.1 A Spectrum of Grief

Svetlana’s grief, made apparent through her physical and emotional isolation, is mild when compared to the grief Farida’s daughter-in-law displayed at an ash. The mother of Farida’s daughter-in-law had died the year before and an ash was held to commemorate the event. When Farida and I arrived, the daughter-in-law’s eyes were red from tears and her lids swollen. Her hair seemed uncombed and the scarf that she used to cover her head was askew, giving her a disheveled and unkempt appearance. Her eyes were vacant. She neither greeted nor acknowledged Farida. When Farida spoke to her she looked with vacant eyes, responding without emotion or animation. She held her toddler absently. The weight of her slight body appeared too heavy. She seemed without strength and exhausted (Field notes, 2008).

In those moments, the words of Julia Kristeva, a French psychoanalyst and literary critic, might have become the monologue of a young Kyrgyz woman:
I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted, time has been erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow… [I am] Absent from other people’s meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naïve happiness… (Kristeva, 4).

Through these words, Kristeva describes the affects (affect is an internal mood, which manifests itself in the body) of depression as they manifest in the voice and in the behavior of the depressed. Kristeva’s description, however, also depicts what I believe is an aesthetic of grieving in Kyrgyzstan, that is, the way in which all the elements involved within a ritual create a cohesion that cumulates in the overall quality of grief, so that, for instance, a mourner becomes her sorrow. She knows and understands nothing but her sorrow, as though that sorrow has eclipsed all past, present, and future joy.

While in I was living in Naryn, the woman with whom I lived was widowed, and when a relative came to tell her that her husband had died, she let out a loud sound. When I heard it, I thought she was laughing and I came out of my room to find out what was so funny. It wasn’t until I saw her tears and the stricken look on her face that I understood that this sound belonged to grief (Personal notes). After her husband was buried and the first forty days of mourning had passed, this woman did not throw off her garment of grief. She wore not only black clothes, but also a scarf over her hair. I could hear her crying herself to sleep each night. In the mornings, when she would join me at the kitchen table, she would narrate her suffering to me and weep (Personal notes).

In retrospect, I believe that such narrations and weeping were a part of ritual. Not only were they a part of a prescribed act for a woman who has found herself performing the role of a widow but they were also acts of psychological necessity. Anthropological definitions of ritual tend to emphasis structural and functional aspects; but in psychology “ritual” is defined as “a series of acts compulsively performed under certain circumstances, the non performance of which results in tension and anxiety” Likewise, “ritualization” is defined as “the formalization of certain actions expressing a particular emotion or state of mind” (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 2003). In constructing koshok as a part of a genre of grief, it is important to consider this psychological definition alongside more structuralist definitions because I am
interested in the perception of *koshok* as a signifier of spontaneous and uncontrollable expression of personal grief.

One aspect of the woman’s narrations was her dreams. From her perspective, her husband visited her each night. Actually the dreams had begun long before his death. Whereas she lived and worked in Naryn, her husband lived and worked in Bishkek, and she used to have a recurring dream that her husband had another wife and another child in the capital. She told me that after her husband’s death she realized that this woman and child were her husband’s illness. She told me that he should have a wife and a child there, in death (a place), implying that that those same things that make a person happy or complete in life also make a person happy or complete in death.

It was interesting to me, as her listener, to learn that death also has its rules. Her husband who, through death, had become responsible for the woman and child that made up his family in the after-life, would put limits on his meetings saying “I have to go. They are waiting for me” or “I’m sorry, I cannot stay with you. They need me.” Once she woke up still smelling the scent of a cigarette he had been smoking in her dream. “So it seems there are smokers in the other world too,” she said without irony. Once her husband came to my defense in a dream. “I was ready to beat you,” she said, “but my husband started waltzing with you, saying ‘Don’t scold Maureen. She is good.’”

Another aspect of this woman’s grief was her health. Her left eye developed a twitch “from crying too much.” She had some problems with her liver, an organ associated with grief in Kyrgyzstan. When Kyrgyz men cry out loud, outside the *boz oi*, they cry “Oh! My liver!” The woman started seeing a doctor, whom she described as a good man. This doctor gave her some books to read about life after death and instructed to put warm compresses on her eyes, to drink chamomile tea and to take a small dose of iodine (Russ: *yod*) daily. “Poison,” (Russ: *yad*) she had told me in a dark pun. “It’s good to cry,” she said, repeating her doctor’s words, “but it’s possible to cry too much” (Personal notes). In my opinion, this woman’s doctor was a good doctor because he recognized that this woman’s emotional state was taking a toll on her physical body. The woman was capable of expressing her emotional suffering through her
ailments and the doctor was capable of giving attention to her emotional pain through physical treatments. Over time, the woman began to heal and to turn her eyes from the dead to the living.

Certainly the social, financial, and psychological stress of having become a widow took a toll on this woman. After her husband’s death, she began to treat me very differently. She began to separate out our lives. She even stopped sharing meals with me. Our interactions became increasingly tense and our friendship decayed. In retrospect, I believe that it was an inability to properly share in this woman’s grief that made me into a stranger (Personal notes).

The last time I saw her was in a dream of my own. In my dream this woman was sewing a curtain for a wedding. At many Kyrgyz wedding feasts in Naryn the bride is placed in the corner of a room, behind a curtain. The bride wears a scarf and sometimes she is weeping. Female guests enter, kiss the bride, put a white scarf over her head, murmur some kind words and exit. During this time the bride neither eats, nor drinks, nor rests. When not weeping behind the curtain, it is the bride’s duty to help prepare the food and to serve the guests. Nurbek’s sister had commented upon this bitterly, “No one will even put aside a plate of food for her to eat.” (In saying this she also meant “No one put aside a plate of food for me to eat.”)

Thus, in my dream, upon seeing that curtain I said to the woman “Oh! Congratulations! Your daughter is getting married.” I remember that she laughed as she always had laughed when I said something ridiculous. “Oh! Maureen!” she exclaimed, “It is I, not my daughter, who is getting married.” To this day I wonder what this dream meant. Did her husband finally call her into death or did she indeed find a new one among the living? Both interpretations are possible in Kyrgyz understanding as dreams can foreshadow the future or they can mean the opposite of whatever they depict.

4.2 Koshok

The notion that emotion is publicly encoded in discourse, Greg Urban explains, does not require investigation of “discourse by means of which people talk… about emotion.” Rather, it requires an investigation of “the discursive or non-discursive sign vehicles in which the emotion of the moment is lodged, through which it is expressed, and by means of which it is communicated to others” (Urban, 149). I
explore these “sign-vehicles” in the following case of a Peace Corps Volunteer’s visit. It was the volunteer’s first visit to our apartment since a death had occurred in the household. Although I had told him that the woman had been widowed, she had not had the chance to say so herself. As soon as he stepped across the threshold, she greeted him with the news, sobbing. The American reacted with a non-reaction. He did not cry or look startled and said something in Kyrgyz with a sympathetic tone. With those words, the woman’s audible sobbing ceased along with emotional tremors. The tears in her eyes dried up and I was perplexed by the demonstration of control she displayed over her self (Personal notes). In the case of the widow described above, both the other American and I were outside of Urban’s use of the word discourse. We were unable to pick up on the signs, unable to interpret the communications, and worse still, incapable of response.

Urban notes that ritual wailing is “an expressive sign vehicle, designed to communicate affect” (Urban, 152) and that its most “common signal types… (are) the cry break… the voiced inhalation… the creaky voice, and… the falsetto vowel” (Urban, 156). He says that

To make the ritual wailing sign vehicle appear to be expressive of the self, it must encode some of the irregularities that are the hallmark of individuality or natural expression. At the same time, because that expression is so socially standardized, the unique individuality of the ritual wailer is revealed to be like the unique individuality of the overhearer. Overhearers recognize themselves in the ritual wailer (Urban, 169).

And so, the trouble between me and the grieving widow was that I was not capable of recognizing myself in this woman or in her emotion. I believe that communication of grief in such a way is possible only because the sounds, behaviors, texts, and contexts that cumulate in ritual wailing are present in other performative moments. I will now offer two contexts for comparison. One is the *ash* that Farida and I attended. The second is the funeral of my student’s father. In presenting these two cases, I am also offering the reader a chance to see how the individual self plays out in moments of ritual.
4.3 An Ash

As Farida and I walked in, seven women sat inside the boz oi, facing the wall and crying. There was a table in the middle of the boz oi with the same food that I would soon partake in inside the house. I did not touch the food upon the table within the yurt, nor did I observe anyone there doing so. As Farida entered, the women began to make whining sounds. Farida’s daughter-in-law seemed grief-stricken, as I have already described. I noticed two women, huddled under a blanket against the cold, whispering to each other. I couldn’t hear their voices but I saw their heads together and understood they were discussing something.

Within a minute all women had bowed their heads, stilled the motion of their bodies, lost expression on their faces and lowered their eyes. One woman, the daughter-in-law, began to sing a melody. She had a pretty voice, in my opinion, but young and unconfident. The melody was pitched unusually high and I didn’t think anything of it until later when I asked Farida, “Is it true that when many women sing together in the boz oi one is the leader and the others take pitch from her?” “Yes,” Farida had replied, “but among these women here there is no such leader. She [meaning Farida’s daughter-in-law] does not know the melody well and her voice is not so good.” By custom Farida should not say anything good about her daughter-in-law, even if she had an excellent voice, so as not to bring bad luck on her, but in this case I felt that Farida meant exactly what she said.

Farida immediately went to the wall of the boz oi and sang a koshok. Her melody was the same I had taped previously, short and clear with only one or two notes varied in the sequence. After Farida had finished, she got up and left. I followed her and we went to join a memorial feast that was taking place inside the house.

Farida and I entered a large room where the “table” filled the entirety of the floor. People sat around the perimeter with their backs against the wall. Everyone came with a covered head, whether covered by scarf or hat. Men also came to join us, but were quickly asked to go into another room reserved
for their gender. In ordinary time Kyrgyz people do not create separate spaces for separate genders and so it is significant that in the case of mourning all space becomes gendered, even the yurt where a curtain is put up if the dead person is male so that he lies separate from the women in mourning.

As at any feast, platters of meat were served and people divided them amongst themselves as they saw fit. I assumed that certain parts of the animal were given to certain guests according to age and status, as this is what went on in Naryn. Bazarlik (Kyrgyz: Plastic bags filled with food from a feast, especially meat, fat, bread and candy) were also given out. A guest is only expected to eat a small portion of meat at the table. He or she will take home the rest. Often this is the only source of meat or fruit that comes into a household. Throughout the feast, I could faintly hear the women weeping and periodically singing koshok.

