

Dynamics of Reciprocity and Networks of the Kyrgyz through Bishkek *Toi* Making

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Abstract

Important life-cycle events in Kyrgyz society are marked by the staging of large, informal feasting celebrations, known collectively as *toi*. This article discusses continuity and change in the materiality and spirituality of *toi* making, specifically in urban Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Organized on a larger scale and with more expenses than elsewhere in the country, Bishkek *toi* demonstrate material and spiritual reciprocities that are crucial in the reproduction of social solidarity and exclusion, as well as poverty, prestige, and power in the post-socialist context.

Keywords

social networking – social solidarity – exclusion – life-cycle celebrations – Bishkek

Introduction

Important life-cycle events in Kyrgyz society are marked by the staging of large, informal feasting celebrations, known collectively as *toi* (Kg).¹ Recognizing the

¹ Kyrgyz language terms are denoted by (Kg) while Russian language terms are denoted by (Ru).

broader social significance of such celebrations beyond the basic observance of life-cycle events, scholars have analyzed *toi* in connection with migration and remittances² and changes in social networking practices stemming from rising poverty, inequality, and marketization.³ Building on these studies, this article discusses continuity and change in the materiality and spirituality of *toi* making in an urban context, specifically in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Organized on a larger scale and with more expenses than elsewhere in the country, Bishkek *toi* demonstrate material and spiritual reciprocities that are crucial in the reproduction of social solidarity and exclusion, poverty, prestige, and power in the post-socialist, urban context. Such reciprocities are important for Kyrgyz in a variety of ways. First, the largely mandatory nature of material reciprocities enacted in *toi* traditionally served to institutionalize extended family and kinship networks. Wealthier relatives, or the “breadwinners,” tended to provide material support for financially weaker families. However, market reforms instituted since the collapse of socialism and subsequent increases in poverty and economic inequality have often had a negative impact on the capacity of poorer families to engage in *toi* and have undermined kinship networks.⁴ This has contributed to an erosion of kinship networks while limiting further class stratification in Kyrgyz society and likely impeding further development of the middle class. These recent changes are significant, however, beyond the material and financial benefits that can be gained from *toi* participation.

Second, the practice of *toi* making is accompanied by important spiritual reciprocities, particularly the giving and receiving of *bata* (Kg), which is translatable as collective blessings. Although the expenses of *toi* are sensitive to household budgets, receiving collective blessings and spiritual support are often viewed as more valuable and beneficial, leading some to criticize the material expenses inherent in Bishkek *toi* as wasteful. Somewhat related to *bata*, the philosophical-moral concept of *namyz* (Kg), which is translatable as honor, dignity, and moral obligation, is another important motivating factor in the staging of *toi*. In order to maintain one’s *namyz*, important life events such as

2 Madeleine Reeves, “Black Work, Green Money: Remittances, Ritual, and Domestic Economies in Southern Kyrgyzstan,” *Slavic Review*, 71, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 108–134; Igor Rubinov, “Migration, Development, and the ‘Toi Economy’: Cultural Integration of Remittances in Northern Kyrgyzstan,” https://src.auca.kg/images/stories/files/Igor_Rubinov.

3 Kathleen Kuehnast and Nora Dudwick, “Better a Hundred Friends Than a Hundred Rubles? Social Networks in Transition—The Kyrgyz Republic,” Washington dc, World Bank Working Paper no. 39, 2004.

4 Kuehnast and Dudwick, “Better a Hundred Friends Than a Hundred Rubles?”

births, marriages, and deaths must be marked with *toi*. *Namyz* is thus essential for understanding how power and prestige are recreated in *toi*. Moreover, through the concept of *namyz* we can see how *toi* also provide a stage for the reconstruction of gender identities in contemporary Kyrgyz society. As the Kyrgyz kinship system is characterized by patrilinearity, *namyz* is closely associated with the father of the family and its maintenance, partially through successful *toi* hosting, is widely considered necessary for maintaining family reputation. Similarly, women's gender roles are recreated through their obligatory participation as hosts, but also in preparing the event, arranging tables, and preparing food (though men are chiefly responsible for slaughtering and preparing meat dishes).

In this article we analyze *toi* making and factors that have influenced its evolution in the post-Soviet urban context of Bishkek. The sheer number and diversity of prestigious venues that have opened for business, and which fall in and out of fashion from year to year, make this a topic of considerable interest and indicate how *toi* making in Bishkek is both more diverse and dynamic than in other cities and areas of Kyrgyzstan. Our research is related to the theme of this special issue "Reclaiming Bishkek", in several ways. *Toi* making reflects important economic, social, and cultural changes happening in Bishkek; as the capital city, Bishkek is the largest and most cosmopolitan urban space in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, however, Bishkek's urban environs have experienced considerable inward migration and urban sprawl throughout its new neighborhoods, called *novostroiki* (Ru). The vitality of traditional rites that are reproduced and recreated on a daily basis in Bishkek are thus a bricolage of the collective consciousness in Kyrgyz society interpreted and enacted in different ways based on participants' home regions and current class constraints. Such physical, material, and ideological "glocalization"⁵ makes the city hybrid and multifaceted.

In order to illuminate the particularities related to Bishkek *toi* making, this article presents historical discussion alongside ethnographic and interview case materials from a 2013 wedding celebration.⁶ Additionally, it draws on informal interviews conducted with *toi* hosts and participants, as well as the authors' first-hand experiences of weddings, births, birthdays, bridal farewells, and other *toi* events held in Bishkek and elsewhere in the country. Since *toi* entail obligatory reciprocities, most interviewees have been both

5 Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995), 25–44.

