How Relations Make Persons: Rituals Accompanying Childbirth and Socialization of Infants in Kyrgyzstan

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Swetlana Torno
Heidelberg University
swetlana.torno@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de

Abstract

Most ethnographies of childbirth are situated in the field of medical anthropology and focus on the interplay of different medical traditions and power relations. A small- er number of works examine activities and rituals accompanying childbirth in the context of integrating new members into the community and constituting the "person" by means of creating or changing relations to the "socio-cosmological universe." Following the latter, the paper analyzes rituals and practices surrounding childbirth and the socialization of children during their first year of life in Kyrgyzstan. I argue that personhood is established through careful work on relationships to entities situated in the social and cosmic domains of the society. The paper draws on ethnographic research in north Kyrgyzstan and explores ideas about conception, rules of conduct during pregnancy, and the life cycle rituals *zhentek toĭ*, *beshik toĭ*, and *tushoo toĭ*.[1]

Keywords

personhood – conception – childbirth – socialization – ritual – cosmology – Kyrgyzstan

1 I am indebted to Prof. Dr. Roland Hardenberg and DAAD for enabling me to conduct research in Kyrgyzstan in 2009. I also thank Louise Bechtold, Baktygul Tulebaeva, and Sophie Roche for commenting on an earlier version of this article, as well as the anonymous reviewers for *Central Asian Affairs*.

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Introduction

One day in mid-April 2009, Gulnara (a housewife in her mid-twenties) took me to the house of her in-laws, who own a small farm outside the village of Tosor, which is situated on the southern shore of lake Yssyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan.2 Her parents-in-law live here with their two sons and a daughter, while their elder son, Gulnara's husband, resides in their old house in the village center. The father-in-law, a retired mathematics teacher, proudly showed me their blossoming apricot gardens, the main source of income in the region, and their stalls with sheep that will soon be taken to the summer pasture (*zhailoo*). He explained to me how much work he and his family put into the farm, saying that it was worth the effort because it will be passed on to his sons and grand- sons. The conversation went on to discuss the different generations of his family: "I am a happy man, God gave me three sons!" He himself was the youngest of six children and his parents' only son. He noted that when his first child, a daughter who is disabled, was born, he assumed misfortune must have beset his family and became devoted in his prayers to God. Smiling and pointing over to Gulnara, who had given birth to two sons and was pregnant with her third child, he said, "I was praying so hard that now even my grandchildren continue to be boys."

To my mind, at the core of Gulnara's father-in-law's narrative are two important ideas about the notion of the person in Kyrgyz society. The first is that there are a lot of things that an individual person can work on and be successful at—the cultivation of apricot plantations or raising sheep are just two examples. There are things, however, which lie beyond a single person's capacity to influence them, things that are situated in a supra-individual domain and dependent on the relationships that surround this person. One of these is the ability to conceive children. The second idea is that certain human qualities can be transferred between individuals or from one generation to another, happiness and misfortune among them. Taking these observations as a starting point, I ask: What is the notion of the person that lies at the base of ideas

2 This paper presents data from ethnographic fieldwork conducted for an M.A. thesis on rituals and medical practices surrounding childbirth. The research took place from March to April 2009 and in August 2009 in Tosor village, north Kyrgyzstan, whose inhabitants consider themselves Kyrgyz, and also included short visits to the capital, Bishkek, as well as to the largest city in the region, Karakol. During this time, I lived with a host family, conducted semi- structured and open interviews with women of different ages, biomedical practitioners and traditional healers, and was able to observe and videotape most of the rituals and practices I describe here. The names of all interlocutors are changed.

and ritual practices surrounding childbirth and the socialization of infants that I encountered during fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan? How is personhood constituted in these rituals? And what type of relationships to the social and cosmic fields are important in order to create a desirable individual person? Before I explore these questions, I turn my attention to the way anthropologists have approached personhood in different societies.

The Notion of the Person in Anthropology

The notion of the person entered anthropology with Marcel Mauss' seminal lecture in 1938,3 where he emphasized that personhood is culturally con- structed and embedded in social structure and the religious and legal views of a society. Taking an evolutionist approach, Mauss suggested three concepts of personhood—*personnage*, *persona* and *self*—thus pointing to a fundamental difference between indigenous and modern epistemologies. He argues that tribal societies understand the person (*personnage*) as a role to which a particular place and certain rights and duties are assigned. By contrast, modern North Atlantic societies regard every individual person (*self*) as a unique, autonomous being with free will and responsibility for decision-making. Mauss' pupil Louis Dumont, who differentiates between "holistic" and "individualistic" ideologies, elaborated this difference.4 It is important to note that Mauss' study was sociological in nature, i.e. he was interested in the social concept

3 Marcel Mauss, "Eine Kategorie des menschlichen Geistes: Der Begriff der Person und des 'Ich'," in *Soziologie und Anthropologie*, ed. Marcel Mauss, Vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), 221–52. For a comprehensive study of Mauss' argument in light of his entire thinking, the work of the Année School, and his broad use of sources from history, anthropology, philosophy, and linguistics, see Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). In this volume, La Fontaine elaborates on the use of "individual" and "self," which create much confusion in Western conceptualization of the person. For a systematic overview of personhood studies in anthropology, consult Michael Carrithers, "Person," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (London: Routledge, 2012), 523–35.

4 According to Dumont, traditional societies have a "holistic ideology" and place the social whole over a single human being, whereas "individualistic ideologies" stress the importance of each individual person and organize their social institutions accordingly. He is particularly interested in the systems of ideas and values which he calls "ideology," and systematically compared Western and Indian ideologies in Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Louis Dumont, *Individualismus: Zur Ideologie der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1991).

and how different societies came to see personhood at different times. During the last century, ethnographers revealed that there is great variation be- tween societies as to who counts as a person (e.g. including animals, gods, and other objects or excluding women, children, and the uninitiated) and what the necessary components of a person are (e.g. such material and immaterial elements as body, soul, bones, flesh, and spirit). The social concept in Mauss' sense is of interest to me in this paper.

How can we study such an abstract entity as the notion of the person in a society? I would like to introduce three anthropologists who have approached personhood through ideas about conception and socialization rituals at the beginning of life. These works helped me to organize my research data. In her analysis of the concept of the person in Kei society, Cécile Barraud5 combines Dumont's concept of holistic ideology with approaches to Indonesian and Melanesian societies through the study of cosmology.6 In the context of these societies, social structure must be understood in terms of the order of the socio-cosmic universe, which does not oppose social to cosmic or man to nature. The social and the cosmic are interrelated, and components which form the person are derived from different domains of the universe: "A person is constituted through a set of relationships, some of which are established on the level of the house—the smallest social unit—others on the level of the society as a whole."7 Barraud analyzes rituals of birth and death to reveal the

5 Cécile Barraud, "Kei Society and the Person: An Approach through Childbirth and Funerary Rituals," *Ethnos* 55 (1990): 214–31.