At the end of this feast, a man entered and read the Koran. After the Koran was read, I expected to leave as this is what I had done the handful of times I had previously attended such an event. However, Farida took me to a bench placed in a sunny place behind the boz oi. This bench is a place where older people can sit down, rest and warm themselves. We sat for a long time while Farida played quietly with her granddaughter.

While sitting there, I had the chance to observe things that I had not observed before: I noticed that as some women came to the boz oi they covered their eyes with their hands and cried audibly, thus announcing their coming. I learned from Elmira Köchümkulova that when there are a number of women who can sing koshok, the choice of who sings depends on who enters the boz oi. The singer should have a relationship with that person who enters (Köchümkulova, personal communication). In the meantime, men wandered around outside the boz oi or lingered near the gate. In a later conversation Elmira pointed out that the women in the boz oi are not only singing for each other or for the woman who enters but also for the men who are listening outside (Field notes, 2008). I will return to this conversational idea later in a discussion of the death of the hero Kojojash.

Several years before I had met Farida or traveled to Talas, one of my students came to my classroom and said, “Teacher, we won’t attend class today because our classmate’s father has died and at
11 a.m. we will go to the funeral as a class.” That was in Naryn and I asked my students if I could go with them, since this girl was my student as well as their classmate. They told me to meet them in the schoolyard and we walked together as a class to the student’s house. On the way, one of my colleagues, the head teacher for the class, handed me a scarf. I put it on my head, tying it at the nape of my neck so that it covered only my hair and the top of my ears.

When we arrived, the first thing I noticed was the presence of men of all ages near the gate. I remember being overwhelmed by the sheer number of people moving in many different directions. At that time I did not know enough to be able to identify the activities, but based on more recent experiences I can guess that these activities were centered around preparing the table for guests. Preparing a table requires killing, skinning, cutting, and boiling an entire horse, as well as making little tufts of fried bread flat noodles for *beshparmak* (*Kyrgyz*: a dish that is made at the table by mixing noodles, meat and broth, all which have already been served separately) as well as *salat* (*Kyrgyz*: any number of vegetable dishes). In addition, cup after cup of tea must be served, requiring several *samovars* (*Russian*: large metal teapots heated by a thin pipe in which a tiny wood fire is lit). The kitchen is outside of the house, at least for such an event, causing people and objects to be in constant motion between the yard and the house.

The head teacher instructed the students to go in three or four at a time. I entered with her and the assistant director. The moment we stepped across the threshold several *koshoks* began. I remember a voice. It was extremely loud there inside the *boz oi* and confident and strong. It also occupied a lower pitch range. I cannot say with certainty whether this voice that I remember was one woman’s voice or the unified effect of multiple women’s voices. I believe it was the latter. I saw the head teacher’s eyes become very large in those moments as I looked at her for a clue as to what I was supposed to do. We didn’t stay in that *boz oi* longer than a minute. By the time I got my bearings we had already exited.

This sound that I heard and that I cannot describe has stayed with me. It is the sound which I was seeking throughout my research and which I could never find. Not even Farida, with her reputation as the best professional mourner in Talas, could reproduce for me what I had heard at that time. In my research I
talked to a number of people about this and they each gave similar responses: Of course I couldn’t find that sound. What I heard was the intensity of the emotion of at a real death, one which was sudden, unexpected, and in which the pain was still un-tempered by time or acceptance.

The closest sound I have heard to this was the sound of koshok as represented in the film Beshkempir (Abdykalykov, 1998). By pure accident, I met the man who is listed as composer in the credits, Nurlan Nishanov. As it turns out, he is from Naryn. Before I had connected his name to the film, Nishanov told me about a memory he had of his grandmother’s funeral in which he heard “polyphony that worked—I don’t know how it worked, but it did.” Later, when I understood his relationship to the film, I tried to ask him about his composition. He replied that he “simply selected a number of recordings for the studio and they [the studio technicians] mixed them until the sound was right” (Field notes, 2008).

In the minutes following our entrance into the yurt, the time came for the body to be removed from the women who had grieved over it for three days. My ear became conscious of hearing koshok at this time. I saw the head teacher giving instructions to five of our girls. Through her gestures I read “stay near your classmate who is mourning and hold onto her.” This action alerted me that something was about to happen. A moldo and some men entered the yurt. The Koran was read inside and the body was taken out. The women followed the body. Somewhere in the stream of events, the following words were said three times: “If my father owes anyone, I will pay it. If anything is owed to my father, let it be forgiven.” A final prayer was said before the men took the body to the cemetery for burial. My attention was not focused on this event, however, but rather on my students. The student who was in mourning tried to hold onto the body. She didn’t want to let her father leave. Her fellow students restrained her from throwing herself onto the body. They comforted her as she broke into weeping.

I asked Farida about this. She said this is not a custom and that this girl was acting on her own. All the behaviors which I have described such as facing the wall, crying, lowered eyes, expressionless faces, covering eyes, covering heads, crying out loud, listening, praying and singing koshok are all part of an aesthetic of grief and the acceptable mode of grief’s expression. However, an excess of grief such as
attempting to hold back a corpse from burial, is not. I suggest that, amongst the Kyrgyz, like the Pashtun women described by Grima, “propriety depends on (1) correct amount of emotion display; (2) correct voice, gesture, and manner of delivery; and (3) correct context…” Extreme suffering can cause a person to violate propriety, and this too is acceptable in the sense that it is a forgivable transgression.

According to Grima, extreme suffering manifests in violations of *parda*, among Pashtun women, which Grima defines as women’s veiling, seclusion, and modesty (Grima, 39). Grima writes:

> Alef Jen describes her response when she learns that her son got into a car accident: “I struck myself. I beat my head. And I got ready to go with them. I didn’t even think of taking my veil or anything else…” Leaving one’s veil is equivalent to leaving one’s womanhood. Yet again and again it is precisely what women say they do when they are beyond themselves with emotion (Grima, 40).

I suggest that, like the Pashtun women described by Grima, Kyrgyz individuals may also communicate through transgression. As Svetlana Nisharapov recalled her mother’s funeral, she distanced herself from a still painful memory through use of the second person and the lack of direct references: “When you are there, with that body, you make that sound, and yet you have no recollection of what you have done or even that you have done it.” When I repeated these words, Farida answered them with empathy, saying “She must really have been grieving” (Field notes, 2008).

In a final description of an aesthetic of grief, I would like to offer the example of what I defined in chapter 1 as instrumental *koshok*. Svetlana told that once upon a time, the son of a powerful leader died. No one knew how to tell this man that his son had died. The people feared for the messenger’s life, and so, amongst themselves they selected a musician to play a sad melody while everyone sat, *heads bowed, eyes lowered, and faces stilled*... (Field notes, 2008). This story presents the origins of a purely instrumental *koshok*, a form frequently depicted in film and still used over television and radio for national tragedies. When these melodies are played, the singer’s face is expressionless. This is very different than other *komus* performances, which are typically quite animated, with a lot of interaction between the performer and his or
her audience. *Koshok* performances of this sort are typically aired in black in white, recalling what I said earlier about grief affecting even the color of the artist’s palette.

The day after an earthquake devastated a village in the south of Kyrgyzstan in 2008, such performances replaced regular programming. Commercials and “filler footage” were replaced by clips from Soviet-era films and documentaries that showed expressions of shock, horror, pain, and weeping alongside footage of the tragedy. These images seemed to mirror the viewer’s expression back to himself. They also served to show the viewer that something horrible had occurred, without the directness of words. Finding an indirect way to informing a person about a loved one’s death is still a matter of courtesy and tact. It is possible that the *komus* as a weeping instrument, in combination with such non-verbal signs, could inform about a death in a more refined fashion than a weeping individual. When I retold Kaybila Ulu’s words to Tazibek in the hope of enlightenment, Tazibek offered no explanation but nodded in agreement saying, “The one who told you that understands *komus*.”

4.4 Ambiguity

No matter how pervasive the aesthetic of grief may be, the emotion itself is ambiguous and this is in part why I have chosen the word “aesthetic” to describe grief: the mourner may or may not feel that which she outwardly expresses. This is evidenced by moments of pretense in which it is clear that the mourner is acting and in moments of incongruity in which the mourner makes a quick change in her affective state or momentarily steps out of what seems to be an all-consuming grief. I came across one such example when the *ash* was finished and Farida’s daughter-in-law walked us to our car. As I opened the door to the car, she stood where her face could be seen only by Farida and me. In that space, her eyes came back to life. She looked at me, smiled and said, “Thanks for coming” (Field notes, 2008). The change in this woman’s mannerisms in no way negates the embodiment of grief that she displayed in the *boz oi*. It simply complicates the connection between emotion and behavior.
Farida had shed silent tears while performing *koshok* for me and my camera. Farida’s performance had caused me to feel guilty for bringing up such raw and difficult emotion in an elderly woman. After the performance I asked Farida if she was okay and if she needed a break. Farida wiped her eyes and smiled: “A bit of artistry is needed [in performing *koshok*]” (Field notes, 2008). Thus the sincerity of her performance lay not in an ability to feign grief, but rather in an ability to communicate grief in such a way that, I, the listener, became affected.

At a social gathering for U.N. workers, I heard one young Kyrgyz man criticize the practice of *koshok*. He said that he felt sorry for his mother and his sisters because it is hard on them to force themselves to weep. He said in doing so they become physically and emotionally exhausted (Field notes, 2008). This man’s complaints clued me in to another possibility that the mourner’s expression of grief may cause her to feel grief, at least for the time that she is performing it. This idea is similar to one put forth by Mahmood, who proposes that “bodily behavior does not simply stand in relationship of meaning to self and society, but it also endows the self with certain kinds of capacities that provide the substance from which the world is acted upon” (Mahmood, 27). She uses this assumption to look at a piety movement among Egyptian women in which “women learn to analyze the movements of the body and soul in order to establish coordination between inner states (intentions, movements of desire and thought, etc.) and outer conduct (gestures, actions, speech, etc.)” (Mahmood, 31). Mahmood proposes that the wearing of the veil is just one aspect of these many “somatic modes of attention” which serves to create a feminine space.