6 Informants' names have been changed for anonymity.

hosts and guests at a variety of events. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The following section briefly discusses the nature and historical roots of gift reciprocity and how it developed during the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods alongside pre-Islamic, Islamic, and atheistic ideologies. Next, we locate contemporary *toi* making practices through discussing key continuities and changes from the historical details just discussed. The penultimate section presents our ethnographic case materials before an extended discussion concludes the paper.

***Toi* Making through History**

Although subject to myriad external pressures, not least forced collectivization during the Soviet era, the Kyrgyz have maintained a number of traditions and rituals that are reproduced in the practice of collective celebrations and memorial events. These events may be divided into two categories: *zhakshylyk* (Kg), which refer to joyous celebrations, and *zhamandyk* (Kg), which refer to afflictions, such as deaths. All occasions subsumed in *zhakshylyk* and *zhaman-dyk* are unavoidable in one's life and are key parts of Kyrgyz customs, collectively termed *salt* (Kg). What we have thus far referred to as *toi* technically only occur on *zhakshylyk* occasions, which include the celebration of birthdays; the birth of a child (*zhentek/nariste/beshik toi*); the first birthday of a child (*tush-oo toi*); and weddings (*uilonuu toi*), among other life-cycle events. Although not termed *toi*, the events arranged to mark deaths and the anniversaries of a death (*ash*) bear some important similarities. It is through the material and spiritual resources engaged in these events that the ethno-cultural identity of the Kyrgyz people is daily recreated and strengthened. The Kyrgyz *toi* is thus the practice of ongoing mutual reciprocities that mark many passages of life according to reimagined customs and a particular history.

The earliest recorded accounts of feasting celebrations occur in Kyrgyz folklore in the Manas epic, which relates such celebrations around the transition from one stage of life to another:

To honor the birth of his son
 The brave Jakip slaughtered now
 Five hundred of his mares Happy
 at having a son,
 He also set aside to slaughter
 Three hundred cows,
 He killed countless sheep,

He killed sheep in abundance,
 He killed rams for the feast.
 All this was quite unbelievable.
 Since it was bay Jakip's feast
 The Kara Kalmyks, the Manchu people
 Came in large numbers,
 The Türgoots all came,
 A great many of Jakip bay's livestock
 Were slaughtered for the feast.⁷

The birth, marriage, and military achievements of the main epical hero, Manas, are marked with the organizing of feasts, including the slaughter of numerous domestic animals and invitations to many relatives and guests. In the past, not only were the passages of life celebrated with feasts, but migrations from one pasture land to another were also commonly marked with *toi*, including entertainment such as horseback games, musical competitions, and epical recitations. For instance, early British travelers noted Kyrgyz festivities as incorporating *baige* (Kg), a game played on horseback. A key concept within this tradition of *toi* is *bata*. As these early accounts noted, *bata* was a way to communicate with *arbak* (Kg), the spirits of ancestors, and ask them for protection and good fortune. Spirits were divided into good and bad. In order to receive protection from good spirits, people had to receive *bata*, and to this day it is widely believed that the degree of protection increases in effectiveness when *bata* is received from many relatives and respected elders.⁸

Bata/arbak practices indicate the extent of spiritual syncretism or hybridity that has historically existed in Central Asia. Islam spread throughout the region in the seventh and eighth centuries. Among the Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomads, however, it was adopted later and more selectively. The faithful tended to combine Islam with local religious beliefs, resulting in a hybrid form of spirituality.⁹ This involved pre-Islamic beliefs such as in Tengri, the god of the

7 E. Köçümkulkızı, "The Kyrgyz Epic Manas." Accessed January 30, 2017. <http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/folklore/manas/manasintro.html>.

8 Ellsworth Huntington, *The Pulse of Asia: A Journey in Central Asia Illustrating the Geographic Basis of History* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1907); Ch. Valikhanov, *Zapiski o Kirgizakh*, ed. A. Margulan (Alma-Ata: Redaktsiia Kazakhskoi Sovetskoi ensiklopedii, 1985); Ella Sykes, *Through Deserts and Oases of Central Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1920).

9 E. Krivets, *Islam v Tsentral'noi Azii* (Moscow: Lenom, 1999); H. Paksoy, "Tengri in Eurasia," 2009, <http://historicaltextarchive.com>; Sergei Polyakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (Armonk, ny: M.E. Sharpe, 1992).

sky, that began transforming and “Tengrifying” clerical Islam.¹⁰ In contrast to this, some scholars have argued that in Central Asia Tengrism, also sometimes referred to as shamanism, was highly Islamized to the extent that a new religious identity—Islamized Shamanism—was created.¹¹ In either case, *bata* remained the spiritual essence of *toi*. As a form of sacred appeal to Tengri and the spirits of ancestors, *bata* combined with forms of Islamic prayer. Gathered people repeated wishes following the *moldo* (a local variety of mullah: Kg) who with sacred words from the Quran also made pronouncements such as *arbak-tar koldosun* (“let the spirits of ancestors protect you”), *arbaktar raazy bolsun* (“let the spirits be happy with you”), and *eldin batasy tiysin* (“may you have the people’s blessings”). This spiritual interconnection and symbiosis further strengthened in Central Asia when, in the late nineteenth century, the Jadid reformist movement became influential in the region.¹²