6 Indonesian and Melanesian societies are often studied from the point of view of their cosmology, an approach that has a long theoretical tradition in French and Dutch anthropology especially. These studies link the order of social life—kinship, marriage, ritual, and house construction—with the order of the cosmos, arguing that they are organized by the same principles. See Signe Howell, "Cosmology," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Barnard and Spencer, 157–59. For further readings, see, for example, Cécile Barraud and Josephus D.M. Platenkamp, eds., *Rituals and Socio-Cosmic Order in Eastern Indonesian Societies, Part i: Nusa Tenggara Timur* (Special Anthropological Issue Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Landen Volkenkunde, 1990), 145/4. Regarding personhood in this scholarly tradition, see Cécile Barraud and Daniel de Coppet, *Of Relations and the Dead: Four Societies Viewed from the Angle of Their Exchanges* (Oxford: Berg, 1994); and André Iteanu "The Concept of the Person and the Ritual System: An Orokaiva View," *Man* 25, no. 1 (1990): 35–53. Further theorizations are "dividual person" by McKim Marriott, "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism," in *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, ed. Bruce Kapferer (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976), 109–42, as well as "dividual person" by Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, ca: University of California Press, 1988).

7 Barraud, "Kei Society and the Person," 214.

complex interconnections of social and cosmic domains that make up a person in Kei society.

The anthropologists Platenkamp and Prager analyze rituals accompanying childbirth and the socialization of new members into society in Laos and Bima, Indonesia.8 Studying ideas about conception, they show how the bodily components of the child (blood, flesh, skin, bones) are derived from the parents and their ancestors, whereas the spiritual components come from the cosmological domain (God, spirits, cosmic powers). The authors suggest that the child is not regarded as a complete social person after birth but needs to be integrated into the community. In Bima, this is done in rituals of bodily manipulation, such as the first cutting of the uterine hair and fingernails of the newborn, which still connect it to the cosmic sphere.9 In Laos, a sequence of rituals carried out after birth is designed to foster good qualities in a child and integrate the child into society. Thus, at the end of the month of avoidance, the child is carried out into the yard for the first time and later to the village shrine, by which point he or she has been assigned a position in time and space.10 Other important practices are ritual washing, dressing in new clothes, and gift-giving by different family members and neighbors, all of which aim to establish the person's social relationships and transfer important social, moral, and economic qualities.11

In line with these studies, I understand the person in Kyrgyzstan as being composed of components of—and relations to—the social and cosmological domains, which are established, maintained or changed throughout his or her life course.12 Below, I follow the constitution of the person from conception through pregnancy, birth, and socialization during the first year of life to uncover which relationships are important in creating a desirable person and

8 Josephus D.M. Platenkamp, "Becoming a Lao Person: Rituals of Birth and Socialization in Luang Prabang, Laos," in *The Anthropology of Values: Essays in Honour of Georg Pfeffer*, ed. Peter Berger et al. (Delhi: Pearson, 2010), 180–200; Michael Prager, "Vom fragmentierten Körper zur ganzheitlichen Person: Beschneidung, Sexualität und Islam in Bima (Indonesien)," in *Sex and the Body: Ethnologische Perspektiven zu Sexualität, Körper und Geschlecht*, ed. Gabrielle Alex and Sabine Klocke-Daffa (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), 41–65.

9 Prager, "Vom fragmentierten Körper zur ganzheitlichen Person," 60.

10 Platenkamp, "Becoming a Lao Person," 184–85.

11 Platenkamp, "Becoming a Lao Person," 184–87.

12 Hardenberg makes a similar argument in a recently published collected volume on ritual economy. The theoretical argument on the study of the socio-cosmic fields is laid out in the introduction, followed by ethnographic examples from Georgia, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. See Roland Hardenberg, ed., *Approaching Ritual Economy: Socio-Cosmic Fields in Globalised Contexts* (Tübingen: Tübingen University Press, 2017).

how these relations change over time. I do this through a detailed analysis of rituals and practices that take place at different stages of a person's becoming and show how the social and cosmic domains converge and interact in the process of constituting the person.

The Conception of a Child and the Cosmic Domain

In Kyrgyz society, children are highly valued and associated with happiness and prosperity. The abundance of children is one of the most spoken wishes for married couples. However, the conception of a child and its proper development during pregnancy depend not only upon the sexual performance of a couple; they are also a result of fate and the appropriate conduct of several generations of kin. Different actors in the social as well as cosmic domains contribute to the constitution of a child. The manifold interconnections be- tween these domains become evident when we look at ideas about conception and why women cannot become pregnant. Furthermore, they shed light on the ways in which my interlocutors conceptualized the relationship between a single person, the social group, and the whole universe.

God (*kudaĭ*) plays an important part in the conception of a child, as we learned from the vignette of Gulnara's father-in-law. My interlocutors considered children a gift of God, and their conception is deemed to depend upon God's will. This understanding is closely related to the Kyrgyz notion of *yrys*, which Judakhin translates as: (1) happiness; and (2) part, portion of a worldly good, destiny.13 It is said that houses with many children have *yrys*; the arrival of a new daughter-in-law into the house is also associated with *yrys*. To have children is the most important achievement in a person's life, and this depends upon God's will. Judakhin further mentions two Kyrgyz sayings, Y*ryskysyz bala bolboit* ("without God's blessings, a child cannot be born") and *Balasy zhoktun, yrysy zhok* ("who has no children, has no happiness").14 This suggests, firstly, that Kyrgyz conceptualize individual persons not as completely autonomous entities but as dependent upon God's will, and, secondly, that God stands at the beginning of every human life.