When a woman performs *koshok* in a *boz oi*, a number of barriers between herself and the external word are established. First, she is veiled emotionally through her lack of response and embodiment of grief. Second, she wears a scarf on her head. Third, she faces a wall so that only her back is seen by those who enter. Fourth, she sits within a *boz oi* into which only women should enter. *Koshok* is that which exists within this space and which travels out of it to the ears of the listeners. In a way, the woman has extended both her body and her voice.
With this process of veiling and extension in mind, I would like to look at a piece of a Kyrgyz epic, the *Epic of Kojojash*. The characters of epics are larger than life and so are the events and dialogues in which these characters participate. Usually a *koshok* is sung for the dead who are absent and who cannot answer back from death. Saeed Honarmand observed that typically *koshok* is “the end [edge] of Discourse” and “an echo” back to the performer and listeners (Honarmand, personal communication). In the story of Kojojash, however, due to a twist in the plot, *koshok* is sung for an individual who is still living. This enables that individual to give his response and, for the purposes of this thesis, it allows me to demonstrate a view of *koshok* as a dialogue between the living and the dead.

4.5 The Death of Kojojash

*The Death of Kojojash*, translated by Elmira Köchümkulova, portrays Kojojash, a hunter, caught on a precipice. He is unable to get down except through suicide and it is implied that if he stays at such heights, the crows will pick him apart as carrion. Kojojash came into his fate through the revenge of a mother goat whose mate and children he had killed while hunting the previous year. In this section of the epic, Kojojash’s father, Karpbay, begins to lament his son’s fate.

Realizing he was losing his own son
[Karpbay] said his words of wisdom:
“At the time when I got old,
You couldn’t bury me with your own hands…
Oh my dear hunter [son]…
You’ll die on the cliff and
I’ll die suffering your loss…
You’re my hope which gives me strength…
My only born child, my foal…
I want to circle around your eyes [to fly to him]…
You hunted leopards, tigers, and lions…
I still remember, my son,
All your service that you did…
My light, lighting up two homes…
Who will be the husband, my son,
Of your wife Zulayka…
To whom will I tell my sorrow?…
Subject-wise Karipbay’s words follow the formula for *koshok*. He faults his son for an untimely death, brings up fond memories of his son, praises his son through affectionate names and describes the way in which the world now is lacking due to his loss. It would be interesting to know whether or not a *koshok* melody is used in the performance of this portion of the epic. Karipbay swoons from emotion and Kojojash, concerned for his father’s well-being also responds with an answering lament. I believe that Kojojash’s answer constitutes a last request. Kaybila Ulu told Köchümkulova and me that last requests can also be sung, but he did not say for whom or on what occasion. Kojojash says:

Don’t wail saying that your son
Has no luck upon his forehead.
I’ll tell your… kinsmen
They should take care of you…
My extraordinary one, Zulayka
Don’t marry another man…

After an internal struggle, Kojojash throws himself to his death and according to the epic his wife, Zulayka:

Wept in sorrow and mourned,
...With her five fingernails,
Zulayka scratched off her face.
If she hadn’t scarred her face,
People would have said she wasn’t mourning…

This episode is interspersed with Zulayka’s own *koshok* in which she describes her husband’s death and her sorrow. Using almost the exact same words as Aitmatov’s Aizada, she says” [God] has created me in this way, [an] ill-fated and miserable person… Instead of marrying the hunter, I should have lived a normal life....” Grima records very similar words said by Pashtun women as these women tell the narratives of their own lives. According to Grima, such narratives display a predominant emotion of sorrow and a value of suffering which are wrapped up in honor for both men and women.

In an email response to an inquiry about the use of *koshok* in Kojojash, Köchümkulova responded:

…in real case situations, there is no dialogue between the dead and the live relatives, however, in oral tradition as well as in written literary works, it is possible… among the Kyrgyz it is not good to start lamenting the person who has not died yet… However, my mother told her experience of her father’s funeral. She said that when
she was singing lamentation about her father, she felt as if her father, who was lying before her behind the curtain, was listening to what she was saying/singing about him. In other word, she was having an internal dialogue with him believing that his spirit was not dead…

I believe that the perception of koshok as a dialogue between living and dead, as demonstrated in this account as well as in the epic of Kojojash, is the most important aspect of the genre. I will begin the next chapter with the mention of a silent koshok, which is defined as such only because it does indeed participate in such a conversation.

4.6 Acting Outside the Aesthetic

In reading about the death of Kojojash and his wife’s subsequent mourning, I wonder whether a woman scratching her face in the throes of grief would be an acceptable expression of her suffering or method of catharsis. That which is acceptable changes. In present day Kyrgyzstan, women do not scratch their faces, nor should they throw themselves on the body, nor should they cry too much. The presence of an observer, that is, a person who is not there to participate in the process of grief, is met with unease and the use of cameras and other recording devices are still under negotiation.

Someone on our street died my second day of research. We knew about it because we could see that a funeral yurt had been put up. Men were sitting and standing around outside the threshold of the house, and women were coming and going. I asked Nurbek’s family if I could approach these neighbors after some time had passed. Svetlana immediately asked me not to do that saying that they [the Nisharapov family] were “too new.” The Nisharapovs didn’t know people well and they wanted to create a good reputation for themselves. Svetlana said that “if we were in Naryn, [where both she and I are known] we could most certainly go and sit [in the funeral yurt].” Tunuk added that no one would give me permission to film a funeral. Even if they wanted to they wouldn’t because it would seem to others that, by allowing me to record, they were engaging in some activity other than grieving (Field notes, 2008).

A few weeks later, I noticed that Svetlana and Bakay were preparing to go somewhere. “Where are they going?” I asked Nurbek. He whispered, “They are going to pray [for the dead with another
family." I suspect that his parents understood that this activity would have been of interest to me and that they wanted to avoid the awkward situation of my asking to accompany them. As I tried to make sense of a behavior I found strange, I thought that perhaps I was not as close to the family as they had led me to believe. Having had more time to reflect, I think that this behavior had nothing to do with my relationship to the family but rather with my lack of relationship to the deceased or those in mourning.

One morning Nurbek’s sister told me “My mother is a professional mourner.” Svetlana dropped her eyes, a gesture I understood as a refusal to participate in the conversation. Tunuk continued, “I could be a professional mourner too, if I practice at night.” At those words Nurbek burst into laughter and that laughter played through all the tension that was in the room. I was the source of this tension as I, in my quest to know and understand koshok, had brought an unspeakable subject to the surface of conversation.

On another occasion, the formal reception of a groom’s family into a bride’s household, I noticed a man filming and taking pictures at all the same moments as myself. After checking to make sure he was a hired professional, I asked him whether he only filmed only weddings and other celebrations or whether funerals were also in his line of work. He said they were. I began to explain my research to this man, asking him if he could help me, either by allowing me to accompany him while on a shoot or by letting me look through some of his tapes. He said his company never keeps any footage from funerals in their archives because it’s considered an ill omen. I explained further saying that I was really just looking for the sound and footage of a live koshok. He suggested that I just film secretly. I replied that I preferred not to do that. The camera man then said that he was willing to help me obtain a film but that it was “protif zakon” and he could lose his job or even be “kicked off the land” (pushed out of the town) if it was known. He said that people would perceive him as abusing their grief (Field notes, 2008). It was clear to me that the camera man was waiting for an offer of money, but at the same time, I guessed that he was describing a real situation which only substantial reimbursement would make worth his while. At that moment I understood his use of protif zakon to mean “against the law.” Tunuk corrected my understanding. She said: “It’s not
against the governmental law. It’s against the people’s sense of right and wrong… We throw stones at such people. We can bury them in stones. iv"

In later weeks, when I attended the ash mentioned in the first paragraph, Farida gave me the following instructions: “Don’t record. Just sit and experience for yourself.” She had also said, “if you had no choice, you can record but do it in such a way that no one notices.” I had lived in Kyrgyzstan long enough to know that I would be told “Do what you will,” but that either good or bad words would be spoken about me depending on my choices. This is one of the methods of testing character. v Case in point, Farida’s son, asked me after the ash, “Did you record anything?” “No,” I answered. He replied with a toothless smile “That was correct!” As we left Farida also gave her approval by saying “They taught you well in Naryn.”

A counterargument to the statements made by Farida, Nurbek’s family, and the camera man may be found in the work of Elmira Köchümkulova, mentioned previously. Köchümkulova has filmed laments in a boz oi in which she herself was grieving for a dead relative. In this case, Köchümkulova has the advantage of being one of the mourners, with full knowledge of social norms and discussions of Kyrgyz and Muslim identity within which she is capable of explaining and rationalizing her actions both to herself and to her relatives. Köchümkulova commented to me that she made her film only after the fortieth day of mourning. She said that the main reason for this was that she was expected to perform koshok and could not perform and film simultaneously (Köchümkulova, personal communication). I am disinclined to believe this. As an insider, Köchümkulova is more bound by communal expectations than I. I believe that Köchümkulova did not film during the three days before burial on account of personal emotions in reaction to a family member’s death as well as from a sense of propriety and a respect for the grief of the other family members who were also in mourning.

4.7 Discussions Surrounding Custom
A discussion presented in *A Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years* demonstrates the divergent views surrounding the value, meaning, and function of koshok. In introducing the character of Aizada in the second chapter of his novel, Aitmatov depicts a scene similar to the one I witnessed with Farida while attending the *ash*. Although no *boz oï* has been built, Aizada announces her arrival with weeping and her entry into the house triggers a reaction from the other women which eclipses all attempts by Yedegei to offer comfort:

Aizada and her husband arrived on a passing train to attend her father’s funeral. She announced her arrival with a loud wailing, and at once the women surrounded her and a chorus of weeping started up. Ukubala [Yedegei’s wife] was especially affected, grieving together with Aizada; she was sorry for her. They wept bitterly and lamented, Yedigei tried to comfort Aizada… but (she) would not be comforted.

The aesthetic surrounding expressions of grief that I described throughout the chapter is given life through the character of Aizada, for whom

the death of her father opened the floodgates, giving her a reason to bare her soul before everyone… to say all those things which had long been bottled up… Weeping loudly, all disheveled and with tear swollen eyes, she deplored her fate… complaining to her dead father that no one understood or appreciated her, that her life had been unhappy from her youth… her husband did not lift a finger, just sat there, confused and looking sad…

Aizada’s *mankurt* brother offers an argument against her behavior. He calls upon an image of *koshok* that does exist in Kyrgyzstan, but which belongs to what I defined as accompanied *koshok* in the first chapter (which will be further discussed in chapter 5). In this case, Sabitzhan has not forgotten or abandoned tradition, but he has confused its contexts.