During the Soviet period, *toi* practices continued to mark the passages of life of Kyrgyz, but the ideological and material grounding was quite different from the pre-Soviet period. *Toi* were still conducted with a view to acquiring *bata*; however, blessings were increasingly appropriated into the atheistic ideology and Islamic prayers were seldom recited. Sometimes an absurd situation emerged when the guests of *toi* collectively wished blessings while referring to the Communist Party, socialism, Lenin, and other ideological figures and slogans. Even today *bata* speeches and toasts retain elements of this, calling for improvements in the strength of the state. At the same time, however, in the Soviet era *toi* still connected multiple generations, and the older relatives and guests, especially from villages and regions, helped maintain the earlier (pre-Soviet) beliefs and traditional customs. Another important aspect of Soviet *toi*

10 Paksoy, “Tengri in Eurasia.” Tengri is the main god of the Turkic-Mongolian pantheon, see: N.G. Aupov, *Tengrianstvo kak otkrytoe mirovozzrenie* (Almaty: Kaznpu imeni Abaya, 2012); Frederic-Marie Bergounioux and Joseph Goetz, *Primitive and Prehistoric Religions* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966), 80; A. Bisenbaev, *Mify Drevnikh Turkov* (Almaty, 2007); Peter Brent, *The Mongol Empire: Genghis Khan: His Triumph and his Legacy* (London: Book Club Associates, 1976); Lev Gumilev, *Drevnie Turki* (Moskva: ast, 2002), 85–87; S.G. Klyashtorny, *Istoriia Tsentral'noi Azii i pamyatniki runicheskogo pis'ma* (spb, 2003), 321–323; D. Sarangerel, *Chosen by the Spirits* (Rochester, vt: Destiny Books, 2001); S. Ugedzhekov, *Sotsial'naiia struktura rannesrednevekovykh kyrgyzov* (Abakan: Abakan State University, 2003).

11 Thierry Zarcone and Angela Hobart, *Shamanism and Islam: Sufism, Healing Rituals, and Spirits in the Muslim World* (London: Tauris, 2012).

12 Adeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); A. Kubatova, *Kyrgyzstandagy dzhadichilik kiyimyly* (Bishkek: Print-Express, 2013).

was the influence of Russian culture in terms of dress, food, and traditions. For instance, *uilonuu toi* (Kg), referring to a wedding ceremony, was often referred to as the “Komsomol wedding,” taking its name from the youth wing of the Communist Party. The Komsomol wedding featured Russian music, European-style white wedding dresses, invitation cards in the Russian language, and Russian cuisine. Reciprocity was also configured more by the exchange of gifts, particularly the coveted “deficit goods” (scarce luxury items), rather than money. Additionally, *Kalpak* (a traditional hat made from felt and worn by men), *chapan* (traditional winter clothing), *joluk* (a scarf worn by women), and *tebetei* (winter outerwear trimmed with wild animal fur and worn by men), became essential gifts circulating among the network of people involved in the *toi*.



figure 1 *The abandoned Naryn Restaurant, Bishkek in 2016.*
Picture taken by Cholpon Turdalieva.

During the Soviet period, wedding *toi* were primarily organized at the regional home of the groom's family. However, some families attached to the Communist Party and state structures conducted theirs in Frunze (Bishkek's Soviet-era name) at restaurants such as Naryn, Ala-Too, Seil, Barchyn, Kyrgyzstan, Issyk-Kul, and others, anticipating the popularity of such venues in the post-Soviet era. For instance, the Naryn restaurant, built in 1984 in the same Soviet style as the Kyrgyz government headquarters and the central library in Frunze, was one of the more prestigious and expensive venues at which to host a *toi*. Despite its relative cost and Soviet design features, *toi* held there continued the culture of building solidarity through the traditions of reciprocity and hospitality. *Toi* were organized with numerous circles of guests arranged according to degree of kinship, collegueship, and friendship, and gift-giving primarily consisted of goods rather than money.

Locating Contemporary *Toi*: Forms, Concepts, and Meanings

The post-Soviet period has featured considerable socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes that have greatly influenced and renewed interest in *toi* making practices. In particular, these changes have brought about new forms and models of delayed exchange with varying influence on social relations, national identity, and notions of prestige, alongside kinship solidarity and support. One significant change brought about by the penetration of the market economy is that gifts are increasingly bestowed in cash rather than commodity form. The “dyadic reciprocity,”¹³ which in this case refers to the relations of *toi* host and guests, dictates the correct sum to be given within economic constraints such as inflation and unemployment. Such cash and other gifts are meticulously recorded in a special journal so they are not forgotten and will be reciprocated appropriately at the next opportunity. Failure to reciprocate usually damages the relationship between parties.

Toi as a form of reciprocity in contemporary Bishkek—and the country in general—continues to be influenced in a variety of ways. Open access to the internet, a lively and relatively free media, and increased opportunities for travel have expanded the scope of practices acceptable in organizing *toi* according to the desired quality, style, and taste of the hosts. However, recent trends in *toi* making toward larger and more resplendent events have attracted criticism from both within and outside Kyrgyzstan. *Toi* are sometimes believed to be

13 Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972).

excessively costly, and such high costs have been well publicized.¹⁴ During 2011, elected officials in the Kyrgyz Parliament, the *Jogorku Kenesh* (Kg), discussed the possibility of introducing legislation to limit expenditures on *toi* for state employees.¹⁵ While this earlier proposal was not endorsed, during 2016 a similar proposal to ban ostentatious displays by public officials and their spouses was introduced by Member of Parliament A. Salyanova. The bill was rejected with 70 (out of 120) votes; opponents argued that the proposal might contribute to the disintegration of Kyrgyz society, erode traditions, and contribute to *mankurtism*.¹⁶ Attempts to regulate similar aspects of the ritual economy instituted in Tajikistan¹⁷ and Uzbekistan have had limited success, with their enforcement hampered by the difficulty of regulating frequent social events, along with the ubiquity of graft among law-enforcement officers. Interestingly, while public opinion (observable, for example, in online comments on newspaper articles) is polarized, there is some desire to clamp down on public officials and their perceived double standards. Nevertheless, despite these sentiments and initiatives, *toi* held by wealthier members of the political elite are among the most grandiose celebrations visible in Bishkek today. Such events often include several hundred guests and even feature performances by internationally famous pop singers alongside elaborate and ostentatious exchanges of gifts including items such as TVs, cars, and apartments.¹⁸ The *toi* of “political celebrities” are thus very public and, as such, their replication is desirable.