As indicated in the opening vignette, next to God's will, the conception of a child depends upon the moral conduct of a person and the social group to which a person belongs. This can include the core family, the household,

13 Konstantin K. Judakhin, *Kirgizsko-russkii slovar'* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1965), 938.

14 Judakhin, *Kirgizsko-russkii slovar'*, 938.

patrilineal or matrilineal kin of several generations, and even deceased ancestors.15 The special relationship between a person and his or her ancestor spirits (*arbaktar)* is reflected in Aldakeeva's observation:

> The spirits [of the dead] are seen as a natural part of life. People talk about the spirits of the deceased as of family members who are far away. The spirits of the dead are respected. In certain cases, people are afraid of the spirits of the dead. According to the understanding of the people, the spirits treat the people like the people treat them. If you meet their needs and do not forget them, they will protect you. However, if one forgets them, then bad things happen; the person or their relatives may have accidents and undergo difficulties.16

Similar explanations were presented to me for why a woman may be unable to conceive or may give birth to several girls or boys in a row. People are perfectly aware that there can be many medical reasons why a woman does not become pregnant. However, at a certain point they start to consider a disturbed relationship to ancestor spirits (*arbaktar)*, misconduct in the past, or destiny (*takdyr*)17 as a cause of childlessness.

One way of tackling the problem is to make a pilgrimage to a sacred site (*mazar*). *Mazar*s are places situated next to old graveyards, springs, remarkably formed stones, or trees; they are believed to concentrate supernatural powers

15 Aldakeeva points out that many people in Kyrgyzstan regard their ancestor spirits (*arbaktar*) as guardians who protect them and their families from misfortune and bad influences. Houses with *yrys* are considered to have a good relationship with their *arbaktar*. To maintain a good relationship with the spirits means to regularly commemorate them (e.g. on Kurman Ait), to slaughter a sheep for them, to offer them food, and to read the Qur'an for them. If people do not pay respect to their ancestors, their *arbaktar* can harm them or other people. Gulmira Aldakeeva, "The Role of Spirits in Kyrgyz Culture," in *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl. Spiritual Power, Pilgrimage, and Art*, ed. Gulnara Aitpaeva and Aida Egember-dieva (Bishkek: Aigine Cultural Research Center, 2009), 237–44.

16 Aldakeeva, "The Role of Spirits in Kyrgyz Culture," 240.

17 In Kyrgyzstan, many people believe that the destiny of a person is foreordained. In my interviews, women often stressed that whom they will marry or how many children they will have is written in their destiny. Having said that, people do not consider themselves powerless. It is known that hard work is necessary to build a good life for oneself and one's family (see also Jeanne Féaux de la Croix, "Moral Geographies in Kyrgyzstan: How Pastures, Dams, and Holy Sites Matter in Striving for a Good Life" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2009), 214–22). On the other hand, there are things that are not in people'scontrol.

(*kasiet*).18 At these places, people can communicate with elements of the cos- mic domain: God, ancestor spirits, or guardian spirits of the site. People come to sacred sites in order to rest and pray, conduct healing rituals, sacrifice food on behalf of the living and the dead, and ask for health, wellbeing, or children. During my fieldwork, I had the chance to accompany a pregnant woman (Gulmira, a housewife in her mid-thirties) to Manzhyly Ata, a well-known sacred site on the southern shore of Lake Yssyk Kul. Manzhyly Ata is a complex of five springs, a tree, and a graveyard situated between several hills, next to an old graveyard. The places are connected by trails and each place possesses particular qualities to treat different kinds of diseases. One of the springs is called Bala-Mazar (child-*mazar*) and is known to treat childlessness. Women who wish to become pregnant come to Manzhyly Ata in a group of other women (female relatives, friends, a traditional healer)19 or with their husbands. The group prepares food, prays to God, and performs healing rituals (*yrym*). These activities aim to maintain the relationship between the person and the cosmic domain and open the way for children.

Gulmira went to Manzhyly Ata in order to pray on behalf of her husband and resolve a family issue. We left early in the morning, taking tea, sugar, sweets, flour, and oil with us. She advised me to wash myself in the morning before leaving the house in order to be clean before God and the spirits. Immediately upon arriving, Gulmira and I added the food we had brought to the collective table (*dastorkon*). A group of elder women was already sitting at the *dastorkon*, which was covered in bread (*nan*), tea (*chaĭ*), butter (*maĭ*), sugar (*kant*), sweets (*tatty-patty*), biscuits, marmalade, and so on. While having tea, a mullah from Manzhyly Ata joined us.20 He talked to the women about the purpose of their

18 For more on sacred sites, their powers, and ritual practices, see Gulnara Aitpaeva, *Sacred Sites of Talas Region* (Bishkek: Aigine Cultural Reserch Center, 2007); Aitpaeva and Egemberdieva, *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl*. For how they are connected to people's ideas of wellbeing, see Féaux de la Croix, "Moral Geographies in Kyrgyzstan," Chapter 4.

19 In Kyrgyzstan and across Central Asia, there are traditional healers like *bübü-bakshi*, *em- chi* or *közu achyk*. They possess traditional knowledge with regard to the supernatural world and treatment methods; some of them can foresee the future and people say that their abilities are a gift of God. For more on this topic, see Gulnara Aitpaeva, *Sacred Sites of Southern Kyrgyzstan: Nature, Manas, Islam* (Bishkek: Aigine Cultural Reserch Center, 2013), especially Part 2.

20 During Soviet time, most sacred sites were abandoned as a consequence of anti-religious purges. With the politics of *glasnost'* and nation-building after independence, pilgrim- age became more common and many sites were reconstructed. For more on this topic, see Gulnara Aitpaeva, "*Kyrgyzchylyk*: Searching New Paradigms for Ancient Practices," *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 17, no. 2 (2008): 66–83. Today, a mosque is

visit, gave them advice, recited verses from the Qur'an, and blessed the food on the table, which all the pilgrims ate. After the tea, Gulmira and I prepared *maĭ tokoch*21 from the flour and oil that we brought with us and added it to the table. The *maĭ tokoch* were an offering to the ancestral spirits whom Gulmira asked for support. A family at the site slaughtered a sheep and prepared *besh- barmak*22 that they shared with us.

After tea or while the food is being prepared, the pilgrims visit the healing sites. I was told that at Manzhyly Ata, the ritual to become pregnant is performed in the following way: The woman approaches the spring Bala-Mazar with respect. She should carefully stick to the trail between the sites in order not to disturb the spirits living along the road and should be thankful that she is able to walk this path. At the spring, the woman bows down to it three times, reads verses from the Qur'an, and asks the spring for permission to drink the water. She also takes a small stone from the spring as a symbol of the manifestation of the child in her womb. In fieldwork conducted between 1930 and 1940 in north Kyrgyzstan, Soviet ethnographer Abramzon described similar practices and provided an example of a woman's prayer: "God bless, I have repented; God bless; give cattle; give head [of a child]; forgive God; do good; God, give a child."23

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often constructed next to bigger sacred sites and one or several mullahs (*moldo*) work there. They take care of the cleanliness of the site, ensure appropriate behavior on the *mazar*, give advice to pilgrims, bless the prepared food, and pray on behalf of pilgrims. Sometimes the mullahs are seen as guardians of the site and are called *shaiyks*.

