

ETHNOLOGY AND SOCIOCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN KYRGYZSTAN¹

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The article is focused on the state of sociocultural anthropology and ethnology in Kyrgyzstan. It seeks to map the disciplines' intellectual and institutional history in the sociopolitical context in which it has evolved. The material for the study comes from published and internet sources as well as from a series of interviews with Kyrgyz anthropologists/ethnologists and academics from other countries who have worked in Kyrgyzstan. The article aims at placing the discipline in the sociocultural and political contexts of socialism and postsocialism in Kyrgyzstan. By considering power relations and economic relations as factors of the discipline's development, the article refers to broader debates on the social production of anthropological knowledge.

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Artykuł poświęcony jest etnologii i antropologii społeczno-kulturowej w Kirgistanie. Celem tekstu jest naszkicowanie intelektualnej i instytucjonalnej mapy dyscypliny w perspektywie historycznej, z uwzględnieniem kontekstu społeczno-politycznego, w którym się rozwijała. Materiały empiryczne pochodzą z publikacji tradycyjnych i internetowych a także z serii wywiadów z kirgiskimi etnologami i antropologami, a także z uczonymi z innych krajów, którzy prowadzą badania antropologiczne w Kirgistanie. W artykule dążę do umieszczenia dyscypliny w kontekście społeczno-kulturowym i politycznym

¹ The idea for the article stems from a symposium 'Anthropology in Spain and in Europe', where I presented a desk-research based report on the situation of sociocultural anthropology in Central Asia. (See details at: <http://webs.ucm.es/info/antrosim/indexeng.htm>). The symposium was an inspiration for me, and after it had ended I decided to carry out a more in-depth study about anthropology in one of the Central Asian countries, my native Kyrgyzstan. While being a fascinating journey, this project took much longer time to complete than I had initially thought.

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sojalizmu i post-sojalizmu w Kirgistanie. Jako czynniki rozwoju dyscypliny rozpatruję relacje władzy i stosunki gospodarcze, w ten sposób umieszczam ten tekst w szerszych debatach na temat społecznego konstruowania wiedzy antropologicznej.

K e y w o r d s: Kyrgyzstan, ethnology, sociocultural anthropology, research, teaching, knowledge production

1. KYRGYZ ETHNOGRAPHY² IN THE SOVIET PERIOD: POLITICALLY GUIDED PRACTICE

1.1. The Institutional Landscape

It could be claimed that the development of ethnography in Kyrgyzstan and arguably other Central Asian countries was not much different from the development of the discipline in other Soviet Union republics during the socialist period. Despite the complex interplay of the bottom-up and top-down influences that shaped it, the immense prevalence of central state imperatives over strictly academic and local ones imprinted itself on the discipline's profile.

Soviet rule was established in Kyrgyzstan in 1924 and the status of Soviet Socialist Republic was acquired in 1936³. As well as installing new political and economic institutions, the Soviets launched the building of cultural institutions in the region, notably the academic and educational structures aimed at replacing the previous ones or creating new ones in accordance with their modernization project. The emergence of Soviet Kyrgyz ethnography (as a subdiscipline of history) was one of the many parts of this project⁴. The first ethnographic expeditions in which Kyrgyz researchers took part were

² The term used in the former Soviet Union to denote academic practices roughly similar to socio-cultural anthropology or ethnology in Western countries is "ethnography" (compare: Dunn and Dunn 1962). Since the beginning of the 1990s, the terms ethnography and ethnology has been used interchangeably in Russian, the latter one is more formal however, i.e. it is used in the names of academic institutions etc. The term 'Kyrgyz ethnography' denotes the disciplinary tradition that developed within the territorial and institutional structures of the Kyrgyz SSR.

³ The violence and persecution that were an unalienable part of Soviet expansion, as well as the repressions during Soviet period, are commemorated but have not become the central narrative of the contemporary memory policies in Kyrgyzstan, see: Abashin (2018) for examples and discussion.

⁴ It is difficult to reconstruct the pre-revolutionary history of ethnographic/ethnological knowledge in Kyrgyzstan. In his critical article on the state of Kyrgyz historiography, Tchoroev makes a remark that is relevant to this study: "(...) no Kyrgyz historian who wrote a history of the nation can be identified before the end of the 19th century. Of course, there were many relaters of genealogical legends and stories based mainly on folk heritage. This paucity of indigenous historiography is the reason that Kyrgyz history has been written mainly from external sources in various languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Iranian, Greek, Turkic, Mongolian, and Russian. Kyrgyz historians made their first attempts at publishing histories at the beginning of the 20th century under the influence of the reformist movement known as Jadidism. Some Kyrgyz intellectuals brought out works in Kazan, Ufa, and Orenburg. For example, books by Osmonaaly Sydykuulu were published in Ufa in 1913 and 1915" (Tchoroev 2002, 351).