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- 14 Iskenderov, “Zagonim v podpol’e i *toi*”; N. Osmonova, “V Kyrgyzstane predlagaiut zakonom ogranichit’ chislo gostei na svadbakh i torzhestvakh do 100–150 chelovek,” 24.kg, February 4, 2016. Accessed January 30, 2017. <http://24.kg/vlast/27212>; Rubinov, “Migration, Development, and the ‘*Toi* Economy’”; D. Zabrudskii, “V Kyrgyzstane snova vystupaiut protiv pyshnykh toev,” ktk.kz, April 20, 2011. <http://www.ktk.kz/ru/news>.
- 15 Iskenderov, “Zagonim v podpol’e i *toi*”; D. Zabrudskii, “V Kyrgyzstane snova vystupaiut protiv pyshnykh toev.”
- 16 William P. Rivers, “Attitudes towards Incipient *Mankurtism* among Kazakhstani College Students,” *Language Policy* 1 (2002): 159–174. In a figurative sense, the word “mankurt” is used to refer to a person who has lost contact with their historical and national roots, and was notably depicted by Chinghiz Aitmatov, a famous Kyrgyz literary figure.
- 17 The law, “On the Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations and Rituals in the Republic of Tajikistan,” stipulated the number of people who could be invited to a wedding ceremony (150 guests) or circumcision feast (60), as well as the amount of food that could be served and the number of cars that could be included in a wedding procession (no more than four).
- 18 Beishenbai Jeenbekov, “Speaker, korruptsioner i konechno zhe millioner,” *Zona.kz*, December 12, 2013. Accessed January 30, 2017. <http://www.zonakz.net/blogs/user/beyshenbay/19810.html>.

They set trends through providing examples of the shifting standards and modes of appropriate celebration in successful *toi* making.

The process of organizing a *toi* event has important material and philosophical-cultural expressions, which can be considered in terms of three phases: preparing, implementing, and completing the event. The quality of the event depends not only on the amount of money invested, but also on the number of people who attend and who express their participation via material support (usually monetary contributions) and also moral-symbolic blessings (*bata*, as described above). Participation in these events is essential for the formation and strengthening of social bonds, first among kin and second on the level of non-familial relations that includes friends, neighbors, and past and present colleagues. However, while not every Kyrgyz family can afford to cover the cost of such activities, many feel compelled to go into debt to be able to organize these activities throughout their lives. This problem has been exacerbated in the post-Soviet period in several ways. First, the collapse of socialism and its replacement with a market economy has vastly expanded the range of goods available for consumption during *toi*. At the same time, this change has eased legal restrictions on individual freedoms enabling *toi* festivities to be pursued largely as hosts see fit, while also apportioning financial resources more unevenly throughout society. The result, as described above, has been that an increasingly wealthier Kyrgyz elite, the *novyi-Kyrgyz*, through co-opting the “invention of tradition”¹⁹ have been able to reinforce and enhance their social status and solidify their economic and political status. Thus, Kyrgyzstan’s recent political economy and the (re)invention of tradition become entangled, and Bishkek’s urban geography clearly demonstrates this post-Soviet divide.

The financial indebtedness that can result from *toi* hosting may be partially explained with the concept of *namyz*, outlined above, which is a key motivating factor in *toi*. Historically, Kyrgyz have considered *namyz* a key component of their individual character, with the acknowledged strength of one’s *namyz* reflecting one’s good reputation, place, and status in society. Having *namyz* means that one has sufficient experience to deal with the rigors of life through taking responsibility and resolving problems in all their manifestations. It is through this moral concept that Kyrgyz have cultivated important relationships, and in this way *toi* form an arena for social communication and

19 Terrence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” in Eric Hobsbaw and Terrence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211–262.

social networking that has become an essential part of realizing *namyz*. To not conduct *toi* or other collective gatherings when one experiences either an important life-cycle event or the death of a close relative can thus be perceived among one's peers as eroding their dignity and good reputation; as eroding their *namyz*. Some common Kyrgyz sayings reflect these sentiments: *namyz ketpesin* ("let honor not slip away"), *namyzka tuugan er* ("a man who stands by his word"), and *nasmyztan zhygyl* ("a drop in dignity is disgraceful").

The cultural practice of *toi* is flexible and variable in different parts of Kyrgyzstan, depending on local practices and traditions.²⁰ In Bishkek, these variable customs combine and are subject to a range of cosmopolitan and modernizing influences, and significant cost inflation. The forms and processes of organization of *toi* celebrations and mourning ceremonies in Bishkek are thus distinguished by pecuniary and cultural characteristics and patterns. As a means of investigating Bishkek *toi*, we examine the experience of a Kyrgyz *uilonuu toi*, a wedding celebration that Toktobek hosted for his son, Kanat, in Bishkek during 2013.