Sabitzhan began to chide his sister: what sort of behavior was this? Had she come to bury her father or to disgrace herself? … Had not the great grief of Kazakh women been the inspiration of legend and song for their descendents for hundreds of years? …By mourning, praise was given to the dead and all his qualities and achievements offered up to the heavens… And she? She had just wailed out an orphan’s tale of woe…

Aizada reacted to Sabitzhan by saying

…you could try teaching your own wife a thing or two first!…Why hasn’t she come and shown us this supreme grief?… (Aitmatov, 38-39).
Through the conversation between Sabitzhan and Aizada, Aitmatov presents differing views concerning the purpose of koshok, the type of performance involved, and the “appropriateness” of the tradition. Aitmatov has represented a larger social debate very accurately. I found representatives of both sides of this larger social debate in the field. One was a moldo, the neighbor of Nurbek’s eldest brother, Simik. Like Sabitzhan, the moldo described koshok as “unnecessary hysterics.” The moldo also claimed that this tradition goes against an understanding in Islam that there was no need to cry over death (Field notes, 2008). The other was Farida who used a similar logic to support a different point. She claimed that Islam prohibits an excess of crying and went on to say that this is why koshok is sung [in the place of crying] (Field notes, 2008).

Elmira Köchümkulova has picked up on the tension between ideas about Islam and ideas about Kyrgyz customs. In her dissertation Köchümkulova describes elderly women who refuse to stop performing koshok when a moldo arrives in the boz oi. While the moldo reads Koran, the women continue their koshok. Köchümkulova theorizes this as a gendered struggle between the male authority of the Koran and a female un-Islamic or pagan Kyrgyz ritual (Köchümkulova, 191) and this seems a reasonable interpretation of the performance that Köchümkulova participated in. Köchümkulova’s written interpretation implies that the reading of the Koran is somehow foreign to ritual lamenting.

This is true in the sense that koshok, or something resembling koshok, may have been performed before the arrival of Islam. Tensions between two opposing traditions may be played out in the sounds of mourning and yet, it is also possible that the tension between the reading of the Koran and koshok is also a tension between acceptance and grief. Despite the independent origins of these two sounds, that is the sound of prayer and the sound of koshok, I believe that these sounds need each other in their present ritual functions. In order to support this conjecture more fully, I would need to spend a long time sitting in boz oi and listening to the way in which these two sounds come together. One detail that supports this interpretation is that as ritual time progresses, neither sound ceases. I mean to say that both performance
and reading of the Koran have a place throughout a year of mourning. As time progresses the tension
between the two sounds relaxes, and both sounds find a peaceful and parallel coexistence.

4.8 Changing Ethnicity

One inherent assumption in both my fieldwork and in Aitmatov’s portrayal is these customs are
Kyrgyz and therefore are passed through families. An exceptional case, however, seems to render
problematical the pairing of ethnicity with blood relationships. When I was living in Naryn, a Russian
woman died. Her last request was very unusual and was met with surprise, shock, and acceptance by some
and resistance and disbelief by others: This woman had requested to be buried as a Muslim. No one knows
why she did this and her daughter did not want to honor her mother’s request. She felt that she could not
properly grieve for her mother in a tradition that was foreign to her. The daughter had left for Russia fifteen
years before and she came back for the first time only when she received word that her mother was dying.
The son, however, had never been outside of Kyrgyzstan and had never lived anywhere but with his
mother. He insisted that their mother be buried as she had asked. The primacy the son gave to a dying
person’s last request is compatible with a Kyrgyz way of understanding.

As the son and I were good friends, I was present throughout the final stages of his mother’s
illness. Their house was very small consisting of a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom. The mother slept
in the living room and whichever child was on duty slept near her on the floor. I and the off-duty sibling
slept in the small bedroom. I was the first one to realize that she was dead. Although I was by no means
bound by Kyrgyz custom, I could not make myself wake him to tell the son that his mother had stopped
breathing and so I waited for the lack of her breathing to wake him as it had me. It did.

The first thing we did was call his mother’s good friend, an elderly Kyrgyz woman and this
woman became our teacher and guide. I believe it was she who washed the body and prepared it for burial.
Television and radio were silenced, as custom strictly dictates, and both men and women covered their
heads, myself included. A moldo was called, a sheep was sacrificed, debts were released, and the Koran
was read. When the men went to bury the body, the women prepared for the constant stream of guest who would begin to arrive in order to honor the dead through prayer and tasting our table’s meat and bread.

I remember that when the son returned from burying his mother, he made the same okuru (Kyrgyz: crying out loud) that I have heard Kyrgyz men make as they return from digging the grave and burying the dead. In the following weeks, the son also made a simple marker for his mother upon which he painted his mother’s name using the Kyrgyz patronymic rather than the Russian (ie. Aleksey kizi versus Alekseyevna). Thus the mother’s identity was changed through the inscription of her name. The identity of her son was also changed through his participation in his mother’s last request. Many people stopped me in the street to ask, “Is it true that [the son] has become Muslim?” and many Kyrgyz people commented that this son was “certainly a good man” and “one of us” because he knew and respected Kyrgyz custom as well as the language.

These actions also caused talk among the dwindling Russian community. One evening the small handful of Russian families still remaining in Naryn also came to offer their respects. We served them tea as they would be accustomed to when entering any Kyrgyz household. One young man, also a close friend to the son, came but refused to drink, saying “Russians don’t drink tea at funerals.” vi With these words the young man fused custom, religion, and ethnic identity. His refusal to drink tea, like a refusal to nan os tey (Kyrgyz: lit. taste bread), is a grave insult to hospitality that can cause the total severing of social ties. In this case, that is exactly what happened.
Figure 7: Reading the Koran in honor of the dead. I am furthest to the right. Beside me is the son of the Russian woman whose story was described. Beside this man is the moldo. The gesture depicted is Bata and when hands held as such pass over the face, this gesture becomes Omin. Maureen Pritchard 2003.

The case that has been presented here demonstrates that ethnicity may be defined by custom. Participation in custom involves not only the participation in the same types of behavior, but also the same feelings and the same understandings. Participation in a performance of koshok, whether as performer or listener, is colored by a participant’s willingness and ability to partake in a larger system, to understand how this one form of behavior, koshok, “makes sense” with other forms of behavior and how the logic behind koshok performance “fits with” a larger social logic, such the knowledge presented through stories in chapter 3. Like myth as presented in chapter 3, the signs of grief are present in multiple places from events to stories to art-film and this multiplicity makes tradition fertile. In Chapter 5, I will invite koshok to become a discussant on this fertility.
Grima also conceives of an aesthetic of Gham (grief) in The Performance of Emotion among Paxtun Women. Grima’s description focuses more on conceptual aspects, such as honor and propriety, whereas I focus more on performative aspects (i.e. posture, sound). However, both Grima and I have chosen the word aesthetic because it gets at an idea of coherency between the details that create an overall quality, in this case, grief.

Since commercials are few, spaces between programs are frequently filled with footage of landscapes, different locals, or nature scenes with an accompanying instrumental soundtrack.


She used the phrase “Kyrgyz Sharia.” Sharia usually refers to Koranic Law but in this context she has given it a new meaning to refer to an unwritten and un-formalized moral code. It could also refer to the Aksel Courts. Aksel Courts are an unofficial “people’s” court that, in theory, existed prior to Soviet times. These courts have no written law.

In another instance, Svetlana Nisharapov had bought a new thermos so that we could have tea when there is no electricity. As the youngest unmarried woman, making tea was my job. I was used to the old thermos whose cap had to be taken off every time and it wasn’t until a few days of use that I realized I didn’t need to take off the cap, I could just pour. After realizing this, I said, laughing at myself and teasing Svetlana “Well look at that! And you knew all along that I could just have been pouring, but you never said a word!” With a dead seriousness that made me squirm internally Svetlana replied. “I’ve been testing your skill in observation.”

He is implying that Russians honor the dead with vodka.

In “The Cultural Analysis of Depressive Affect,” Schieffelin critiques a view that categories of feelings are universal. According to Schieffelin, not only is the communication of feeling constructed by the larger social system, but so are the ways in which feeling is felt. In Schieffelin’s view therapists must adapt diagnosis categories as well as treatments accordingly.
Whereas in the last chapter, I introduced Kojojash in order to talk about the function of koshok as a dialogue between the living and the dead, in this chapter I begin with Kojojash so as to return to the topic of discursive myth as source of knowledge and understanding. In the story of Kojojash introduced in chapter 4, the hero had a chance to take a blessing from Sur Eçki, a magical goat, by sparing her mate.\textsuperscript{i} Sur Ecki pleads with the hero, saying:

\begin{verbatim}
Hunter, you have killed all the kids,
    My heart is torn apart by this.
Now that all my kids are gone,
    In the wilderness alone,
How can I live by myself?
    I’m your true mother kayberen\textsuperscript{ii}
I have a request from you.
If your heart agrees,
    Even if he is old, please leave
My partner Alabash teke alive…. 
May you have a long life,
    My famous, master hunter…
You’re your father’s only child,
    You will never see any misfortune
For I, kayberen, will bless you...
\end{verbatim}

(http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/culture/epic/kojojash/kojojash07.html)

Despite the pleas of the magical goat, Kojojash did not spare her mate and he brought both the meat and the hide home to his own people. Kojojash did, however, agree to catch Sur Eçki with his hands, rather than with a gun, the following spring. In so doing he had unwittingly sealed his fate. She tricked him and he received the above blessing in its exact opposite, a curse. The motif of a hunter who is either blessed or cursed by his prey is a common motif in Kyrgyz stories. Such a motif points to a perception of strong ties between human and animal.

K. Imanaliev tells another story of a hunter who is cursed by his prey:

Once upon a time two hunters lived: Karamyrza and Asan. One day they were hunting in the woods of Alamyshyk in Naryn and saw a horned woman with a child among deer on the pasture. They decided to kill
one of the deer and shot. Then they heard the cry. It appeared they shot a child who was playing near the deer. The horned woman pronounced the swear which became true very soon “Let Karamyrza have no more descendents after the third generation. Let Asan’s descendents never reach a hundred in number, but if they do, let them not live through the autumn (K. Imanaliev, 88).

This story was presented by K. Imanaliev in a discussion of curses and it clearly points to the power of the word, as discussed in chapter 3, to uphold or sever ties and to come true upon being spoken.