organized in 1926. Their interests were in the history (B. Soltonoyev, B. Jamgyrchynov), language (B. Junusaliev), social relations and religion (S. Iliasov) of the Kyrgyz. There were also scholars from the centre – i.e. Soviet Russian research institutions – participating in establishing the tradition of Kyrgyz ethnography (e.g., S. Abramzon; compare: Tabyshev 1990). The first expeditions were aimed at collecting materials for the Republic Museum (opened in 1927). In 1928, the Research Institute of Regional Studies affiliated with the Council of National Commissioners of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Republic was formed. When a Kyrgyz branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences was established in 1943, ethnography found its institutional place within the structures of the Institute of Language, Literature and History and, from 1954, was part of the History Institute of the Kyrgyz Republic Academy of Sciences. In 1966, the Chair of Ethnography was created, which was ‘promoted’ to the status of a division in 1989. Though the ethnography unit in the History Institute existed at the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences from its inception in 1954, the institutionalization of ethnography as a university discipline took place much later. The Chair of Archaeology and Ethnology in the History Department of Kyrgyz State University was founded in 1978.

The complex interplay between the political and academic fields (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology) in the soviet period can be illustrated by the case of Saul Abramzon’s work that received negative reviews from Kyrgyz party leaders. His first book on Kyrgyz culture published in 1946 was criticized by K. Orozaliev, the Kyrgyz Communist Party Propaganda Secretary, for the underestimation of the positive effects that contact with the Russian revolutionary nation had had for the Kyrgyz (Tabyshev 1990, 8). When the monograph on the ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz people was first published (Abramzon [1971] 1990), the critical review in the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kirgiziya* by the academics S. Iliasov, A. Zima and K. Orozaliev was followed by a public criticism by the first secretary of the Kyrgyz Communist Party T. Usabaliev who blamed Abramzon for ideological and methodological mistakes. There were two main lines of criticism: 1) allegedly, Abramzon augmented the role of the survival of tribal relations and underestimated the changes that took place after the revolution among the Kyrgyz (compare: Abramzon 1954), and 2) he represented the Kyrgyz people as extremely divided into numerous tribes and moieties, therefore undermining the unity of the Kyrgyz nation (Tabyshev 1990, 9). The negative review was considered by a special committee of the USSR Academy of Sciences and most of the criticism was refuted as unsustainable⁵.

⁵ The outcomes of this incident were relatively mild for Abramzon (although he felt deeply hurt and left Kyrgyzstan where he had spent most of his adult life), while sometimes failure to satisfy the authorities’ expectations resulted in the loss of a job and/or repression as was the case for Sabyr Attokurov, the first head of the Chair of Archeology and Ethnography at Kyrgyz State University, who “was forced to leave the university, [and] students who supported him were nearly expelled from the history faculty” (Tchoroev 2002, 363).

Several tensions seem to manifest themselves in this incident. First, it proves that science was ruled by politics and expected to fulfil a social role ascribed to it⁶. The very possibility of local party leaders formulating criticism in wording like “serious ideological-political mistakes [were made]... that considerably diminish the academic and pedagogic value of the book” (cited Tabyshaliev 1990, 9) is telling in itself: it was the mark of the totalitarian state that subsumed all levels of social life. Second, the role of ethnography – and more broadly, of the humanities – revealed itself as that of serving the political goals of nation building and the creation of the Soviet nation as well as contributing to the national consciousness development of the titular nationalities. Third, the incident gives away the tension between the central and local (republic) level of governance. The affiliations of the actors indicate that scholars and party leaders at the republic level were in opposition to the scholars and party leaders at the central level. It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the merit of the argument or to establish what exactly the stakes that produced the tension were, yet this incident demonstrates that neither science nor politics in the former Soviet Union were as conflict-free as it might seem from a contemporary perspective.

1.2. Ideology/Theory Nexus

Some of the institutional traditions, methods and theoretical ideas of imperial Russian ethnology, ethnography and folklore studies were continued during the Soviet period (compare: Bertrand 2002). Yet there were also shifts in the discipline (Azrael 1978; compare: Huttenbach 1990; Knight 1998). The nationality question was recognized as politically significant as early as 1917. The ambiguity of nationality politics lay in the combination of two conflicting imperatives: 1) the declared importance of nationality, especially the nationalities oppressed by imperial Russia as well as the famous Leninist ‘national self-determination’ principle underlining the equality and self-dependency of nationalities, and 2) the need to minimize the political meaning and ‘fission’ potential of any particular national/ethnic group within a newly established multi-ethnic polity. It could be suggested that Soviet ethnography – alongside other disciplines such as history or philosophy – was used as one of the instruments for overcoming the tension between the need to establish nationality as a basis for social ‘fusion’ and the fear of the ‘fission’ potential inherited in it⁷. Among its other uses, the discipline was instrumental

⁶ In fact the Academy of Sciences acted as one of the government bodies in the USSR (compare: Beyler, Kojevnikov, Wang 2005, 31).