Toktobek's *Uilonuu Toi*

The *uilonuu toi* is the most important and costly *toi* and often includes hundreds of guests and the performance of many Kyrgyz customs. Reflecting this trend, different *toikhana* (Kg), restaurants and cafes specializing in *toi* and related functions, have become a ubiquitous feature in Bishkek's urban geography and an essential component of the city's renewal and reclamation in the post-Soviet period. Diversity in the menu offerings, interior and exterior design, dining environment, location, and services reflects the variety of consumption preferences among prospective hosts.

Uilonuu toi are divided into three stages, each marked with a separate *toi*: the pre-wedding, wedding, and post-wedding, and each involving different ceremonies. The pre-wedding *toi* is limited to very close relatives and friends. During the pre-Soviet period, pre-wedding or engagement *toi* were held in the bride's parental home. Close relatives, the chief of the kin, and even tribal leaders came to the *boz ui* (Kg), or *yurt* (Ru) of the bride's parents, and the ceremony was accompanied by the sacrifice of domestic animals and exchange of

²⁰ Rubinov, "Migration, Development, and the 'Toi Economy'."

material goods. The quantity of animals sacrificed depended upon the social and material status of the bride's family. Today, the pre-wedding is usually celebrated with a small group of close relatives who gather at a cafe or at home, and the engagement is fixed by the reciprocal exchange of *kiyit* (Kg), gifts of clothing. Some families give cash instead of *kiyit*. Another ceremony, the *soilo saluu* (Kg), in which the groom's mother hangs earrings on the bride, is also part of this *toi*.

Following this tradition, the bride's family may conduct a pre-wedding *toi* exclusively for their own relatives, friends, and colleagues who constitute that family's primary social network. This tradition is called *Kyz uzatuu* (Kg), the bride's farewell, and is the traditional sendoff for the bride when she departs her parental home and (officially) spends the first night alone with her husband. Nowadays, some wealthier families conduct this ritual in the form of a miniature wedding and guests from bride's side also attend. From the groom's side, usually only his parents and immediate family are invited. Kanat's bride, Asel, did not have a *Kyz uzatuu* since she is from a single-parent family that did not have the financial means to arrange one. Her case demonstrates the impact of economic circumstances on the performance of some Kyrgyz customs and how some are not practiced if the families are too poor.

Toktobek's family live in Luxemburg village in Issyk-Ata district, around 17 kilometers from Bishkek. Like many modern families, they decided to celebrate their weddings at the Salkyn-Tor *Toikhana*, one of the larger and more reputable restaurants in the capital. Anara, Kanat's mother, explained the choice of venue in the following terms:

We have chosen a *toikhana* in Bishkek. Since we have two children, and Kanat is our only son, we would like to organize his wedding in a memorable way. In the future, he will keep all our family ties, our home, and other properties. Another reason [for choosing the *toikhana* in Bishkek] is that in our district there are not any large restaurants. We are going to invite more than 100 people, it will be more convenient and prestigious to conduct a wedding in Bishkek than in Kant [the district capital not far from Luxemburg].²¹

Anara vividly described the privileged status of a male child in contemporary Kyrgyz culture. Kanat is the future heir of his father's name, heir of the kin-tribal ties, and responsible for maintaining these reciprocal relationships into the future. As the 26-year-old Kanat explained:

21 Author's interview with "Anara," Bishkek, 2013.

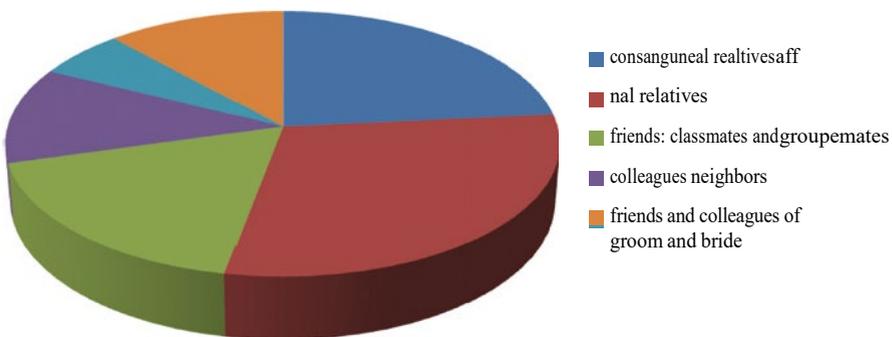
My parents want to organize my wedding in Bishkek since the cafes and restaurants are larger and fancier. Although they are expensive, they will pay and I think it is good for our family. On one day all the guests can come and celebrate our wedding with us.²²

Asel, the 25-year old bride, was also very pleased with the choice of *toi* location. She revealed the sense of shame she might have felt were the *toi* held in their village outside of Bishkek:

My wedding will be at Salkyn-Tor restaurant in Bishkek and I am so lucky. I will be proud to invite my friends to this place. I was so afraid that it would be possibly conducted in Kant or even in Luxemburg village.²³

The sentiments expressed by the bride and groom reflect some of the emotions involved in *toi* making, the desire that the *toi* be “memorable” despite the expenses that incur as a result. Bishkek’s *toikhana* are well-prepared to cater to these desires. The desires of parents such as Toktobek and Anara demonstrate an important ongoing source of this demand.

The seating arrangements within *toi* are also of considerable concern for the hosts. The resulting table layout and seating chart should distribute the guests according to the hierarchy of kinship-tribal and social connections in order to avoid negative post-celebration gossip, complaints, and resentments that are thought to undermine the *bata* received in the *toi*. Close relatives from the groom’s parents and bride’s parents should also be placed in equal order. Parents of the new couple and grandparents are usually seated in one line of tables and close to the center of the restaurant hall.



²² Author’s interview with “Kanat,” Bishkek, 2013.

²³ Author’s interview with “Asel,” Bishkek, 2013.