According to Nurbek’s sister, Tunuk, Aitmatov also retold a similar story that was then depicted in the Kyrgyz-language film Bugu Ata:

The enemies of the Kyrgyz waited for a funeral and then, when everyone was in mourning, they struck. They killed all the Kyrgyz except for two children, a boy and a girl. These two children were found by a mother deer whose own children had also been killed by hunter. This deer nursed the children and raised them… (Field notes, 2008).

After briefly summarizing the story, Tunuk made her own analysis in which she linked animal to human through the kinship tie of “clan” and offered an interesting detail of a custom of decorating a grave with antlers:

My mother’s family came from the children raised by this deer… In my mind it is wrong that in Issuk-Kul they [people from the deer clan] put deer antlers on graves…. (Field notes, 2008).

(I have not witnessed this practice myself.) Tunuk’s commentary expresses a feeling of respect and responsibility to that animal who is her mythical relative. In light of the repeated elements of animal and hunter, and deer in particular, the koshok that Svetlana related to me in story form acquires a richer meaning:

There was a hunter whose wife had made new boots, pants, and a jacket for their young son out of the deer’s skin because that was what they had. One day their son followed his father when he went hunting. The hunter did not expect another human to be around and so when he saw the skin, he assumed it was a deer. He shot and the deer fell. When he went to take his prey, he saw that it was his own son. From his grief, a koshok came out (Field notes, 2008).

Svetlana had told me this story in order to illustrate that koshok is a sound that comes from grief. At the time of her telling I was not yet aware of the hunter motif. Something about the story, however, struck me
as legend-like, and so I asked her, “Remember the koshok you told me about, about the father who thought
his son was a deer... was that a myth or a legend?” “No,” she answered. “It’s true. I heard it [the koshok]
myself.” In a place like Naryn, where hunting is a known and accepted profession, such a tragedy is
possible. Nonetheless, I felt that I had been told an un-truth. Troubled that I could not tell what was real and
what was fiction, I brought the situation to the scholar Margaret Mills, saying, “She told me a story and
said it was true, that she heard it herself.” Mills replied matter-of-factly, “That’s what stories are for!”

With those words I realized that right here, in this story about a koshok, I had an example of a
discursive process, that is, I had an example of the way in which stories are retold in different contexts, for
different purposes, and create new meanings that feed into life’s experience and that are fed by life’s
experiences. I also had an example of the circulation of the same information, through the medium of
stories, in varied forms for varied purposes. That is, the motif in Kojojash, the tale told by K. Imanaliev, the
legend told by Aitmatov, and the koshok all attest to the power that words have and to a special relationship
between human and animal, and yet these stories have differing plots, points, and details. These sources of
knowledge come from different places: the excerpt from Kojojash is coming out of an epic that was recited
out loud; the story told by K. Imanaliev came from an unknown source and was recorded in a book; the
story told by Tunuk was written in a novel, displayed in film and reinforced by the material object of a
grave; the events relayed by Svetlana were heard in a koshok and retold as a story. It is precisely this
process of the connection and circulation of knowledge through varied forms and mediums that I will
emphasize in this chapter.

I will also reconsider and expand the view of koshok that I presented in chapter 1. I first
introduced a view of koshok that was based on details of the performance and its contexts. Throughout my
research I frequently met researchers who emphasized categorization and classification based on tangible
traits of the performers, the context, the text and the sound. Alongside these sorts of views on koshok, with
their tendency to classify knowledge, I also gathered other views from performers and listeners. These
individuals presented a view of koshok that emphasized more abstract qualities of koshok, qualities that are
less tangible in that that they move through the arena of discourse via the processes described in chapter 3 and rely on the spectrum of social behavior described in chapter 4. These views emphasize the discursive function of koshok, its dialogic nature (dialogic refers to an interplay of many voices) and the necessity of grief as both the source of koshok and as the dominant aesthetic quality. In order to re-conceptualize koshok as presented in chapter 1, I have chosen to juxtapose several discussions through which differing views are presented.

5.1 Re-conceptualizing Koshok

In Bishkek, I spoke with a woman who worked with the Ustad Shaiir School, a music school funded by the Aga Khan Development Network which enables talented students to train under gifted musicians and craftsmen so as to continue both the art of playing and of creating instruments. This woman was not of Kyrgyz ethnicity, but she was native to Kyrgyzstan. She worked at the conservatory and after I told her about my research she offered a useful overview of koshok as a musical genre. She presented this to me, she said, in the same fashion as she offered it to her students. The main points in her lecture were as follows:

There are two types of koshok, male and female. The melody “goes and goes.” One woman starts. This woman is the most experienced. All the other koshoks come off of this woman’s lead. Koshoks are passed from mother to daughter. They have no set structure. Polyphony and dissonance occur because each woman starts at her own starting point…There is only one koshok [an unheard ideal] and which all [heard] koshoks are variants of [this ideal] (Field notes, 2008).iii

Before ending our session, I asked her what exactly the Ustad-Shaiir school did. She answered that it served “to preserve Kyrgyz traditions [musical traditions] and to turn them into a modern view.” From my own knowledge of the Aga Khan Music initiative, I understood modern to mean marketable on one hand and sustainable on the other. Since Kyrgyz consumers do not have much disposable income, Kyrgyz music and its traditions must be made marketable to those people and organizations who sponsor “world music” and “traditional culture.” On the other hand, Kyrgyz music cannot continue unless Kyrgyz people choose to
continue it, and so the Ustad-Shaiir school offers affordable classes and instruments for young people who are willing to learn from an experienced musician.

Figure 8: A komus-in-progress in the Ustad-Shaiir workshop, Maureen Pritchard 2008.

This woman, whom I consider an (ethno)musicologist, recommended that I find Artik Suyundikov, a film director who, at the time of my field research worked at Manas University in Bishkek, on the Jal Campus. Suyundikov has produced a film called Koshokju (The Professional Mourner). The basic plot of this film, according to its makers, is that of a man who, like Aitmatov’s mankurt, “repressed” (executed) his own father. Years later, when this man knows that he is dying, he calls a koshokju and asks
her to perform koshok for him at his death. She cannot refuse and yet she knows that this man has killed his own father and this knowledge weighs heavily on her. When he dies, she intends to perform koshok, but finds herself unable to do it. She gets up and walks out of the boz oi. Her apprentice is forced to take up the performance instead. According to Talip Ibrahimov, the author of the screen play, the final scene of the film is intended to be satire since the koshok praises the worth of a man who performed horrible acts. The woman’s blatant refusal to grieve, demonstrated in her walking out of the boz oi rather than performing koshok, reduces the man who has died to a non-human status. The force of such a severe statement is softened, however, by the second woman who takes up the koshok instead.

Although I did not see this film myself, as Suyundikov had no copy to offer me for viewing, I did read the scenario which Ibrahimov kindly offered. In the meantime, both Suyundikov and Ibrahimov were willing to talk with me about the process of making a film about koshok and their personal views on the tradition. According to Suyundikov, he had, not unlike myself, spent a long time looking for women who could perform koshok and who would be willing to teach an actress. Both men agreed that for a koshokju, the performance of koshok is a ritual, an art, a craft, and a way of earning extra income. As reflected in the plot of the film, Suyundikov believes koshok to be a way of praising the dead. When I asked him whether or not he thought that this tradition was dying out he replied, “No, not at all! Rather, it’s growing.” This statement was exactly the opposite of statements made to me by the Nisharapovs and Farida who feel that the performance of koshok is fading. Suyundikov explained his view by saying that in the past, koshok was only said for great men, but now, any ordinary person could have a koshok sung for him. Ibrahimov added that “this was all just a way of reinventing the past.” His words imply that present-day performances of koshok are not a timeless tradition, but something rather new that perhaps links to something very old.

In contrast to the views of the (ethno)musicologist, film director and screenplay writer, who view koshok as a specific, that is categorizable, item, Svetlana presents a view of koshok that calls all
categorization into question and emphasizes the participation of koshok within the a larger genre of grief. I believe that her view is expressed in the following examples.

Svetlana called to me from the living room where she sat ironing and watching television.

“Maureen! Come quickly! It’s a koshok! Bring your recorder!” I did. The Kyrgyz-language channel was showing a film called Ogon Iri (Kyrgyz: Eternal Flame) written and performed by Roza Amanova. I considered this clip to be “pop,” but I was the only listener making this distinction. Svetlana and her family seemed to see this sound as but one of the many possibilities for music happening in the Kyrgyz language. Thus “Kyrgyz” music was defined, for them at least, by language rather than by some other attributes of sound, voice, or instrumentation.

In Ogon Iri Roza Amanova plays a woman whose only son becomes a soldier. The son is killed in the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan. Throughout the song, the woman retells the story of her son’s death, her memories of him and the pain of his loss. The film begins with the image of a Kyrgyz mother, an older woman in a white scarf. She sees her son to the gate of the yard and gives him a final hug before he leaves. This image is returned to over and over again, interwoven with other scenes: an image of mother and son laughing; an image of mother awakening from a bad dream, her scarf askew; an image of her son’s photograph burning; an image of a bird falling out of the sky; images of planes and fighting.

Amidst all these images, there is a scene in which the mother is informed by three other women that her son has died. The mother drops the water bucket she had been carrying and begins to cry out. Overcome by grief, she is no longer capable of standing on her own two feet and the other women must support her. This image is also repeated multiple times. As discussed in chapter 4, the woman’s reaction of crying out is a standard signal for grief, whereas her inability to stand is an extreme reaction that is acceptable in the understanding that her grief is also extreme.

The film shows a white coffin being delivered to the mother. When this image came up, Svetlana commented that the narrator complains that she is unable to bury her son the way he should be buried. The mother should wash the body of her son before mourning begins and then again, three days later before
burial. Svetlana explained that when bodies came back from the Afghan conflict it was forbidden to open coffins. She said this was because the body might have been mangled or missing parts; it might have been the wrong body or there might have been no body and so it was better not to open the coffin. Although the mother is capable of expressing her grief, it is painful for her not to be able properly tend to her son in his death by following the protocols of burial.

The clip closes with an image of the singer-mother standing before a memorial to the soldiers who have died in Afghanistan. This image is followed by an image of the song’s melody, appearing, note by note, on a blank page of staff-paper. Like Svetlana’s story of the hunter who mistook his son for a deer, the purpose of this image is to state that this koshok has grown out of all the sorrows that have been depicted in word and images throughout the clip.