⁷ The discipline’s outlook changed largely in response to the state and party politics, e.g. Abashin suggests distinguishing the Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev epochs (Abashin 2009). Similarly Ilkhamov points out that political tendencies directed the development of science in the former Soviet Union (e.g. from the early 1930s the political rationale pushed ethnographers towards the incorporation of some parts of the pre-Soviet legacy). Therefore viewing the whole Soviet era as a monolith period is untenable (Ilkhamov 2009). See also: Sokolovskiy 2017.

in establishing an association of all things national with the past, while the present was supposed to be largely internationalist. Associating ethnic groups' characteristic features with the historical past was a technique for dominating these groups by making them politically irrelevant to the present (compare: Fabian 1983).

Paradoxically, the Soviet state also built many of the institutions that facilitated the emergence of national consciousness before and nation building processes after the collapse of the USSR (Terry 2001; compare: Hirsch 2005). At the same time, the institutionalization of national tradition went side by side with the limitations put on practising ethnic differences in professional and everyday life, e.g., by limiting indigenous language use at work and in public places; by controlling school and university education in native languages; by rationing publishing (the press included) as well as cultural events in indigenous languages and the like.

Yet another contradiction was inherent in the (quasi)federal character of the state. The administrative division of the USSR into the Soviet republics, and a number of autonomous republics and oblasts within the latter, triggered a hierarchical division of nationalities into more and less important, or 'big' and 'small', ones (Tokarev 1953)⁸. The political and social rights of particular ethnic groups were differentiated accordingly. Thus the situation of the titular nationalities of the USSR republics was different from the situation of such ethnic groups as Crimean Tatars, Jews or the Uyghur.

The often arbitrarily drawn administrative borders of the republics – arguably – required legitimization not only through coercion but also through consent. Legitimization could be partially provided through finding the scientific proof of a titular nationality 'rootedness' in an assigned territory. Especially, but not exclusively, in the case of nomadic peoples such as the Kyrgyz this required 'inventing traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). It also resulted in a particular rigidity of nationality (*ethnos*) as a salient classificatory (and ideological) category in postwar ethnography, especially in the 1960s when the theory of ethnos was created by Bromley (1979)⁹. Nationality was thus considered as a relatively stable set of cultural features maintained over time; the theory of ethnos can thus be called primordialist. It must be

⁸ The terms *natsia*, *natsionalnost'* and *narodnost'* reflected this hierarchy (e.g. Hirsch 2005).

⁹ Importantly, the term *ethnos* did not have the same status during the whole Soviet period. For instance, in the 1930s during the times of repression *ethnos* was regarded as an almost 'reactionary' term (Abashin 2009). Moreover, there were two *ethnos* theories, the first developed by Yuri Bromley (1979) and presenting an evolutionist and Marxist-Leninist view of nations (i.e. that presenting historical stages of development and stressing socio-economic relations, for more details see: Sokolovskiy 2017); the second was developed by Lev Gumilev (1989) who perceived *ethnos* as a natural cosmic phenomenon. The latter theory was not considered 'scientific' during the Soviet period but gained wide followership among national political elites and the public in the post-Soviet period, notably in Kazakhstan. Sergey Abashin suggests that its attractiveness for post-Soviet Central Asian countries might also stem from Gumilev's positive evaluation of the Golden Horde and Turkic legacy that was in contrast to Soviet historiography (private communication).

added that primordialist conceptions were by no means unique to Soviet ethnology – e.g. they were developed in German ethnology in the nineteenth century (compare: Eidson 2017) – yet, they gained a lot of currency in the Soviet (and ironically post-Soviet) period and therefore are often associated with Soviet ethnography. In contemporary discussions on the legacy of Soviet ethnography, the concept of ‘primordialism’ acquired a heavily value laden (negative) meaning, which will be discussed in the next section of the article.

At the same time, not all ethnographers dealt exclusively with nationality issues – research was undertaken on material culture, everyday life (*byt*), family relations, food, shamanism, economic relations and other topics (e.g. Antipina 1962; Makhova 1959; Iliasov 1953; Mambetalieva 1963). This was partly due to shifts in the ‘social order’ (*социальный заказ*) for themes, like the interest in new forms of production and the associated forms of everyday life and social relations that generated a number of ‘kolkhoz monographs’ in the 1950s and 1960s (compare: Abashin 2009) or ethnic sociology from 1970 to 1990 (Drobizheva 1998)¹⁰, but also partly to the fact that the search for topics outside party interests was a search for a degree of academic freedom, which could only be achieved to an extent, since research topics had to be approved by centralized academic institutions.