Toktobek, as the *toi* host, allocated 32 seats to the bride's family and their relatives. However, these seats were not sufficient, and the parents of the bride bought an additional 20 seats for their relatives. This illustrates the negotiation and compromise that takes place between new in-laws, and the scale of their reciprocity networks. The number of relatives from both sides ideally should be equal. School and university friends occupied three tables, and this component of the reciprocity network is very important since, in many cases, it is financially and socially more stable and supportive. The guest list included more friends than colleagues because Toktobek had retired from his previous occupation due to health reasons and had only recently commenced employment with a new firm. Colleagues were also represented; however, they tended to be from the side of the groom's parents. Since only two colleagues from the bride's parents came, they were placed at the table of the colleagues of the groom's parents. In the reciprocity and hierarchy of ordering, neighbors are also honored guests. A Kyrgyz proverb reads: *alys tuganyndan jakyn koshynan zhakshy* ("Sometimes a close neighbor is better than a distant relative.") At Toktobek's *toi*, neighbors occupied one table and contributed a sum of money that reflected and reciprocated an earlier exchange at a gathering of neighbors. The final segment of Figure 2 consisting of friends and colleagues of the groom and bride shows the involvement of the younger generation in the *toi*. The attention to detail characterizing seating arrangements and allocation of guests is crucial in avoiding offense, maintaining *namyz*, and maximizing *bata*.

All invited guests make cash contributions, called *koshumcha* (Kg), and these are an essential component of staging *toi*. The quantity of *koshumcha* provided by different types of guests depends on several factors. Relatives of the host usually predetermine the amount of *koshumcha* they will contribute in advance. For instance, close relatives establish a certain value of *koshumcha* for different types of *toi*. The *koshumcha* for a wedding in Bishkek starts at around \$60 and can be considerably more. The amount of contribution also depends on the social and material well-being of relatives and *toi* hosts. For instance, sisters and brothers of Kanat's mother collected \$500 since Kanat is the only son of their sister and because her husband, Toktobek, was unemployed for a lengthy period. The amount of *koshumcha* also changes with inflation. However, all Kyrgyz families keep meticulous records of the gifts they receive so they know the precise amounts that need to be reciprocated at the next event. These notes record gifts both of money and other items. Non-monetary gifts include garments, headwear (scarves and hats), kitchenware, and other items for the home. The main non-monetary gifts given during wedding are the national outwear (*chapan*) for new in-laws, headwear (*ak joluk* or white scarves) for female parents and the bride, and *kalpak* (the traditional Kyrgyz

felt hat) for male parents and the groom. The friends of the bride and groom who attended the celebration also gave different valuable household goods such as kitchenware and television sets. However, money is the primary tool of reciprocity within all circles of relatives, friends, and colleagues. It is because of this fact that the expenses associated with weddings have risen so much in the post-socialist period.

Toi are mainly conducted in late summer and autumn. At this time of year, livestock such as horses and sheep are cheaper than during winter or early spring, while fresh fruits and other foods are also more readily available. Despite coinciding with the peak harvest season, *toi* expenses remain high. At Kanat's *uilonuu toi* the cost per meal was 1,200 som (~\$25).²⁴ There were 230 guests in total, seated at 28 tables with eight people to each table, suggesting that the cost of food alone was in the vicinity of 300,000 som (\$6,000). These expenses included: one horse costing as much as 80,000 som (~\$1,600); alcohol and other beverages: 48,000 som (~\$1,000); gifts and prizes for guests: 24,000 som (~\$500); and meals: 136,000 som (~\$2,700). Additional expenses included renting luxury vehicles, organizing official wedding procedures, purchasing the wedding garments (such as the bridal dress), payment of *kalyng* or bride price, beverages, other gifts, and other indirect expenses.

Kanat's mother explained that the total expenses for the wedding were about \$8,000. Guests' cash gift contributions totaled around 272,000 som (~\$5,500), leaving a significant shortfall to be covered by the immediate family. To put these costs into perspective, according to World Bank data, in 2015 Kyrgyzstan's GNI/capita (PPP) was \$3,300. Toktobek had been recently unemployed, but his wife Anara, son Kanat, and unmarried daughter, Aksalkyn, do work, and together bring around 40,000 som (~\$800) into the household budget per month. Although the guests' contributions did not cover all expenses for the wedding, they were still a substantial source of support. These calculations demonstrate Toktobek's family's strong reciprocity circles as so many contributed so generously to the *toi*. This also means, however, that in return Toktobek and his family are obliged to contribute *koshumcha* of equal or greater value when they themselves are guests at future *toi*. In cases where Kyrgyz families are unable to afford these expenses upfront they will often obtain a loan from the bank or friends, a practice that has generated considerable criticism.

The wedding *toi* shows the extent to which Kyrgyz society is integrated into the global market in terms of fashion and consumerism. The richer the family, the more diverse and international the entertainment provided during the

24 Based on the August 2013 exchange rate of us\$1 = 48.8 som.

toi. The entertainment industry in independent Kyrgyzstan is quite developed relative to the Soviet era. The services of performers from different genres of traditional and contemporary music are available and are commonly hired for weddings. For instance, the cultural component of Kanat's wedding included songs by Kyrgyz pop singers, a performance of modern dance, and a performance by a locally famous musician. The *toi* hosts attempted to combine national traditions with contemporary approaches in order to provide a high level of entertainment, which is considered an essential part of hospitality. At the same time, the cost of famous musicians and singers is high. For example, the most popular Kyrgyz pop singers demand more than \$500 for a short performance at a *toi*. However, their inclusion in the ceremony is highly sought after because, in addition to providing good entertainment, the presence of costly, prestigious performers reflects well on the hosts by demonstrating their financial well-being among their peers.