The melody of the song is in the minor mode with a short, driving refrain. Musically, it is more song-like than lament-like, having a wide pitch range and using dramatic changes in volume and tempo. The singer’s voice is accompanied by a komus and the sounds of warplanes and shelling are incorporated into the music. Afterwards, Svetlana said, “The music is just heart-rending. I can hardly stand to listen to it….” She then goes on to advise me: “You can compare what Farida sings to this clip. You can say life moves ahead and music moves ahead. People [Kyrgyz people] no longer pull out their hair and cover their faces in dirt. That was in the 12th Century. This is the 21st [century]- life is moving ahead. Life doesn’t stay in one place and neither does music” (Field notes, 2008).

Through Svetlana’s proposal that Ogon Iri be viewed as a koshok, it is possible to see that koshok is not to be limited by the type of melody, the style of performance or the medium of performance. Ogon Iri demonstrates that koshok is a performance genre that can offer social, as well as personal commentary. After all, sons have not ceased to die in Afghanistan. Their stories, and others, borne by koshoks, serve as narratives through which individuals can relate to one another and through which they can find companionship in sorrow and in a sense of shared, yet individual, experience.
Svetlana furthered her view of koshok as a dialogue that has its source in grief through a second example. She told me that her father-in-law wrote a koshok upon his wife’s death. According to the koshok he had not been able to be there with his wife when she died nor did he even realize that she was sick, and so he felt a great guilt when she died. Svetlana said that she had found the koshok by chance in her relative’s house and that she had stolen it because “they were uneducated people and would never read that notebook. In their hands such a thing would be lost, used as scrap paper, or thrown away.” Unstated by Svetlana is the same value explored in chapter 3 of things belonging to the dead, of the stories of the past and of a connection to history. Svetlana said that her husband did not know his own mother’s story until he read his father’s koshok. She said that when he read it, he wept.

At my request, Svetlana gave me the koshok to copy by hand. I asked her if I could I take that koshok to Farida and ask her to sing it. Svetlana paused before replying. “You can take it, but I don’t think she can sing it. It is a koshok made to be read silently, not one to be sung out loud.” In this way Svetlana indicated to me that this written koshok used different structural formulae than that of a koshok that is performed out loud.

I asked Farida whether or not there could be such a thing as a silent koshok, explaining to her what I knew about the one that Svetlana’s father-in-law wrote. Farida discussed a moment with her daughter in Kyrgyz and I understood that they were trying to decide if this would be considered koshok or something more akin to poetry. In the end Farida answered, “I would consider it koshok because it has the elements of koshok: it arises from the bitterness of grief and it tells about the relationship between the father and his wife, as well as the situation of her death.” Thus with the help of Farida and Svetlana, I move my conceptualization of koshok from one which emphasizes taxonomy and formal qualities to one that emphasizes inter-relationships and emotional content.

5.2 Koshok for Chingiz Aitmatov
Chingiz Aitmatov died in June of 2008, only a few months before I arrived for fieldwork, and his death was still very much on everyone’s mind, from shepherds to taxi drivers to school teachers to government officials. Some people, such as Patia Bakierevna, the head of the Russian department at Luxembourg School (Luxembourg is a village just outside of Bishkek) are concerned that, in a nation where there are so few models of great men, not enough is being done to recognize Chingiz Aitmatov. Patia’s concern displays a need for providing future generations with models through whose example values can be taught and lessons can be learned. Like the Akaev-led government, which declared 2002 “The year of Manas,” the Bakiev-led government has declared 2009 “The year of Chingiz Aitmatov.” As I was preparing to depart, Patia was preparing her students to greet the year of Chingiz Aitmatov. One step in this preparation was the showing of a film made in memory of Aitmatov’s death, entitled *When Mountains Fall*. In November of 2008, the Department of Education had given one man the task of going from school to school throughout the Chui Region in order to show the film.

As I was not present in Kyrgyzstan at the time of Aitmatov’s death, viewing this film offered me an excellent chance to contextualize two *koshoks* performed in memory of Chingiz Aitmatov. In re-creating my viewing, I am offering the reader the same chance to contextualize the *koshoks* that will be discussed at the end of the chapter. I also offer the reader a chance to compare Aitmatov’s funeral with the funerals of the lesser-known citizens that I described. It may be said that the identity of the Kyrgyz Republic found a momentary culmination in its marking of Aitmatov’s death. Aitmatov’s funeral was a rare moment in which the eyes of the world fell upon the Kyrgyz Republic for a reason other than political instability or concerns over the U.S. air base. With the whole world looking on, the Kyrgyz Republic felt the need to enact Kyrgyz identity in all its contradictions and complexities. Just as a host in a Kyrgyz household will lay out the best candy, butter, meat, and bread when a respected guest comes from afar, so in the moment of Aitmatov’s death did the Kyrgyz government attempt to place its best items on the world stage. As a result, Aitmatov’s funeral is very rich in contradictions that display a combination of Soviet, Muslim, and Kyrgyz customs on a grand-scale.
The auditorium of Luxembourg School, with its wooden chairs and small stage, reminded me of my own high school auditorium. I took a seat in the second row. On all sides, teenagers were laughing, joking, finding seats, saving seats, exchanging information about classes, gossiping, calling out to their friends and showing off the latest pictures on their cell phones. Cell phones were a new addition to the school environment since I had trained there as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the months before I received my permanent assignment in Naryn. The entry of Patia Bakierevna caused a sudden silence. The first thing she said was, “If I hear a single cell phone during the film I will confiscate it and throw it away!” With that assertion of authority, she moved on to say that the students had been called to the auditorium in order to watch a documentary on Chingiz Aitmatov. “Aitmatov was a chelovek (Russian: person) with a capital CH, Patia stated. Her statement was meant to point out the greatness of Chingiz Aitmatov and his importance to the Kyrgyz Republic. She then entreated the students to respect Aitmatov’s memory by viewing the film silently. The lights were then switched off and Patia took a strategic place near the wall from which she would periodically point out aspects of the film for the students’ benefit.

The film was a montage that inter-spliced mass media footage with footage from older films. It opened with footage of Aitmatov’s son and daughter-in-law receiving Chingiz Aitmatov’s body in the Manas Airport when it arrived from Germany. A funeral wreath was also shown, borne by soldiers. The presentation of a funeral wreath is a custom adopted in Soviet times, which is still kept, especially when honoring the death of a person who has served their country. Next came a national address from President Bakiev, who said: “Today, we, along with millions of other readers, lost a lamp.” This particular turn of phrase clearly emphasized the importance of Aitmatov for, without a lamp, the readers of the world were left in the dark, unable to read. Bakiev’s words were followed by a black and white clip that showed a man and woman on horseback. The man and the woman arrived in a place where many people are gathered. No one greeted them. Everyone sat with their heads lowered and silent and I remembered the story that Svetlana told me about a man who played his komus in order to tell another man that his son had died. The woman looked at these people and then at the man. She then began to cry. Her crying, shown in black and
white, was followed by the image of a remarkably large number of men crying out loud. This is the same cry that the Russian woman’s son made (described in chapter 4). The cries of this near-army of men created an enormous sound as they carried Aitmatov’s body to the boz oi that had been prepared for him. It must be understood that although for Aitmatov’s family and friends, Chingiz had died, for the Kyrgyz Republic, Aitmatov had ceased to be his personal self. Aitmatov had become the father of every man, woman and child. In a way, the announcement his death became the announcement of the death of the nation, a nation that still lived and yet who had died and was grieving for itself.

A koshok, sung by female voices, could be heard on the soundtrack. The camera did not go inside the boz oi. It remained respectfully outside, showing that the boz oi remained lit at night. Pieces of black and white films were spliced to complement the sound of koshok and the image of the boz oi. A girl wept. A man wiped tears from his eyes. A man stood, listening. A grown woman cried. All of these are the same images that I have depicted in an attempt to describe components within an aesthetic of grief and all of these images were intended to reflect back upon the Kyrgyz viewer as a mirror image of their own grieving. A man was depicted traveling on a camel, just as Yedegei did in A Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years. The koshok unites these various clips into the story of how “the people” began to travel to join in the mourning of Aitmatov upon received the news of his death. Although Islam dictates that a body be buried immediately, Kyrgyz people have a custom of sitting with the body for three days before its burial. Indeed, so many people came to the wake in order to pay their last respects that Aitmatov was buried after four days, rather than three, and police were stationed to keep the line of mourners orderly and moving.

The film showed men going up to the side of the boz oi to cry out loud. It is clear that there were multiple koshoks being sung by multiple women as different melodies were happening at once and one voice was louder than all the others. Much to my surprise Bakiev entered the boz oi. I wondered why he did that and how people reacted. I wondered whether Bakiev was exempt from rules of male and female space because he was the President and the honor of having such a man enter the boz oi outweighed tradition. I also wondered whether the women still sat with their faces to the wall when Bakiev entered. That is, I
wondered whether the aesthetic of grief dictated that these women should not even care if the president of
their Republic entered the boz oi. I also wondered whether Bakiev went to the women’s side or whether he
joined Aitmatov behind the curtain. Flowers upon flowers stood outside the yurt, as did an enormous
picture of Aitmatov. Presenting flowers at funerals and hanging a portrait is Soviet custom that has been
adopted into the present-day practice in general. However, the size of the portrait and the number of
flowers were proportionate to the death, not of a man, but of a nation.

Black and white footage of Aitmatov’s family and some color footage of Aitmatov signing his
books was presented, followed by the image of Aitmatov’s coffin as displayed at the Bishkek
Philharmonic. A number of wreaths were present and two soldiers stood on either side. The nation’s flag
covered all but Aitmatov’s head and his portrait hung above his body. Crowds of people passed by, one by
one, to take a last glimpse at the body. The camera lingered on their faces and I was reminded of the way in
which people came to gaze at Lenin in his mausoleum. This funeral departed from custom in significant
ways: it took place in the Philharmonic rather than in a boz oi, and both men and women, relatives and non-
relatives came to see the body. However, this wake seemed to fit with the logic of the Kyrgyz funeral
tradition if not with the typical form and context.

At this point the soundtrack featured a koshok sung by a man accompanying himself on the komus.
Minutes layer both the soundtrack and the footage changed to that of a brass band. This band was exactly
like the “welcoming” bands depicted in Soviet movies; however, it played slow somber music. In this
simple juxtaposition of koshok and brass is possible to see the combination of an older Kyrgyz way of
honoring the death of a great man, and a newer, Soviet way. In addition, many speeches were given by
government officials. For the Kyrgyz Republic and Aitmatov’s family members, this combination was
necessary and appropriate in marking the death of a man who was on one hand, just a man, and who on the
other hand, came to embody a nation. Aitmatov was clearly a man of the state in his service to the state as a
government official. However, many individuals, from Nurbek Nisharapov to Patia Bakierevna, expressed
a feeling that Aitmatov was one of “us,” one of the people, and for once, it did not matter to which ethnicity
the individual identified. Both the officials who gave public speeches and the individuals with whom I spoke commented that Aitmatov was “international,” a man with whom people of any and every nation identified. The world’s ability to identify with Aitmatov thus became the world’s ability to identify with Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyzstan’s ability to identify with the world.