21 *Maĭ tokoch* is deep-fried flatbread that is prepared as an offering to the spirits. People believe that the ancestor spirits feed on the smell of fried oil and are thereby invited to the table. See Aldakeeva, "The Role of Spirits in Kyrgyz Culture," 238–39.

22 *Beshbarmak* (literally "five fingers") is a traditional dish that is served at major feasts and banquets. It consists of mutton (at large feasts, it may also be prepared with beef and horsemeat) and noodles, cooked in meat broth. The preparation of the meat usually falls to the young men who slaughter the animal. Prior to the slaughtering, blessings (*bata*) are spoken to ask the spirits for their assistance with the planned endeavor. See also Aldake- eva, "The Role of Spirits in Kyrgyz Culture," 240.

23 Saul M. Abramzon, "Rozhdenie i detstvo kirgizskogo rebenka: iz obychaev i obriadov tian'shanskikh kirgizov," *Sbornik Muzeia antropologii i etnografii* 12 (1949): 89. There is no question that one should treat Soviet publications with caution because they were based on Marxist-Leninist ideology and think along evolutionist lines. Religious beliefs are often described as "*perezhitki*" (survivals) that will disappear in the near future. In many cases, however, it is possible to identify the ideologically colored interpretation and draw out ethnographic material that is of equal quality to contemporary publications from European or North American social and cultural anthropologists.

What do these ideas and practices tell us about the concept of the person in Kyrgyzstan? In line with Barraud, Platenkamp and Prager, I suggest understanding the person as being integrated into a web of relations to the social and cosmic domains. The conception of a person is particularly dependent upon God's will. Thus, people address him in their prayers, ask him for forgiveness, and are grateful to him for their offspring. Furthermore, if a woman cannot become pregnant, the supernatural powers of *mazar*s are consulted for help. These powers are, however, not the only reason why people visit sacred sites. A person is not considered an independent individual, but part of a wider group of kin. The moral misconduct of one member of the group, even if it happened several generations ago, can affect the ability to conceive a child. Ancestor spirits belong to this social group and people are expected to pay respect to and commemorate them regularly. If they do not meet these obligations, they might suffer childlessness, among many other scourges. Sacrificing food at *mazars* and praying on behalf of the deceased restores the relationship between a person and their ancestor spirits, thereby helping a couple conceivea child.

Constitution of the Person during Pregnancy

As Abramzon outlined, Kyrgyz believe that the physical body of the person is formed during the first months of pregnancy, a belief common in the Muslim world.24 Around the fifth month, when the fetus starts to move its legs, people say that the soul has entered the body and it has become *zhanduu* (having a soul). Having a soul is a quality that distinguishes living persons from the dead; the soul leaves the body after death. Several women told me that a person's destiny (*takdyr*) is inscribed on his or her forehead during pregnancy, so women should pray fervently to God for the child's future. One interlocutor put it this way: "During the pregnancy, I prayed to God to give my child a long and healthy life, that he would be well and lead a life of happiness." When talking about their lives, people also describe them as an individual life path (*zhol*). To a certain degree, this life path is foreordained. At the same time, people have many opportunities to work on their destinies and influence their respective life paths, for instance by praying to God or conducting rituals at *mazars*. Based on these descriptions, I suggest that body, soul, and life path are important components of a person in Kyrgyz society. People work on these components

24 Abramzon, "Rozhdenie i detstvo kirgizskogo rebenka," 92.

throughout their lives by creating and maintaining or transferring valuable qualities and social relations between individuals and groups.

As in most societies, Kyrgyz regard pregnant women as being particularly vulnerable and prescribe numerous rules to govern their behavior. Following the rules protects the child from harmful forces, while neglecting them can interfere with the child's positive development. For example, women are expected to observe a particular diet that contains meat, butter, and other dairy products in order to make the child strong. Furthermore, they should behave modestly in public spaces (e.g. avoid cosmetics, dress chastely) and not pay a lot of attention to the baby (by talking to the unborn directly, expressing a lot of joy about the pregnancy, or buying clothes or baby equipment before birth) because this behavior can attract the evil eye (*köz tiĭgen*), or bad luck. (Some women even reject ultrasound scans.) Another example is the belief that going outside in the dark or at full moon attracts evil spirits (*albarsty*, *zhin*) who want to take away the child.25

Zhanyl's story illuminates the dangers mother and child can face during pregnancy. In August 2008, Zhanyl (22) gave birth to her first child. It was a very difficult pregnancy with many complications. Due to low blood pressure, she was hospitalized three times and instead of helping in the household she had to lie down and keep her legs raised to prevent the child from sinking in the womb. Almost every month, Zhanyl experienced *aĭ tolgoo* ("full moon labor," i.e. bleeding) and was at risk of premature birth. As well as going to the hospital, she visited traditional healers and conducted different healing rituals (*yrym*). For example, her mother-in-law stitched a red thread into the hem of one of her skirts. The thread, she said, would stop intermediate bleeding; Zhanyl wore it until the end of her pregnancy.

In the middle of her pregnancy—during which time she was living with her husband in Karakol—Zhanyl had the following recurring dream: She had to flee and was trying to hide her child. She had the impression that somebody wanted to kill her newborn. While the setting of her dreams varied—from the city streets to her parents' village to her in-laws' house—the need to hide the child was constant. After this had been going on for some time, Zhanyl visited a fortuneteller (*tölgöchü*), who discovered that the spirit of a deceased woman (*arbak*) was chasing her and recommended that Zhanyl undertake a commemoration ritual for this spirit. Initially, Zhanyl did nothing, but after some time she dreamed that a beautiful woman opened the door to their apartment and looked around. Inquiring of her neighbors, Zhanyl discovered that a young, appealing woman had lived in that apartment some time ago. She did not have

25 See also Abramzon, "Rozhdenie i detstvo kirgizskogo rebenka," 96–99.

many relatives or friends and disappeared one day. Zhanyl assumed that the spirit of this woman was chasing her in her dreams because her relatives were not treating her spirit with respect, so the spirit became angry and started to bother other people. Thus, one evening, Zhanyl, her husband, and his parents slaughtered a sheep, prepared the meat in their apartment, read the Qur'an for the spirit of the woman, and asked her to leave the unborn child alone. After that, the spirit stopped appearing in Zhanyl's dreams. Soon afterwards, however, other complications occurred, and in the end Zhanyl had a very long and difficult delivery.