The economic significance of *toi* is reflected in the quality and quantity of restaurant facilities throughout Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the capital where cafes and restaurants such as Salkyn-tor, Ala-Too, Kainar, Frunze, Altyn Kazyna, Parliament and others with seating for 300 to 700 people can be found. These establishments provide high standards of service and catering for the wealthiest families. Costs for the food and services varies from 800 to 1,300 som per invited guest. During the more ostentatious events held in these establishments, such as the weddings of political elites, networking reinforced with similar—albeit larger investments—openly takes place. In contrast to these wealthier establishments, within Bishkek's new and poorer neighborhoods (*novostroiki*) such as Archa-Beshik, Kara-Jigach, Ak-Orgo, and others there are new *toi*-oriented cafes with seating for more than 300 guests. These cafes accommodate customers of different income levels and also accommodate different types of celebrations. Mourning commemorations, for example, may cost as little as 150 som per person. This flexibility of catering options within commercial establishments and the high rates of internal migration into the *novostroiki* have contributed significantly to the production and reproduction of Kyrgyz customs around life-cycle events, solidarity networks through the mandatory reciprocal exchanges, and the increase in social and class differentiation of Kyrgyz society in Bishkek.

Another interesting aspect of *toi* is the differing perceptions between generations. The older generation tends to view *toi* as unchangeable and as necessary for building one's social network and maintaining ties among relatives. The Kyrgyz proverb *El menen el bolosun* ("You can be part of the people only with the people") *El menen adam bolosun* ("with people you can be a human being") demonstrates the logic of this phenomenon from the perspective of

the older generation. Kyrgyz are socialized in the communal environment, through constant relationships with relatives, friends, and others. The older generation in Bishkek tries to attend all types of *toi* since it marks their presence in the social life of their community and continuation of *bata* traditions. The younger generation in Bishkek perceives *toi* in the same way in principle; however, they sometimes criticize their parents for frequent attendance at *toi*. During an interview with Salkyn, a 64-year old widow, she explained that her married sons living in the city had berated her for frequent participation in these celebrations. In order to avoid their criticism, she re-entered the work-force to regain her financial independence and now spends almost all her earnings on *toi*:

If I do not go to the *toi*, my relatives will think negatively about my sons, and I will also become cut off from my friends and family. But if I participate in the *toi* and share everything, then in the future all my *toi* obligations will be shared by others.²⁵

Two important circumstances are contained in Salkyn's answer. She worries about the reputation of her sons since social relations in Kyrgyz society are still male-centered and as such are developed through the reciprocity of the father, husband, and son. Salkyn does not want her relatives to think about her sons in a negative way and blame them for the disconnection of the natal family from the reciprocal networks of numerous relatives. Another reason for her participation in different *toi* is her willingness to receive symbolic protection for her sons and their families. The quantity and quality of *bata* importantly depends on the number of people present at *toi*. In this sense, receiving *bata* is perceived as more important and valuable than costly material and financial expenses.

Concluding Thoughts

Because of the complexity and diversity in practice of *toi* making and associated lack of research, *toi* remain under-theorized. Both joyous and somber festivities and events have been analyzed in terms of their spiritual dimensions.²⁶

25 Author's interview with "Salkyn," Bishkek, 2013.

26 N. Choibekov, "Ritualy obmena kak otobrazhenie politicheskoi i sotsial'noi etiki iz traditsionnykh znaniy," *Vestnik Akademii Upravleniya pri Presidente kr*, #18 (2013), 1–9; T. Ryskulova, "The Social Function of Bata Performance Rituals," *auca Academic Review* (2009).

According to Ryskulova, *bata* or collective blessing in its different etiological and ontological variations, demonstrates important ties with Islam. Through expressing an appeal to Allah and also to one's *arbak* (Kg), the spirits of ancestors, those gathered at the *toi* call for the protection of the *toi* holders and their relatives.²⁷ *Bata* continues not only in the verbal-spiritual form, but also in a material form. For example, at the conclusion of a *toi* guests are given a *pakyet* (Ru) containing leftover food from the feast—or *dastarkan* (Kg)—laid for the *toi*. Collectively, the meal including the meat, confectionary, fruit, and bread portions are called *yrys-keshik* (Kg), translating to “happy leftover food.” This food is considered to be a transmitter of happiness when it is brought home and shared, thus spreading *bata* to the guests' families upon consumption.²⁸

Though by no means divorceable from this spiritual context, elements of *toi* have also been analyzed in more material terms, such as in connection with migrant worker's remittances.²⁹ This aspect of the *toi* economy spreads across international borders with Kyrgyz migrant laborers working abroad, mainly in Kazakhstan and Russia, who are motivated to invest their remittances into their relatives' festivities as well as their own celebrations. This motivation has increased cash transfers from the country of migration to the home country,³⁰ and these investments are increasingly construed as an important way of remaining connected to family and community after prolonged absences abroad.³¹ Social networking as a key component of the material importance of *toi* was also elaborated in a key earlier contribution from Kuehnast and Dudwick.³² These authors noted the continuities in social networking practices from the Soviet period but highlighted important changes in the post-Soviet context as Kyrgyz society became more unequal and the types of guests present at one's *toi*—such as extended family versus colleagues and other economically strategic relationships—shifted toward the latter.³³ As these authors noted, the changing political economy of the 1990s, particularly rising inequality, influenced significant changes in *toi* making and social networking practices toward strategic inclusion and exclusion.