The fourth aspect of the interplay between political and academic fields lies in the theoretical underpinnings of Soviet science. Congruent with but not identical to the previous three was the enlightenment (or positivist) project of Soviet science, ethnography included. Science was juxtaposed with ‘local knowledge systems’ (religion, medicine etc.) and, in the case of ethnology in particular, this meant waging a war on all *perezhitki* [survivals] (outdated, outlived practices, compare: DeWeese 2009): religious beliefs, ‘backward’ customs (such as bride kidnapping, *kalym* etc.). Materialist and atheist theory required firm identification of these practices with the past (with the practical goal of bringing them to an end).

Therefore in Soviet Kyrgyz ethnography the issues related to *ethnos* constituted the core of ethnology’s research interests¹¹: national history, culture, kinship and belief systems were meticulously studied (Kochkunov 2002). Additionally, in Kyrgyz ethnology the studies of ‘other’ groups or cultures were far less prominent than the studies of one’s ‘own’ group, although there was some research on the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Dungans, Germans and Russians. Expeditions (often centrally organized) were the core mode of ethnographic investigation; they were carried out collectively and usu-

¹⁰ In Kyrgyzstan, the ethnosociological tradition was developed by A. Aksakanov and his students, some of them from Osh University (Aksakanov 2004).

¹¹ In Soviet Russian ethnology, this tendency was also strong but was somewhat diverted in the 1970s and 80s, when ethnographers began to undertake research on contemporarily relevant topics such as ethnic conflict (Sokolovskiy 2017). Yet, in Central Asian republics this tendency was much weaker and the scholarly interests inherited from 1940–60 continued well into the 1980s.

ally included representatives of several disciplines, such as linguists, archaeologists, historians and ethnologists.

As for the theoretical outlook of the discipline, it was enclosed in the framework of dialectic materialism or Marxism as a grand theory as well as Bromley's ethnos theory as a middle range theory of the discipline¹². The alleged theoretical paucity of Soviet era ethnography – or its inability to produce an alternative grand theory to Marxism such as the structuralism of Levi-Strauss or interpretative anthropology of Clifford Geertz – is currently referred to as the 'descriptive' character of the ethnography practised by anthropologists/ethnologists in the region. The advantages of doing ethnography differently than in the Soviet period are seen, among other things, in the introduction of interpretations and theoretical conceptualizations (compare: Reeves 2014). Interestingly, this very juxtaposition was used by Saul Abramzon when he assessed the contribution of his pre-revolutionary predecessors:

"The ethnographic study of the Kyrgyz nation in the pre-revolutionary period can be considered primarily as a period of accumulating factual material (...) [after the 1917 revolution] the researchers do not limit themselves to observations and simple registering the facts, but aim at generalisations and interpretations" (Abramzon [1971] 1990, 12–13).

His usage of the descriptive/theoretical dichotomy is almost identical to the contemporary criticism of Soviet era ethnography (compare: Durand 1995). It appears that criticism goes round in circles and as such it is largely ideological, i.e. it does not clearly define the actual weak and strong points of the respective traditions but merely provides simple categories for the negative labelling of the Others' academic practice and praising of one's own. The side effect of this criticism – that is often put in evolutionist terms – is a view of knowledge accumulation in which the stage of collecting material precedes that of building theory and therefore the scholarly practice of collecting material is denigrated. This issue will be dealt with further in the following section.

2. ETHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN KYRGYZSTAN IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD: DECENTRALIZED POLITICIZATION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the establishment of independent states in Central Asia, post-Soviet science in the region started undergoing rapid changes as far as ideological incentives as well as the economic and institutional conditions of its functioning were concerned. In the following section of the article, the attempt is made to demonstrate the impact of the transformation period on Kyrgyz

¹² Yet denigrating Soviet Marxism as just one stream of (dogmatic) thought is perhaps an oversimplification. As some research has demonstrated, there were attempts at 'creating a space to ask new, intellectually challenging questions about processes of historical change and mechanisms of social inequality' (Luehrmann 2005, 851) within this stream.

ethnography as a discipline. Both the continuity with the discipline's traditions developed in the Soviet period as well as current and potential tendencies and directions of (paradigmatic) change will be reflected upon.

2.1. Institutional Developments in Ethnology and Anthropology in Kyrgyzstan

After 1991, academic institutions in Kyrgyzstan found themselves in a state of crisis due not only to a radical decrease in funding¹³ but also to the diversification of the sources of funding and significant changes in the ideological landscape that affected the position of science in society.