To summarize, during pregnancy, a person's components—body, soul, and life path—are formed, distinguishing humans from other beings, such as animals or spirits. However, the fetus' existence is highly uncertain and it is particularly vulnerable to supernatural powers, as revealed by Zhanyl's birth narrative. In order for the baby to be born and enter the human world, pregnant women have to observe many behavioral rules that protect the unborn child from supernatural powers and aid the development of a strong and healthy child. After birth, the child is slowly withdrawn from the influence of the supernatural domain and, by means of establishing social relationships, gradually integrated into the social world.

Birth Practices, Past and Present

In terms of the mother's role, the birth is often interpreted as a rite of pas- sage.26 The same can be said of the status of the person. As suggested by Prager and Platenkamp, birth is an event that marks the transition of the child from the supernatural to the social world. In the Kyrgyz context, Karmysheva and Gubaeva interpret the status of the person similarly when they argue that birth rituals have two goals: firstly, to protect the newborn from the influence of evil forces and make it strong; and secondly, to accompany the child's development and transform it into a social being.27 How this socialization happens is the theme of the following sections. I first focus on the childbirth and the ideas

26 Arnold van Gennep, *Übergangsriten: Les rites de passage* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2005); Brigitte Jordan and Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth in Four Cultures: A Crosscultural Investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden, and the United States* (Prospect Heights, il: Waveland Press, 1993).

27 Balkis H. Karmysheva and Stella S. Gubaeva, "Obriady, sviazannye s rozhdeniem i vospitaniem detei u karateginskikh kirgizov," in *Sredneaziatskii etnograficheskii sbornik*, vol. 5, ed. Sergei N. Abashin and Valentin I. Bushkov (Moscow: Nauka, 2006), 149–64.

related to gift-giving and celebrating *zhentek*. In the second part of the article, I analyze the rituals that take place throughout the first year of life and their importance to the development and socialization of the child.

Childbirth

The influence of the cosmic domain on women in labor and newborns was particularly evident at the time when Abramzon was doing his fieldwork. He described childbirth as taking place in the *yurt* of the woman in labor, assisted by a midwife (*ėmchi*).28 People feared the presence of evil spirits who would harass the woman and prevent a fast, facile delivery. Thus, only her husband and close relatives were permitted to enter the *yurt*. If needed, the midwife called on experienced older women who had given birth to several strong and healthy children to help. Immediately after birth, the baby was washed in salted water and wrapped in clean, old towels. The salt was supposed to make the child strong and steadfast (*bek*), while the old cloth was deemed to make it unattractive to evil spirits. Before putting the child on the mother's breast, clarified butter (*sary maǐ*) was put into its mouth, again intended to make thechild strong.

Today, about 90 percent of births take place in biomedical settings,29 assisted by trained medical staff. Most traditional childbirth techniques have lost their importance, a midwife in Toros explained; others might be practiced at home as everyday routine.30 I witnessed, for example, clarified butter being given to children several weeks after birth to make them more resilient and steadfast. The village midwife reported that she recommends clarified butter for newborns who seem weak, to the same end. The continuation of the rituals that surround pregnancy, these beliefs and practices points to the vulnerability of the person, especially at the beginning of life. The dangers of the cosmic do- main can be avoided by surrounding the newborn with experienced midwives,

28 This summary of childbirth is based on Abramzon, "Rozhdenie i detstvo kirgizskogo rebenka."

29 Adilet-Sultan Meinmanaliev, Ainura Ibraimova, Bolot Elebesov, and Bernd Rechel, "Health Care Systems in Transition: Kyrgyzstan," who Regional Office for Europe, 2005, http://www.euro.who.int/document/E86633.pdf.

30 On medical diversity in Kyrgyzstan and the revival of spiritual healing, consider Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka, "Risky Encounters with Doctors? Medical Diversity and Health-Related Strategies of the Inhabitants of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan," *Anthropology & Medicine* 23, no. 2 (2016): 135–54; Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka, "The Way of the Shaman and the Revival of Spiritual Healing in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Shaman: Journal of the International Society for Shamanistic Research* 22, no. 1–2 (2014): 35–59.

as well as by applying "strong" substances—such as clarified butter or salty water—to the child's body.

Gift-Giving and Celebrating "Zhentek"

In Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries, there are two notable practices of gift-giving related to childbirth as an event of joy and happiness: *süĭünchü* and *köründük*.31 *Süĭünchü* derives from the verb *süĭünüü* (to rejoice) and refers to the circulation of "good news" upon the birth of a child or the marriage of a family member. When they bring *süĭünchü*, people expect a gift from the recipient, usually a small amount of money. Hearing the "good news," the recipient replies, "*bolsun*" or "*baktyluu-taalaĭluu bolsun*"—"so let it happen" or "happiness and prosperity may come." *Köründük* contains the verb *kör* (to see) and designates a gift that is given upon seeing something for the first time. For example, if a family has been fortunate enough to buy a car or welcome a daughter-in-law or offspring to their house, neighbors, family members, and friends come to see the evidence of this good fortune. In this case, they bring a small amount of money, a headscarf, a toy, a tea bowl, or some other gift with them. Discussing this practice, an interlocutor remarked, "It is better to give anything, however minuscule, than nothing." The intention of these acts is to share the joy, happiness and prosperity that the birth of a child brings to a house with family and friends. *Süĭünchü* and *köründük* can be understood simultaneously as means of welcoming a new member into the community, strengthening existing social ties, and establishing a person's first social relationships.

Another way to share the joy of childbirth and welcome a new member to the society is the practice of *zhentek*, which takes place during the first weeks after the birth. Abramzon and Fiel'strup remark in their work that the size of the celebration varies depending on the family's financial status and the offspring's meaning to the family.32 If the newborn is the first, long-awaited son, the family considers giving a big *zhentek toĭ* and inviting many guests. During my fieldwork, a family from Bishkek showed me a video recording of how they (the mother-in-law together with several relatives) collected their daughter-in-law, who had given birth to their first grandchild (a boy), from the hospital and organized a small *zhentek* in front of the hospital. They carried

31 See also A. Kochkunov, "Obychai i obriady: material'naia kul'tura," in *Kyrgyzstan: Entsiklopediia*, ed. Osmon Ibraimov (Bishkek: Tsentr gosudarstvennogo iazyka i entsiklopedii, 2001), 276–86.