By taking ownership of Aitmatov, Kyrgyzstan was able, at least momentarily, to cast aside associations with the “primitive” society, the “dangerous” religion, and the “new” democracy and to stand in artistic equality with Russia and the West. During his presidency Akaev had declared Kyrgyzstan to be “our general house” (Personal notes). This was a metaphor that many Kyrgyz people in Naryn misconstrued as “a dormitory” out of frustration with the influx of refugees and foreigners. However, I believe that Akaev used this metaphor in the sense of the Soviet dream that aspired to build the Soviet Union as an enormous house in which all ethnicities lived in harmony under a single roof. This idea was realized in the designs of architects (Castillo, “Peoples at an Exhibition”) and in Andrey Platonov’s novel The Foundation Pit.

In the logic of early Soviet rhetoric, in which Utopia was being built with and on the bodies of men, it was possible for an individual to embody the qualities of this “general house.” I believe that the Republic attempted to make Aitmatov into such a person. Like the construction of Manas as a “national ancestor,” such metaphors are not entirely artificial, for they fit well with ideas of exchange, networking, trade, and hospitality that are inherent in Kyrgyz view of the world. Aitmatov himself captured this view when he wrote the words cited in chapter 2: “The trains went from East to West and from West to East….” Much of what was said about Aitmatov after his death linked the author to the hero Manas, placing Aitmatov into the rhetoric of national ancestry. However, it is not only the Kyrgyz government that was trying to link Aitmatov to Manas. Patia Bakierevna pointed out to the students that “a manaschi is singing about Aitmatov in the style of the Manas epos.” This too is a great honor given to Aitmatov by the manaschi as a tribute to Aitmatov’s art. In creating such a performance, the manaschi connected Aitmatov to Manas and Aitmatov’s work to the great epics.
A parade was shown that began with a portrait of Aitmatov and was followed by his family, by soldiers in formation, by soldiers with wreaths, by soldiers with the coffin, by the head moldo of Kyrgyzstan and finally by the same brass band. I may rephrase this to say that the portrait of an individual citizen was followed by representatives of his individuality (the family), religion (the moldo) and the state (the soldiers and the brass band). In yet another moment that turned Aitmatov’s death into the death of the nation, the Kyrgyz flag was lowered all the way to the ground while the band played “Kyrgyz Jeri,” the Kyrgyz Republic’s unofficial anthem. Crowds of people lined the streets on all sides as a police escort led the hearse to the cemetery. In a clip from a black and white film, the tuyunduk is shown falling from the hands of a man and rolling away into the desert. Patia’s voice rang out, “Think about what you are seeing now, children. That’s the symbol of our nation.”

In my notes I wrote: “The graveyard is very unusual. There is a yurt symbol [a giant metal tuyunduk] in the middle (on the ground). Soldiers stand around it.” I believe this is a monument that marks a mass grave of persons executed for accusations of nationalism in 1938 (K. Imanaliev, 19). The name of this cemetery, Ata Beit, is very close to Ana Beit, the name of the fictitious cemetery where the mankurt’s mother was buried. Ata means “father” in Kyrgyz and Ana means “mother” and I suggest that Aitmatov might have wished to refer to that cemetery, or another like it, in his work. If this cemetery is indeed the one that Aitmatov refers to, then the decision to bury him in this place demonstrates an interpretation of his novel by family and state that places the story of the mankurt in reference to such historical events as that retold by Suyundikov in his film, Koshokju, and to which a very real cemetery stands witness. In a prime example of the discursive process, Aitmatov’s novel, Suyundikov’s film, and the cemetery exist in reference to and in dialogue with each other; each of them offers a means of interpreting and commenting on the others. In a single referential moment, an image is shown of soldiers placing wreaths on the grave, followed by a black and white image of a man getting shot, his glasses falling into the sand. I believe that this too was a reference to The Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years. It reminded me of the moment in the novel when Yedigei falls into the sand as the rockets blast-off. At this moment it is not clear whether
Yedigei has fainted or has died. It is possible that Kyrgyz film-makers did indeed take up a reading that referenced Soviet repression and that this reading was then presented through the medium of film.

The film ends with the image of Aitmatov’s son standing alone at his father’s grave (Field notes, 2008). This is a very poignant image in the sense that it allows for a moment of private sorrow and gives a message of hope that Aitmatov’s work will be carried on in future generations. Perhaps at this moment the son of Aitmatov remembered his father’s words:

… all through the journey (to the burial site) he was thinking about something. Thought followed though, just as one wave follows another at sea… Yedigei thought about the past, when Kazangap [his dead friend] had still been young and healthy; and, from a chain of things remembered, an unwanted, long felt and bitter sadness fell upon him… (Aitmatov, 107-108).

Indeed, it seems that all of Kyrgyzstan remembered Aitmatov’s novel when a government official stated that when Aitmatov died, “an entire century passed before our eyes” in clear reference to The Day Lasts Longer than 100 Years.

5.3 A Koshok Speaks

Nurbek Nisharapov took a copy of the two koshoks performed in memory of Aitmatov from the radio station. I later recognized them in the soundtrack of the documentary described above. Nurbek told me that he wanted to listen to them with me and that he wanted to tell me about his own feelings when Aitmatov died. The transcriptions presented throughout this last section are from a recording in which Nurbek and I listened to the koshok together. While listening, Nurbek explained the lyrics to me. Both the koshok of Zamirbek (first name unknown) and Elmirbek Imanaliev are performed in Kyrgyz with komus accompaniment. Nurbek translated them into Russian for me. However, throughout this process of translation, a conversation was also taking place between Nurbek and me. This fact causes some moments of confusion in which I am not certain who is speaking. At points I am not certain if Nurbek is directly translating the words of the performer or if he is creating his own commentary. In other moments, it is quite clear that Nurbek is speaking for himself and more so, that he is speaking directly to me in a way that he thinks will be easier for me to understand. I have transcribed these segments in such a way as to preserve
the metaphors that may be suggestive of the inner workings of language and that reflect the way in which this two particular koshoks stand in dialogue with all koshoks as well as with the national conversation. I suggest that the reader read this transcription as though it were a play complete with stage directions.

[A radio announcer speaks]

Today marks the 40th day after Aitmatov’s death. The name of Chingiz Aitmatov lived, lives and will live not only for the Kyrgyz people, but for other people as well [meaning: for the international community] The komus player is Elmirbek Imanaliyev.

[Nurbek speaks]
When our great writer Chingiz Aitmatov died, every radio station played nothing but koshok. It was, of course, a black day [meaning: a horrible day].

What is this called? [Nurbek points to his spine. He speaks in English.] Everybody said, “The spine of Kyrgyz has broken”

[Because of Nurbek’s lack of declensions and cases, I cannot know if he means Kyrgyzstan or the Kyrgyz people but I believe that in this instance the two are synonymous.]

[Nurbek switches back to Russian]
They [the Kyrgyz] cannot walk anymore. There is a mountain that belongs to Kyrgyz— that mountain has fallen…We were so proud… If you [he means me personally] want to say where you are from, you can say from America and everyone immediately understands… 50 States, Statue of Liberty. [On the other hand] We Kyrgyz, we first say, Do you know Chingiz Aitmatov? Yes. Well, we are Kyrgyz. That we are the Kyrgyz people is only the second thing. First we are the people of Chingiz [Aitmatov]…

In this first segment, the date of performance and the name of the performer is established. Nurbek sets the stage for me by briefly describing his feelings at the radio. He then takes up the voice of the collective, that is, he does not say “I felt that my spine had broken.” Rather he says “Everybody said, ‘The spine of Kyrgyz has broken. They cannot walk.’” This switch from I, to a general term, like everybody, to the distant term of “they” is something that occurred over and over again as I listened to individual narratives. Grima makes a similar observation about narratives told by Pashtun women. She interprets this shift as both a
depersonalization of the self and as the adoption of a voice with more authority, the collective voice of the community (Grima, 131-132). I believe that Grima’s analysis is a plausible explanation for what I encountered. Following a switch to “they,” Nurbek allows the words of E. Imanaliev to become his own. He uses a typical metaphor of a fallen mountain. This metaphor is apt because a mountain cannot fall and yet it did. Aitmatov should not have died and yet he did. Nurbek then explains to me that the koshokju points out that the only reason the world knows about the Kyrgyz Republic is because of Aitmatov. He is stating that Aitmatov has made the nation, not that the nation has made Aitmatov.

Nurbek then goes on to translate the following segment. As he translates, his voice tightens and strains, as though he is holding back tears.

We can’t say we have a father, Chingiz.
We can’t comprehend whether or not he is alive.
The whole world is used to hearing [of] and listening [to] Chingiz, but what can we do?
Kyrgyzstan has been left with nothing.
Great Manas died, and after Manas, Chingiz [also died].
Something here [meaning, in this life] is already missing.
Dear Chingiz, when you lived, there was something in this world...
Now that you are gone, there is nothing, only emptiness—
we are without status, leader… pitiful people.

In this segment E. Imanaliyev establishes Chingiz Aitmatov as a father for the Kyrgyz people. He also links Aitmatov to Manas, implying that in Kyrgyz history there was only one man as great as Manas and this was Aitmatov. As is typical in any form of koshok, E. Imanaliyev also describes a feeling of loss. In this way, he portrays Aitmatov through what is absent: hope, status, and leadership. E. Imanaliyev then moves from a description of what is no longer to what once was. He sings:

Our “kalpak” [Kyrgyz: national hat, but here refers to snow on the mountain] is already gone.
I mean, if there is snow and ice in the winter, there will be enough water for all the plants, but now there is no mountain, no snow, nothing.

Kyrgyz have lost everything, You were our pride, our future…
Because Chingiz existed, Kyrgyz existed.

…. You were the world’s beloved, your soul was so happy, so gentle.
You wrote works like “Jamilla”… you loved nature.
You worked for human rights… you respected Kyrgyz culture.
You took characters from Talas…

[Nurbek explains to me]
because he too, was from Talas from Shekker Village

[Nurbek translates]
…you were nail…
[Nurbek explains that there is a Russian idiom “nail of the party” which I understood to mean “star of the party”]
flower, king… and now all that is over.