The institutional situation of ethnology in the **Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences (KAS)** – the fundamental research institution – is an illustration of the demise of centralized state-sponsored research in the post-Soviet period (compare: Sokolovskiy 2017). After 1991, the number of academic positions available at the KAS diminished fivefold. Libraries stopped being regularly supplied with new books and periodicals from Russia, not to mention publications from other parts of the world. The lack of funding made it impossible for ethnologists to rely on their institutions for research development and travel costs. Very few doctoral theses were defended in the 'ethnology' speciality during the 27 years after gaining independence, and the degrees are conferred outside of Kyrgyzstan (for the good overview of the PhD theses in sociocultural anthropology by Kyrgyz scholars, as well as western scholars working in and on Kyrgyzstan, see: Reeves 2014). The Academy leaders encouraged applied research as a remedy to poor state funding. Recently some new initiatives have been introduced in the Academy of Sciences, e.g., a special programme in history (including social anthropology) supported by the French Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and the EHESS aimed at junior scholars working at the KAS. Yet the precarious financial as well as political situation¹⁴ does not make it possible to be optimistic about state supported academic ethnographic research prospects.

The situation at **universities** is perhaps slightly better thanks to the liberalization of the higher education system. At least the mushrooming of universities across the country, especially in Bishkek, creates an impression of development.¹⁵ However,

¹³ Independent Kyrgyzstan is a rather poor country, and science is far from being privileged in the state budget, although education (including schools) receives about 20% of government spending. According to the CIA World Factbook, in 2017 gross domestic product per capita in Kyrgyzstan was estimated at 3,700 US dollars (compare: Kazakhstan – 26,100; Russia – 27,900 and the EU taken as a whole – 39,200).

¹⁴ There were two violent uprisings in the republic, two presidents were ousted in the space of 5 years between 2005 and 2010, thousands of people lost their lives and many more their homes or belongings, especially in the 2010 conflict in the Osh region.

¹⁵ Some commentators draw attention to the fact that the increase of the level of higher education in the country in the post-Soviet period is disproportionately larger than the number of qualified jobs available for people with high qualifications (DeYoung 2008).

ethnology chairs and/or departments in old and new universities occupy a somewhat marginal position and, in the majority of cases, are situated in departments of history. As a consequence, ethnology is still taught in a way that concentrates on material culture and customs of the past rather than on contemporary life. At Kyrgyz State National University (in Bishkek) the Chair of Archaeology and Ethnology has a considerable archaeological bias in research and curriculum. The same is the case for Osh University. At Kyrgyz State Pedagogical University (in Bishkek) there is a Chair of History, Ethnology and Social Education that offers not a full programme but a module in Social Anthropology. Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University (in Bishkek) has established the Department of History, Culturology and Marketing within an interdisciplinary Faculty of Humanities. Some archaeological projects are carried out there, but others – aiming at contemporary cultural problems such as ethnic conflict resolution – are conceptualized as ‘culturology’ (*культурология*). The emphasis on applied research and the departure from an ethnological perspective has been further deepened by the recent introduction of marketing and advertising-related subjects to the curriculum. Students do not normally pursue ethnological careers after graduation and do not even expect to be able to do so.

The American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek is a peculiar exception in this picture. It was created from scratch with USA money¹⁶ but primarily by Kyrgyz scholars who used the political change as an opportunity to leave their stamp on the discipline and introduce the classic four-field formula of American anthropology¹⁷ to the university curriculum (Madeleine Reeves, personal communication; compare: Reeves 2014). At the Anthropology Department, apart from the permanent academic staff consisting of linguists, folklorists, social anthropologists and archaeologists, there are also a number of visiting fellows and guest lecturers from Western universities (European and American). In the beginning much teaching was in Russian, currently more teaching is done in English and there are also several courses in Kyrgyz.

The shift from Soviet ethnographic traditions at the Anthropology Department of the AUCA manifests itself in the attempts at engaging in comparative research and moving away from the domination of the ethnos theory and towards theoretical pluralism that includes interpretative and structuralist theories alongside ethnos theories. Additionally, there are courses devoted to studies of the contemporary world: ‘applied anthropology’, ‘medical anthropology’, ‘environmental anthropology’ and ‘political anthropology’. Special emphasis is placed on intensive fieldwork which is a part of the curriculum.

¹⁶ The university is funded by Eurasian Foundation of the U.S. State Department and the George Soros Open Society Foundation.

¹⁷ It has to be emphasized that currently in the USA this formula is considered rather problematic by the representatives of the discipline, since it ‘cracks’ not only theoretically or methodologically but also institutionally, compare: Sylverman 2005.

Although the Anthropology Department has been highly successful in many ways, and can be seen as a *spiritus movens* behind the consolidation of Kyrgyz anthropology and ethnology¹⁸, its institutional role within the AUCA has recently changed into a ‘concertation’ (or program) within a larger Liberal Arts and Sciences Department.