32 See Abramzon, "Rozhdenie i detstvo kirgizskogo rebenka," 103; Fedor A. Fiel'strup, *Iz obriadovoi zhizni kirgizov nachala 20 veka* (Moscow: Nauka, 2002), 66.

food (bread, sweets, pastry) and drinks (water, juice, alcohol) that they shared among the guests, who spoke good wishes on behalf of the mother, the new- born, and the family.33 Another interlocutor in Tosor reported having done the same upon the birth of the first grandchild that was supposed to grow up in their village to thank God for the gift and "open the way" (*zholun achylsyn*) forfurther grandchildren.

During my field research, I did not encounter the big *zhentek* celebrations described by Abramzon and Fiel'strup. At the beginning of my fieldwork, Anara (a housewife in her late twenties) and her husband considered giving a *zhentek toĭ* should Anara give birth to a son; they planned to combine it with a housewarming party. However, since Anara gave birth to a daughter and the couple's economic situation was rather poor, her husband gave a small *zhentek* just for his friends and colleagues. During my research, another interlocutor, Baktygul, a retired teacher from Tosor, was invited to a colleague's house to celebrate the birth of her first grandchild. The celebration took place about a month after the birth, and Baktygul referred to the event as *bala körüü* (to see the child), which she equated with a *zhentek*. Several colleagues were invited and all of them brought presents for the child (*köründük*). Salads, *boorsok*, pastry, sweets, drinks, and *kuurdak*34 were served to the guests, and as they ate, they gave toasts with wishes and blessings (*bata*) for the mother, the child and the whole family.35 On such occasions, people usually wish health (*den- sooluk*), strength (*küch*), prosperity (*kut*), happiness (*bakyt-taalaĭ*), the sound development of the newborn, and numerous children and grandchildren for the family. Older guests speak blessings and ask God and ancestral spirits to protect mother and child, as well as to bring happiness and prosperity (*yrys, bereke, baktyluu-taalaĭluu)* to the house.

These rituals and practices suggest that at the beginning of life, the person is particularly vulnerable and his or her human existence depends upon the mobilization of the resources of the cosmic and social domains. The person is made steadfast by the application of clarified butter and salt, and the prayers, wishes and blessings of elder people call upon God and ancestral spirits to protect the child and give him or her such important qualities as health, strength, and prosperity. Furthermore, the feasts and gifts welcome the person into the

33 On the abundance of feasts among Kyrgyz people and how they are an expression of joyand happiness, see Chapter 8 in Féaux de la Croix, "Moral Geographies in Kyrgyzstan."

34 A traditional Kyrgyz dish containing meat and potatoes.

35 On the art of formulating toasts and their power, see Féaux de la Croix, "Moral Geographies in Kyrgyzstan," 236–37.

society and, by means of creating the child's first social relationships, integrate the child into his or her family's social network.

Life-Cycle Rituals after Birth

Seclusion Phase and "Kyrky" Rituals

The first forty days (*kyrk kün*) after childbirth represent a seclusion phase for the mother and her child, since they are considered weak. Gulnara, whom we got to know at the beginning of this article, stated, "The mother should rest and recover her strength; everything should return to its place." The number forty occurs in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and frequently represents a time of waiting, withdrawal or transition. Women often told me that during the first month after birth the mother and her infant should stay in the house and leave it only in cases of absolute necessity, such as visits to a medical center. The mother should not perform serious work in the household, while the infant should be protected from the gaze of strangers and kept in a separate room during unexpected visits. Baktygul reported that she prepared meat broth (*shorpo*) for her daughter-in-law after delivery and even added but- ter, because warm and rich foods are classified as "hot" (*ysyk*) and are necessary for the mother, whose body got "cold" (*suuk*) during pregnancy.

The transitional status of the infant was particularly expressed in the *kyrky* rituals recorded by Abramzon. For example, on the fortieth day, the infant's hair (*karyn chach*) was cut for the first time.36 Furthermore, the child was washed in forty spoonfuls of warm water, to which salt, a golden ring, and wheat grains were added. Karmysheva and Gubaeva interpret the haircut- ting and ritual washing as a way to separate the child from its supernatural existence, while the salt, the golden ring, and the wheat grains should make it strong, prosperous, and fertile.37 In present-day Kyrgyzstan, such practices are considered "grandparents' traditions," archaic, and superstitious. Some of my interlocutors were aware of the rituals, but none reported putting them into practice. Nevertheless, the seclusion phase is taken very seriously; some women stay in their mother's house during this period. This old tradition, as people explain, provides the mother with more intensive care and helps her recover more rapidly from the hardships of pregnancy. After forty days, the

36 Abramzon, "Rozhdenie i detstvo kirgizskogo rebenka," 119; Fiel'strup, *Iz obriadovoi zhizni kirgizov*, 78–79.

37 Karmysheva and Gubaeva, "Obriady, sviazannye s rozhdeniem i vospitaniem detei,"155–56.

restrictions on moving and being seen are slowly removed, and mother and child are gradually integrated into the social world.

"Beshik Toĭ"—Putting the Child into the Cradle

Another step in the socialization of the person is the ritual of placing the infant into the cradle (*beshik saluu*), which can be accompanied by a feast called *beshik toĭ*. The time frame can vary from six days to three months after child- birth. I was told that in northern Kyrgyzstan people rarely organize a *beshik toĭ* and by no means all families use a cradle. One interlocutor reported that she and her mother-in-law performed a small ritual and called a neighbor, an experienced old woman whom they consider a traditional healer, for help. Thus, the ritual was integrated into their daily routine. I was told that in the north, people instead give a small *zhentek* and a big *tushoo toĭ* when the child begins to walk. In southern Kyrgyzstan, greater importance is given to a *beshik toĭ.* This section draws on a videotaped recording of the *beshik toĭ* that the Bishkek-based family mentioned above conducted for their first grandchild. They originate from Jalal-Abad region.