Along with highlighting Aitmatov’s most important deeds, E. Imanaliev repositions Aitmatov. He moves him from an earthly man to an immortal ancestor by creating a path for Aitmatov that extends from Talas to the sky. E. Imanaliev also branches out Aitmatov’s lineage, so that Aitmatov is not only as great as other Kyrgyz heroes, such as Manas. He is also as great as Western heroes such as Ernest Hemingway and Victor Hugo.

He [E. Imanaliev] is speaking of Talas… of the great people of Talas… Manas, Kanikay, Bakay Ata [other heroes from the epics]… Great River Talas…
You have stamped your nation…
Hemingway… Hugo… we cannot differentiate between them and you.
They too left in their time.
You gathered everyone, and then left, your own, children, grandchildren, your nation…
You were such a talent…
I believe that you live in this moment.

You are immortal to us, say the Kyrgyz…
You were Chingiz, but now you have become a star…
I hope that this star becomes brighter and brighter each winter.
All the people… including Zamirbek [the following singer] who sing, will cry with their heads bowed for the father that they have lost.
[End of koshok]

In the above segment, the words “You were Chingiz, but now you are a star” suggest that Aitmatov is no longer his personal self, but rather a symbol of hope and guidance.

Following E. Imanaliev’s koshok, I asked Nurbek if this koshok sounded sad to him. He said it did and so I asked him to try and explain how it is sad because I heard beauty but not sadness. Nurbek answered me:

He sings as if his soul cries… He [his voice] trembles like he is worried…
He uses monotone. When he sang, we, at the radio could only put on the music,
but it was [shown] on television too. On television, he sat with a bowed head, a candle and a portrait of Aitmatov and sang *koshok*. You know [that] women [typically] sing in the yurt, but when a man sings [*koshok*], he takes on a big responsibility.

[I understood Nurbek’s meaning as being that when an individual does an activity that is not assigned to his or her gender, he is taking on a great responsibility to do that thing well, to legitimize the transgression of gender categories.]

… his soul burns… aches… A man never cries and never will, so he…
[Nurbek shows a gesture of self-restraint and I offer the word] …yes… he holds back, but there is something there… [something that he is holding back]

Nurbek’s description connects the expression of sadness to the timbre of the voice (“he sings like his soul cries”), melody (“He uses monotone”), and physical behavior. Nurbek states, “we at the radio could ONLY put on the music.” Nurbek says this as though the music is not the full performance, and indeed, it is not. Connecting an expression of extreme grief to Nurbek’s comment that “a man never cries” places restraint as part of the aesthetic discussed in chapter 4. It is not true that a man must remain stoic, for men have their own sound of crying, *ookuru*, that is distinguishable from the crying of women. However, in the case of a *koshok* sung by man, such as the two exemplified here, Nurbek is right to say that a man should not break down into weeping.

Nurbek often used the word “broken” to distinguish the melodies of *koshok* from other types of melodies. (In using the word melody here, Nurbek was making a direct translation from the Kyrgyz word *koo*.) In his attempts to guide me through such melodies, Nurbek offered metaphors of brokenness, e.g. “A table should have four legs, but this has three.” I believe that the melody Zamirbek’s melody exemplifies Nurbek’s notion of “brokenness.” In this *koshok*, the singer establishes a rhythm and breaks it. Zamirbek does this by reducing the rhythm to a basic beat and causing the melodic line to drag behind that beat. Nurbek explains this by drawing the progression of the melody in the air and by singing the percussive effects of the *koshok*, created when the player’s hand strikes the *komus* strings. This second *koshok*, translated by Nurbek, is a very powerful one, at least in light of the things that I have written so far.
Zamirbek begins with words that are like that of a moldo. He reminds listeners of their fate, that is, of death. Like the discussion between Chakyrbay and Toktorbay presented in chapter 3, Zamirbek and Imanaliev also create a conversation. Just as E. Imanaliev acknowledged Zamirbek in his koshok, so does Zamirbek acknowledge E. Imanaliev by responding to his words and adding to them.

*A jai* [Kyrgyz: the hour of death] comes. You can’t escape it. [No matter] If you are young… beautiful… death will still take you when it comes…

O Chingiz, you were such a good person…

He [the singer, Nurbek explains] is so sad, sad that he [Aitmatov] didn’t yet see better times, the future of Kyrgyzstan through their [Kyrgyz people’s] efforts…

For example Chingiz showed us [Chingiz displayed Kyrgyz people to the world] and now we should show Chingiz [Kyrgyz people should show Aitmatov to the world].

Zamirbek’s *koshok* is meant as a lesson to his listeners. Whereas E. Imanaliev spoke for to Aitmatov on behalf of the Kyrgyz nation, Zamirbek speaks for himself to the nation through a conversation with Aitmatov. In so doing, he reminds his listeners that they too have a responsibility to remember Aitmatov, to honor his memory and to bring their future into being.

Hey people, don’t forget Chingiz because it was through Chingiz that we came into the light!

Yes, you [Chingiz Aitmatov] saw a lot of celebrations, a lot of riches on account of your talent…

You cultivated the earth… your children, and your people…

you were our sun and suddenly [Nurbek snaps] the sun was no more

… You went somewhere from whence no one can ever return…

Why? You showed us [not clear what was shown] you should come back… we are waiting for the love that you showed us…

You were a mountain that no one could destroy, but you were destroyed—

deadth took you…

Water flows so quickly. You wanted to flow like water, to escape death, but death stopped you…

Nurbek continued to translate Zamirbek’s words, saying, “Kyrgyz land was holy to Chingiz, [Zamirbek asks Aitmatov] Isn’t it true?” Nurbek pauses to speak as himself, commenting, “What’s he [Aitmatov] going to answer? In this way, we [Kyrgyz people] are awaiting an answer.” Nurbek then resumes Zamirbek’s voice: We [Kyrgyz people] await you [Aitmatov].” Through his commentary Nurbek points out
that one aspect of a *koshok* is to ask questions of the dead, but the dead can only answer in silence.

Speaking again as Zamirbek, Nurbek begins to describe a relationship between Aitmatov and the land based on the land’s own animated quality. In so doing, Zamirbek replaces Aitmatov’s physical body with the body of the Kyrgyz Republic. However, it is as though the soul of the landscape has flown and the landscape grieves for itself.

You were the Lake Issuk-Kul, the Rivers of Naryn and Talas, the fields, the woods. The lake has remained, the rivers, the woods, but how can we say that they are Chingiz?

The Lake shows in its character that you are not [That you have passed away], Its waves have risen—it’s offended. The soul of the lake also grieves. All souls ache…

Following this, Zamirbek describes how many Kyrgyz people offered Aitmatov good words and good wishes in his lifetime and how this continues after his death.

Yes, Chiki [diminutive of Chingiz], you have left us… no one can say that Chingiz owes Kyrgyz… Kyrgyz owe Chingiz. You accepted many *bata* from Kyrgyz before death. Now, after death, *bata* is also offered…

As with Manas and others who have died, such as Nurbek’s grandparents, the relationship that existed in life does not cease at death but continues. It will be interesting to see whether people come to visit Aitmatov’s grave, as they do the grave of Manas, or whether a feeling of the living presence of Aitmatov fades over time. Zamirbek concludes his *koshok* with some words on Aitmatov’s work. These words imply that Zamirbek also sees the connection between great art and life. In this moment, however, Zamirbek’s words, the words of a *koshok*, are the connectors.

Your literature was like a dialogue between writer and reader: Between them, they speak on a single theme. Now let's stop and think: who is the writer and who is the reader?

In one moment, all [people] are readers—Chingiz too. And all are writers. Through your literature we read you and you read us and something new comes out. It’s too bad you are gone… If you were still alive, we would fly…

Through use of the word “dialogue,” Zamirbek touches upon the interconnectivity of texts. Through his
concept of “reading,” Zamirbek touched upon the way in which objects, actions and words can present interpretations of and commentaries on other objects, actions and words. With the image of flight comes the image of a new creation, that is the creation of a time and place in which people, whether literally or metaphorically, fly, where individuals are released from their present limitations and become capable of moving in all directions.

The case of Aitmatov demonstrates a complex mixing of traditions that happens in most Kyrgyz funerals. Like any other funeral, Aitmatov’s was a moment in which the collective self was being presented, negotiated, confirmed and contested. However, the stage for this particular performance of self was so gigantic that it stretched beyond geographic borders to other continents. Upon this stage, the same constructions of being Kyrgyz as discussed in chapter 2, the same myth-infused context and dialogic process discussed in chapter 3, the same spectrum of learned affective behavior as discussed in chapter 4, were incorporated into a single performance that had a particular meaning for individual Kyrgyz even as it called on Kyrgyz people to see themselves in an international context. This performance showcased cultural elements, like koshok, whose particular and close meanings are best understood by those for whom such customs are alive and rich in expressive capacity. Such a staging also allowed a moment of unity, for although each individual experienced the marking of Aitmatov’s death within the confines of his or her private self, the experience happened simultaneously with the experiences of countless other private selves and in this simultaneous divergence, something was shared. Thus the marking of Aitmatov’s death was also a moment of nation-building.

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ii The word kaybaren and teke are left untranslated by Köchümkulova. I am not certain of the exact translation, however, I do know that they are titles of respect and probably of relation such as discussed concerning the title Eje in chapter 1.

iii The (ethno)musicologist said that the idea of an unheard ideal that manifests itself in many variants can be found in the work of a scholar whom she called “Zukkerman.” I was not familiar with the works of this scholar (I still have not come across any of his works), but it is important to note that in this interaction this (ethno)musicologist was trying to be helpful to me as a student in the same way she would be helpful to her own students. At the same time, by pointing out that she knows what I do not know she was putting herself in the position of authority on the subject. She was not
putting on airs so much as she was doing her job. She is a teacher in a society in which teachers have knowledge and students do not. More so, her scholarly views were bounded by the state of academia in Kyrgyzstan.

iv Suyundikov did not have a good quality copy of his own film. He said that the copy kept at Manas University had some kind of technical problem in the first 15 minutes of tape that made it “impossible to view without ruining the artistic integrity.” Like Kaybila Ulu he also complained that he is unable to gain access to the Kyrgyz National Archives where a copy of his film is stored.

v Statements of “is, was, and will live” were also made about Lenin.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