Apart from traditional academic institutions, there are more flexible institutional arrangements that create opportunities for the development of ethnology in the region: **non-government research organizations and international projects**. These include think tanks and research centres (e.g., *Aigine*¹⁹) that incorporate an ethnological component. It has to be emphasized, however, that in most of these projects the discipline is not treated independently but is linked to archaeology, history, sociology, political science, international relations or economics.

International projects indisputably trigger a lot of valuable research initiatives in ethnology and anthropology in Kyrgyzstan, yet they are relatively short-term and, more importantly, they often bring research agendas from outside and do not really allow them to emerge locally in a bottom-up fashion. Despite this reservation, in the economically weak and only moderately politically stable conditions of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, international projects create an alternative to state support of research institutions. There are several types of projects that could be placed in the category of projects with an anthropological component. There are the UNESCO policy-oriented programmes, research projects initiated by Western universities or foundations sponsoring science and also quite specific and valuable projects catering for didactic needs.

A large-scale UNESCO project ‘Integral Studies of Silk Roads – the Roads of Dialogue’ has been functioning in the region since 1987. The project has resulted in a number of initiatives ranging from studies on the situation of women in the region to the organization of an ethnic handicrafts and art festival²⁰. In 1995, the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (*MICAI*) was established in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, by UNESCO. In 2006 *MICAI* organized an interdisciplinary archaeological-ethnographic expedition, ‘The Study of Migration Processes in the Ancient and Medieval history of Central Asian Peoples’, to the Xingjian-Uyghur region of China. It included Kyrgyz ethnologist A. Asankanov (currently at Kyrgyz National Pedagogic University in Bishkek)²¹. Interestingly, in many large-scale projects anthropology/ethnology is not treated independently (and therefore ethnological research questions do not constitute

¹⁸ Between 2014 and 2017 four editions of the national Congress of Anthropologists and Ethnologists took place, with roughly two thirds of the participants representing sociocultural anthropology (the remaining participants represented the field of archaeology) and coming from a number of Kyrgyz universities of Bishkek, Osh, Naryn.

¹⁹ <http://www.aigine.kg/>, access: 10.01.2018.

²⁰ UNESCO CLT/CPD/DIA/2008/PI/68.

²¹ A. Asankanov also participated in an international expedition to Altay, Khakasiya and Tuva in 2003 aimed at archeological research into Kyrgyz presence in the region, joined by S. Alymkulova and O. Karataev; the expedition was supported by the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Russia.

a goal in their own right) but is linked to archaeology, history and literary monument studies as well as to tourism development rationales and practices²².

Since 1991 the George Soros Open Society Foundation (OSF) has contributed significantly to scholars' development in the country through individual grant schemes (CARI grants) as well as publishing projects²³. The latter included a particularly valuable component devoted to translating major ethnological work into Kyrgyz.²⁴ It supported anthropological education in the region, providing funding for the AUCA as well as developing the Regional Seminar for Excellence in Training (ReSet) HESP²⁵ projects, highly relevant to the development of the discipline in Kyrgyzstan: 'Nationhood and Narratives in Central Asia: History, Context, Critique' and 'Building Anthropology in Eurasia'²⁶.

The 'Building Anthropology in Eurasia' project (2007–2010) was aimed at undergraduate university lecturers. The project was hosted by the Aigine Cultural Research Centre, Bishkek (in cooperation with the AUCA and the Programme on Central Asia and the Caucasus at Harvard University, USA). It was aimed at promoting the institutionalization of sociocultural anthropology in the region. The project's mission was the replacement of the old Soviet tradition of ethnography/ethnology with a new one²⁷:

"Anthropology, as known elsewhere in the world, *did not exist in the Soviet Union* [my emphasis – A.H.]²⁸ and has been very slow to develop in post-Soviet space. The Regional Seminar on 'Building Anthropology in Eurasia' 'will undertake to provide a substantial beginning for anthropology to scholars in this new space' (Project's website).

²² To give an example, there is an institution harbouring ethnological/anthropological research worth mentioning: the *Institut français d'études sur l'Asie centrale* opened in 1992 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. It is a part of the Main Office of University Research Cooperation, Department of Archaeology and Social Sciences, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<http://www.ifeac.org/fr/>). It has its branch in Kyrgyzstan, headed by Amantur Zhaparov, an ethnologist specializing in nomadism and migration (e.g. Zhaparov 2007, 2009). The research activities of the Institute are not limited to anthropology, but ethnological/anthropological topics appear in their publications. Since 1996, the Institute has published annually *Les Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, an interdisciplinary journal in French.

²³ Unlike in Uzbekistan, in Kyrgyzstan OSF has been functioning without any major disturbance (compare: Laruelle 2005; see also: Reeves 2014). Reeves argues that among five post-soviet Central Asian countries Kyrgyzstan is the most welcoming for western researchers.