Let me first summarize the relevant features of the cradle (*beshik*) used in Kyrgyzstan. It consists of a wooden frame with a pole on top. A blanket is put over the pole to keep the child warm. Several mattresses cover the bottom of the cradle and all of them bear a hole for discharging urine via a wooden stick called *shimek*. Along with a pillow, sheets, and blankets, the *beshik* is furnished with two long bands (one each for arms and legs) in order to firmly install the child in it. Every time the infant is put into the cradle, its head, arms, and legs are tightly wrapped in the sheets, covered with the blanket, and tied with the bands that encircle the whole cradle. It is important that the infant is fixed and cannot slump to the floor. The cradle is easy to transport and infants spend a lot of time in it while the mother is occupied in the household. Furthermore, mothers often breast-feed their children directly in the *beshik*. Baktygul described the cradle as a small house and caring mother that keeps the child warm, clean, and protected from the outside world. Viewed from this perspective, the *beshik* can be understood as an intermediate space between the mother's womb and the house, as well as between the cosmic and social domains, before the child starts to crawl inside the room and walk outside on the street. It is important to note that some women to whom I talked during fieldwork used the cradle, while others regarded it an old-fashioned tradition.

A traditional rule holds that the mother should offer a *beshik* to her daughter's first child and the parents-in-law should organize a feast on this occasion. Several kin attend the celebration and carry a variety of gifts, including clothes, baby paraphernalia (stroller, diapers, etc.), sweets, and food, as well as *sary*

maǐ (clarified butter). The presents are offered to the mother and her child, the child's father and grandparents, as well as to patrilineal kin who help to organize the feast. Similar to the gifts presented at a *zhentek* or as *köründük*, these presents renew and strengthen existing social relationships within the extended family, on the one hand, and integrate the child into his or her family's social network, on the other.

At the center of the feast is the ritual of placing the child into the cradle. Since the cradle belongs to the female sphere, only women and children are allowed to participate in the ritual, which is performed by the oldest, most experienced women. To start, they place themselves on either side of the cradle and adjust the bedding to the right position. A large flatbread is placed below the mattress on the head side, symbolizing prosperity and abundance. The pa- ternal grandmother places a platter with *boorsok*, *sary maǐ*, an ax, and a plate with wheat grains next to the cradle and ignites a juniper branch to expel the evil spirits. Now everything is set for the ritual to start: The two women who perform the ritual place the ax into the cradle, tilt it to the right side so that the ax glides to the ground, and pass it back below the cradle to the starting position. In this way, the ax surrounds the *beshik* three times, while the attendees repeat "*oŋ*" (right). The cradle is thereby imbued with strength and resistance in order to protect the sleeping child.38 It should keep the baby in the "right place," which means tight and upright; give him a sound sleep; protect him from evil forces; and show him the right path.

Having prepared the *beshik*, the two women place the infant into it, tie up the bands and simultaneously speak a prayer.39 The elder of the two women takes some *sary maǐ* with her finger and puts it on the child's lips and forehead so as to make his path smooth and give him strength for the difficult times in his life. Subsequently, the women cover the cradle with a blanket and put baby clothes, as well as the clothes of male family members (grandfather, father, uncle),40 on top of it; the qualities of the people who wear these clothes should be transmitted to the infant in this way. Hereafter, the women distribute the

38 See also Fiel'strup, *Iz obriadovoi zhizni kirgizov*, 68.

39 The prayer cannot be heard on the video. Abramzon provides the following speech in this context: "Get rich (*baǐ bol*), [the path] ahead of you shall be filled with children (*astynda bala bassyn*), behind you with cattle (*artynda mal bassyn*), on that God gives you accord- ing to your requests (k*udaǐ tilegiŋdi bersin*), live long (*köp zhasha*). Then she [the woman] turns to mother Umaï: mother Umaǐ rock [the child] to sleep (*Umaï-ėnesi uktat*), mother of the cradle hold tight (*beshik ėnesi bek karma*)." See Abramzon, "Rozhdenie i detstvo kirgizskogo rebenka," 111–12.

40 Since the infant is a boy, the clothes of male family members were used. The clothes of female family members would have been used for a girl child.

wheat grains over the clothes, while continuing to pronounce wishes for the child. The ritual is concluded with the maternal grandmother throwing sweets and coins, first over the cradle and afterwards among the attendees, while wishing the child a long, healthy and happy life. All the women and children rush forward to collect the falling sweets and coins, and laugher breaks the silence that previously prevailed. The wheat, sweets, and coins symbolize happiness, prosperity, and financial success, which should manifest themselves in the child's life path. Thus, the *beshik* ritual is a way to transfer important qualities from particular substances and people to the child, in order that he or she lead a good and happy life. At the same time, the joy of childbirth is shared among the kin, who carry part of this *yrys* to their homes.41 The women who performed the ritual receive a handful of candies and scarves as a sign of gratitude and respect. Further gifts (toys, scarves, and towels) are distributed among the attendees, and the guests move to another room, where the celebration continues with the consumption of food.

"Tushoo Toĭ"—Celebrating the Child's First Steps

One of the most important means of establishing the personhood of the child is the *tushoo kesüü* ritual and the accompanying feast, *tushoo toĭ*. *Tushoo* denotes shackles for horses and is derived from the verb *tushaa* (to tie). During the *tushoo kesüü* ritual, the child's legs are tied with a rope that has to be cut through (*kesüü*). The festivity is held when the infant begins to take his or her first steps and is intended to "place the child on his or her own legs." This can be understood both literally and figuratively. On one level, the *tushoo kesüü* assists the child in his ability to walk on his own. On another, according to Kyrgyz understanding, what differentiates humans from animals is that they can stand on two legs (*butka turuu*). Thus, the *tushoo kesüü* ritual helps to establish the humanity of the person and prepares him or her to remain steadfast in life. As noted above, people in northern Kyrgyzstan place a high importance on organizing a big *tushoo toĭ* for their children and invite many guests, including patrilateral and matrilateral kin from near and far, friends, colleagues, and neighbors, all of whom bring gifts for the child. Often, the feast takes place after the harvesting season, when there is more cash available. Since this is a joyous event, people look forward to it. I attended the *tushoo toĭ* that Baktygul organized for two of her grandchildren of similar age in August 2009. In total, about 50 guests attended. The preparations started about one week in advance, including choosing a menu for the feast and doing the required shopping. Two days in advance, the daughters-in-law started to prepare the salads and

41 Karmysheva and Gubaeva, "Obriady, sviazannye s rozhdeniem i vospitaniem detei," 157.

pastries, and a day before the event, the men slaughtered two sheep for cooking warm meals. Furthermore, several rooms with tables were arranged to serve the guests.