Accessed January 30, 2017. http://elibrary.auca.kg:8080/dspace/bitstream/123456789/335/1/Ryskulova_2009_2.pdf.

27 Ryskulova, “The Social Function of Bata Performance Rituals.”

28 Choibekov, “Ritualy obmena kak otobrazhenie politicheskoi i sotsial'noi etiki iz traditsionnykh znanii.”

29 Reeves, “Black Work, Green Money”; Rubinov, “Migration, Development, and the ‘Toi Economy’.”

30 Rubinov, “Migration, Development, and the ‘Toi Economy,’” 3–4.

31 Reeves, “Black Work, Green Money,” 114.

32 Kuehnast and Dudwick, “Better a Hundred Friends than a Hundred Rubles?”

33 Ibid.

Extending this research, we argue that in Kyrgyz society social networking and solidarity is, in significant part, built through the *toi*, as demonstrated in Toktobek's story, above. However, as Kuehnast and Dudwick³⁴ rightly point out, these practices have been reimagined, even reinvented,³⁵ in the context of an evolving political economy in which the introduction of democracy and a market economy have brought tremendous upheavals. In contrast to the theorized nature of this introduced market economy, the diverse exchanges that occur within *toi* embody spiritual-religious traditions and norms. The approval and collective blessing, or *eldin batasy* (Kg) and collective sharing of well-being, *yrysky* (Kg), are closely intertwined with both Islamic and pre-Islamic Tengrianic rituals, and these non-pecuniary values have experienced a significant revival in the post-socialist period. However, market-oriented norms such as individualism have also apparently influenced *toi* making practices, and this is evident in a variety of ways. First, as noted above, and as Kuehnast and Dudwick³⁶ and Provis³⁷ argue, the more strategic considerations vis-à-vis *toi* guest lists have eroded patterns of kinship-based association in favor of pecuniary and more status-driven social networking considerations.

Second, *toi* practices include elements of both balanced and unbalanced reciprocity. Most *toi* participants keep meticulous records of previous gifts in a sort of gift ledger with a view to balancing their own future counter-gifts. However, circumstances of "unbalanced" reciprocity are also apparent, wherein for various reasons one may return less, or even nothing at all during the next occasion with deleterious effects on the relationship and leading to social exclusion. In addition, one may return a significantly greater amount of gifts—commonly cash—or hospitality—a grander *toi*—for the purposes of gaining status. As Sahlins noted, "It is precisely through scrutiny of departures from balanced exchange that one glimpses the interplay between reciprocity, social relations, and material circumstances."³⁸ Thus, in considering spiritual and material factors together, we do not simply understand these as complementary or as different sides of the same coin. There exist inherent contradictions and tensions within these practices, particularly between the desire for shared well-being that *bata* practices demonstrate, on one hand, and the desire for

34 Ibid.

35 See, e.g., Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa."

36 Kuehnast and Dudwick, "Better a Hundred Friends than a Hundred Rubles?"

37 Rene S. Provis, "Shifting Social Dynamics and Economic Inequality in the Post-Soviet Space: Networking and Participation in *toi* among the *novyi* Kyrgyz," *Economic Anthropology*, 2, no. 2 (2015): 371–384.

38 Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 190.

high social status at the expense of collective solidarity reflected in changes in networking preferences and departures from balanced reciprocity, on the other hand.

This article has provided examples of *toi* events in Kyrgyzstan to outline contemporary patterns of marking life-cycle events in Kyrgyzstan. The high costs associated with *toi* have often been criticized as wasteful. However, elaborating the many different functions that *toi* fulfill in Kyrgyz society beyond simply marking important events recasts this notion of value. This addresses critics who see expenditures related to *toi* as wasteful and focuses instead on investments within social networks that are an important source of social solidarity and stability in uncertain times. *Toi* making is a practice of cementing kinship, tribal, familial, and non-familial networks through the reciprocal exchange of money, gifts, and hospitality. Beyond these ostensibly calculated investments in social networks, however, the material aspects of the *toi* must also be considered in conjunction with their spiritual dimension. The giving and receiving of *bata* is an important feature of *toi* in which it is believed spiritual protection from bad spirits and misfortune can be obtained. In addition to the material aspects, this spiritual dimension provides a powerful motivation for *toi* making.

Such blessings as *tengri koldosun* (“May you have the god of heaven protecting you”), *kudai koldosun* (“May you have god protecting you”), *arbak koldosun* (“May you have a spirit protecting you”), and *eldin batasy tiysin* (“May you have the blessing of people”) have been spoken since ancient times, and these practices were not displaced by Islam. During Soviet times, collective blessings were also a part of *toi*; however, the spoken content differed. Mostly people and especially elderly guests shared their *bata* using spiritually neutral and at the same time universal phrases: *jakshylyk bolsun, aman bolgula, baktyluu bolgula* (“May you have well-being, may you have good health, and may you be happy”), for example. During the post-Soviet era, *toi* making has changed significantly, reflecting the impact of globalization, the introduction of a market economy and high consumption lifestyles, particularly among Bishkek’s urbanized and wealthy elite. Being a means of reciprocity, Kyrgyz feasts connect different circles of people that are allocated, placed, and ranked according to the relationships with the *toi* hosts, their status in the community, and specific type of relationship. However, while shifting norms around *toi* making may have presented new opportunities for building non-kinship-based strategic alliances, it has also become a mechanism of excluding poorer relatives, thus exacerbating the inequalities inherent in the new market economy. Nevertheless, such practices remain inextricably and paradoxically linked to the contemporary construction of well-being in Kyrgyzstan, and nowhere is this more clearly apparent than in urban Bishkek.