²⁴ The lack – if not complete absence – of textbooks and monographs in Russian or Kyrgyz that represent a social/cultural anthropology perspective is a predicament for the discipline's teaching practice. Translation work is needed. Sometimes students from urban areas also lack a good working knowledge of Kyrgyz. Some universities try to develop teaching in English, which has its downside in making anthropology studies even more elitist.

²⁵ Higher Education Support Program.

²⁶ <http://www.csen.org/BuildAnthroEurasia/BuildAnthroEurasia.html>, access: 10.01.2018.

²⁷ Elsewhere, the project's initiator John Schoeberlein described Soviet science as dogmatic and ideology-driven thus unable to harbour serious theory development (compare: Schoeberlein 2009).

²⁸ American anthropologists who were engaged in dialogue with Soviet ethnographers in the Soviet period put it more mildly – as a difference of languages and/or scope in the discipline's names in the USSR and USA (Dunn and Dunn 1962, 329).

Despite the patronizing rhetoric of this description which suggests that Kyrgyz (and other post-Soviet) scholars have to be taught how to do things 'properly', the project creates a framework for regular cooperation between scholars from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Western Europe and the USA, who evaluate it very positively as a platform for authentic debates without predetermined answers (private communications with several of the participants). Perhaps, it is the case that demonstrates that the level of rhetoric of academic endeavours and the level of practice are very often discrepant.

International projects and cooperation with individual scholars from the West is an intricate part of the Kyrgyz ethnology/anthropology landscape. Yet cooperation with Western partners is, in principle, problematic and is viewed as such for the simple reason of the immense disparity of power between the different sides in such partnerships (this especially refers to extremely unequal access to economic and academic resources). In the beginning of the 1990s

"(...) there was also a fear that large bodies of rich, original unpublished work might be published by wealthier Western colleagues, possibly without acknowledgement (a genuine fear)" (Stephanie Bunn, private communication).

If direct exploitation was rarely the case, hegemonic relations have been developed in which demotic subjects act according to exogenously rather than endogenously set agendas. I am not suggesting that cooperation should cease, though. Far from it, I am rather calling for more self-reflexivity by all those involved in cooperation. This would be a type of critical reflexivity similar to that exercised with regard to the problem of the unattainable objectivity of knowledge in the humanities.

2.2. Lines of Research in Post-Soviet Kyrgyz Ethnology and Anthropology

Ethnological research in Kyrgyzstan is primarily aimed at the study of ethnic groups, their customs, oral and literary tradition and material culture, including architecture. Among the scholars who have embarked on the tradition of cultural and social anthropology as opposed to ethnography, the anthropology of religion (e.g. beliefs, rituals, shamanism, Islam) is one of the most prominently represented lines of research alongside the studies of ethnic/national identity and history (Aitpaeva, Egemberdieva, Toktogulova 2006; Alymkulov and Ashakeeva 2004; Chotaeva 2004, 2005; Toktogulova 2006, 2007). Relatively new fields of research include the development of political and economic anthropology, with special interest in rural development, urban anthropology, new perspectives in the studies of nomadism (Zhapparov 2007), the nexus of politics and kinship (Ismailbekova 2017) and the anthropology of trade (Nasritdinov and O'Connor 2006; Nasritdinov 2007, 2012) as well as research into the influence of ecological and geographic aspects of the environment on cultural practices and vice versa. Migration has also become an important line of research (e.g., Zhapparov 2009; Fryer, Nasritdinov, Satybaldieva 2014; Nasritdinov 2016). Predictably, there is