Food is an important part of the feast, since it represents the wealth, prosperity (*yrys*) and social status of the family. On the one hand, this *yrys* is supposed to be shared with the guests. On the other hand, it represents an offering to the ancestor spirits and God, who enabled this event and who are invited to the table (*dastorkon*) by the smell of fat and rising smoke. Throughout the celebration, the *dastorkon* should be full of different pastries (including *boorsok*), salads, marmalades, fruits, sweets, yogurt, butter, sugar, honey, mineral water, etc. The guests are continuously invited to drink tea and taste the food, the hosts might serve alcohol periodically, and all is reciprocated by good wishes and blessings for the future of the child.

Next to the cold foods, several warm dishes containing meat, such as *shorpo*, *kuurdak* and *lagman*,42 are served. The last and most important dish is *besh-barmak* (see above), which is initiated with a prayer and blessings (*bata*) by the oldest and most respected participants. The big pieces of meat are served on large plates and distributed among the guests according to their age, social status, and relationship to the hosts. The noodles are served shortly after- wards and consumed right away. The majority of the meat and a considerable amount of the food on the *dastorkon*, however, is taken home by the guests. In this way, they are able to carry part of the prosperity and happiness contained in the food to their houses and share this *yrys* with their own families.

The *tushoo kesüü* ritual takes place on the street in front of the parents' house, in the presence of all guests and other people from the neighborhood. The ritual placing of the child on its own feet is done by means of a race, with the winners cutting through the shackles (*tushoo*) of the child. The shackles are made of black and white woolen strings twisted together, to represent the good and bad times in life.

Usually, the race consists of three rounds and three groups competing among each other: children, women and men. At the *tushoo toĭ* I witnessed, the first group consisted of kids between 3 and 7 years, the second group comprised youngsters of 8–14 years, and the third was that of the grown-ups. Usually, the infants stand, supported by their paternal grandparents, at a predetermined finish line, surrounded by spectators and women holding prizes for all race participants. The first round is of particular importance because the winner has to cut through the shackles of the infant with a knife and support him or her in making the first steps. To do so, the two fastest racers take the arms of

42 Dish containing noodles, vegetables, and meat.

the child from the grandparents and, accompanied by all the other children, walk with him or her several meters along the street and back again. After every race, women distribute prizes (e.g. a knife for the race winner, water pistols, dolls, jewelry, scarves, and caps) among the participants. At the *tushoo toĭ* that I attended, after the race two senior women approached every guest with a big tray of cookies, *boorsok*, and mare's milk (*kymyz*) and asked them to speak good wishes. There was also a second team carrying a plate of *boorsok*, salad, and alcohol with the same intention. After the ritual ended, everybody returned to the tables.

As my description shows, the *tushoo kesüü* ritual and the accompanying feast are important steps in the child's socialization; they constitute its humanity and provide important values such as strength, health, happiness, success, and prosperity. This is done firstly by the expression of good wishes and blessings in the context of food preparation and consumption. Secondly, the best, fastest, and strongest runners cut the shackles of the child and accompany his or her first steps on the road. As a result, the child should be able to start to walk faster and stand steadfast on its own feet. These same qualities should accompany the person throughout his or her life. The gift exchange and the food sharing further anchor the infant firmly in a network of social relations that includes patrilateral and matrilateral kin, family friends, and the local community.

Conclusion

I began this article by arguing that personhood in Kyrgyzstan is established through careful work on relationships to entities situated in the social and cosmic domains of the society. Taking Barraud's relational concept as a starting point, I elaborated on rituals and practices surrounding childbirth and the socialization of infants during their first year of life. I showed that the person is constituted through and by means of relationships, which are established on different social and cosmic levels. These relations are not stable, but change over time and affect the person in different ways throughout his or her life. The properties which constitute personhood and endow the person with his or her humanity need to be ritually constructed and transferred, as well as maintained, in order to manifest themselves in the person's life and provide success and social, political, and economic status.

In the course of the article, I revisited ideas about conception, rules of behavior during pregnancy, pilgrimage to sacred sites, and consulting traditional healers as a means of resolving complications during pregnancy and securing

the safe delivery of a healthy child. Such situations reveal that humans are enmeshed in a complex web of socio-cosmic relations and powers, and that the coming into being of a person depends on the creation, manipulation and maintenance of these relationships. The practices after birth focus on creating a social persona and transmitting valued qualities to the child. In rituals (*kyrky*, *beshikke saluu*), substances such as salt, clarified butter, wheat grains, an ax, sweets, and coins are used to make the person strong, healthy, steadfast, and wealthy, and constitute its humanity (*tushoo kesüü*). The feasts and gift-giving introduce the child to his or her family's network of social relations and assign the child a position within the community. Equally important is the preparation, consumption, and distribution of food during the feasts. Firstly, the food serves as an offering to the ancestor spirits and God, who enabled this joyous event. Secondly, the guests reciprocate the invitation by speaking good wishes and blessings to the child and the family.

This study focused on the socialization of infants during the first year of life, omitting the practice of name-giving due to space constraints. Furthermore, I did not address the questions of when a person is regarded as complete (e.g. with marriage or later in life), how the socialization of boys and girls differs (e.g. circumcision of boys, which tends to take place later in life), or how human personhood is different from human spirits. In a recent paper, Tulebaeva described value conflicts that inhabitants of a village in Kyrgyzstan faced when local mullahs asked them to stop practicing *tushoo kesüü*.43 During my research, such conflicts were not yet apparent—or at least not widely debated among the public.

Here, it is worth recalling Mauss' and Dumont's positions on personhood. The notion of the person in Kyrgyzstan seems to bear aspects of "holistic" and "individualistic" ideologies. I argued that next to body and soul, every person is endowed with individual qualities and a life path, a feature rather common in "individualistic ideologies." At the same time, the person is seen as a member of a bigger social group and dependent on the moral conduct of his or her parents, their kin, and even deceased ancestors. Here, social and cosmic entities converge as part of one hereditary line to constitute a person. Socialization rituals and feasts are important for the child's individual development (for becoming strong, successful, and rich); however, they also emphasize the happiness and prosperity (*yrys*) of the whole social group. To conclude,

43 Baktygul Tulebaeva, "In Search for the Good Life: Value Conflicts and Dilemmas in the Practice of Islam in Kochkor, Kyrgyzstan," in *Approaching Ritual Economy*, ed. Hardenberg, 71–104. Tulebaeva is currently writing a dissertation on the socialization of children in Kyrgyzstan at Frankfurt University.

"holistic" and "individualistic" ideology are useful concepts for ordering data and revealing important traits of complex notions, such as personhood, and their connection to social institutions and cultural values. On the other hand, as a binary opposition, they tend to be exclusive, which makes it difficult to adequately capture the complexities of everyday life and continuously evolving social worlds.