also an interest in the theory and methodology of anthropology, though no theoretical framework seems to have been dominant, even if the 'constructivist' approach – the term that often implies Anderson's 'imagined communities' template – is usually considered a viable alternative to the Soviet ethnos theory. At the same time, I have not come across either sustained critique of the Marxist theoretical framework or proposals for engaging in alternative (grand) theories. Rather, ethnologists/anthropologists are more concerned with methodological issues and testing the relative advantages of participant observation as opposed to expedition research. (In the AUCA, Malinowski-type fieldwork is treated as the ideal way to practice anthropology as a discipline; however, in actual fact a lot of research relies on literary and historical sources due to their accessibility and relatively low cost, although staff puts a lot of strenuous effort to secure external funds for fieldwork trips, through research grants or otherwise, and in some cases succeeds). Folklore studies and linguistic anthropology fall within the group of research interests that are a continuation of Soviet ethnological and folklore studies but some new approaches are applied within this subfield e.g. in narrative and travel writing analysis (Dyikanbaeva 2005; Turdalieva 2005, 2009). The actual distinction between ethnology and anthropology only appears in certain contexts (e.g. in its strongest form perhaps in ReSet projects and at the AUCA), while in the others both terms are used interchangeably. Moreover, the bulk of research projects undertaken are clearly interdisciplinary in their theoretical and methodological outlook: history, archaeology, ethnology and historical linguistics is one combination, others include anthropology, political science, sociology and international relations. This interdisciplinarity – or syncretism – of humanistic knowledge is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be destructive for the development of (relatively weakly formed) anthropology. On the other, it might allow for a more innovative outlook in the discipline that would be keener to address the issues relevant to contemporary societies.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over a period of 65 years (1926–91), ethnography (ethnology) in Kyrgyzstan developed as a discipline under Soviet rule. As a consequence, its character was influenced by Soviet state-building imperatives as well as by the tensions between the centre and periphery inherent (although not always overtly articulated) in the Soviet empire. Kyrgyz ethnographers – the national elite – were educated and socialized in Soviet academic institutions (e.g. S. Iliasov, K. Antipina, T. Bayalieva, K. Mambetalieva, I. Moldobaev and others). The political and economic transformation in Kyrgyzstan in 1991 unquestionably affected the development of ethnology and anthropology. The pluralization of political pressures since 1991 has allowed opportunities for theoretical and methodological pluralism in anthropology/ethnology to emerge. However, the

paradigmatic shift within the discipline as such is not as dramatic as one might have expected (compare a similar assessment for Russian anthropology by Funk and Nam 2017). The content of disciplinary knowledge has changed (e.g., new historical narratives, positive assessment of national tradition etc.), but the terminological apparatus of Soviet ethnography has been largely preserved. National traditions, national culture and identity (the key topics of ethnographic studies) are most often approached in essentializing terms (despite some attempts to use ‘constructivist’ approaches). The materialization and aesthetization of the concept of culture have been boosted by nation-building objectives and tourism development incentives as well as by a generally positivist view of science, that is ideally expected to bring some ‘hard data’ and not speculations and hypothesizing (Kanef and King 2004; Pelkmans 2005).

The teaching of ethnology/anthropology follows history-bound curriculums in many of the country’s universities, yet there are also examples of the introduction of a four-field American type anthropology to the academic curriculum (AUCA). The economic conditions in which anthropology departments function are not favourable: quite simply, research funds are meagre. Western grant-giving institutions play an important role in supporting anthropological research and teaching, but their capacities cannot be compared to those of long-term state funding of fundamental research (which is much needed but lacking due to the country’s poverty). What is more, their interest in the region is volatile, which is indirectly proven by Madeleine Reeves’ (2014) statement that the funding available to the western scholars who want to do research in Central Asia dwindled over the period between 2004 and 2014. Moreover, the rationale of international projects (i.e. which themes are supported and which approaches promoted) is not often congruent with that or those of Kyrgyz scholars. In a similar fashion, Petric (2005) has argued that the rationale of international NGOs operating in the region is incompatible with local interests and needs (compare: Petric 2015). Due to the misbalance of power between partners, international projects are inherently problematic regardless of their initiators’ and participants’ intentions. The attempts at building sociocultural anthropology from scratch, in sharp opposition to Soviet ethnography, are bringing very interesting research results, yet they also create tensions within the discipline and among the discipline’s practitioners in the country: those anthropologists who fully embark on the discipline’s new project and those who consider that Soviet ethnology should not be totally dismissed are starting to perceive each other as rival camps with the labels of ‘descriptive’, ‘outdated’ or ‘conformist’ easily attached to one or the other.

The ideological uses of ethnology / anthropology and, generally, the politicization of humanistic knowledge are still very prominent trends in the use of science in society today, although – in comparison with the Soviet period – currently political incentives have become more numerous and decentralized and the geography of pressures has significantly changed. The powerful institutions (national and international) are oper-

ating more through economic and symbolic pressures and less (if at all) through direct coercion. For ‘small ethnology’ like that in Kyrgyzstan, this means that the attainment of a (somewhat) equal status in the new global order of a largely Western-centred and hierarchical neoliberal academy is hardly a feasible prospect (compare a diagnosis of a ‘gloomy’ picture for Russian anthropology by Funk and Nam 2017), despite the brave efforts tirelessly undertaken by the discipline’s practitioners in Kyrgyzstan. Many of the Kyrgyz scholars of younger generation are ‘sucked in’ Western academia (the UK, Germany, USA), as the list of PhD theses defended by Central Asian anthropologists and ethnologists made by Reeves (2014) attests. The peripheral position of Kyrgyz ethnology/anthropology largely remains. On a different scale and with a different intensity, similar processes and tensions are emerging in other countries of the former Eastern bloc (compare: Skalník 2002; Buchowski 2017) and seem to be a paradoxical outcome of the large-scale geopolitical change.

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