

AN ANCESTRAL WORLDVIEW

SALTANAT: Well, for every person, in the family, in every family, there are relatives who have passed [away] . . . well . . . to the other world. And sometimes on the anniversary of this deceased person, the day of his/her death . . . um . . . Thursday, or on Friday, we welcome them [to our] home with fresh bread, and read the Koran.

THE DIALOGIC EMERGENCE OF ANCESTRY

Throughout Inner Asia, the relationship between the living and their ancestors, those who have come before, is a critical component of both structuring a cultural worldview and imagining a social future.¹ Heroic ancestors, such as Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Chinggis Khan in Mongolia, are a fundamental component of nation-building and national identity today; they are considered to be the spiritual forefathers of modern states. These epic figures and the mythic narratives of their lives and power set an example for their “descendants”—contemporary populations and their governments. At times, such a powerful legacy can undergird national leaders exhibiting increasingly autocratic and charismatic domination, as has been the case in Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan. But the state does not hold a monopoly on the symbolic importance of genealogy or history. In post-socialist environments of political repression and economic uncertainty during recent decades, many individuals, families, and communities are turning to their forebears—both personal and national—to develop mechanisms of care for people and for their ancestral land, beyond the bounds of any nation. From blessing and prayer to oral poetic traditions, the conversations between ancestors and the living constitute a basic aspect of many different discursive traditions.

Attending to the performative dimensions of language in *all* encounters allows linguistic anthropologists to describe the social roles, relationships, and negotiations emerging in the heteroglossia of everyday life. Who can speak to whom, and how?² Studies in linguistic anthropology have long demonstrated oral tradi-

tion and verbal art to be particularly charged and concentrated sites of ideology and social authority within communities (Briggs and Bauman 1990; Hymes 1981; Tedlock 1983). Abu-Lughod (1986) and Caton (1990) have argued powerfully for an analysis of the social production and the political consequences of particular poetic genres in Egypt and Yemen to emphasize poetry's centrality as a mode of action or a cultural practice, as an emergent space for the negotiation of values. The efficacy of poetry or other forms of verbal art lies precisely in their performative capacity, to transcend the frame of the everyday (see Bauman [1977] 1984). Performance blurs the boundaries of accountability in language: who is responsible for what is said?

Specific attention has been paid in linguistic anthropological studies to the social contexts and realities created by talk in interaction (Duranti and Goodwin 1992) and to the assumption (or attribution) of accountability in narrative and dialogue (Hill and Irvine 1993). A focus on words spoken in the world (Tedlock 1983) can also illuminate the metaphoric conversations between cultures and ecologies or landscapes (Basso 1996; Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy 2012). My focus on the performative qualities of language in contexts ranging from poetry to pilgrimage is not just a descriptive exercise. Rather, this approach is an argument: that even under a regime characterized as "authoritarian," alternate forms of authority can and do exist, and they emerge in dialogue.³ Ancestors are not just part of the realm of history or "cultural heritage" but rather an active part of conversations in performance and daily life.⁴ In his ethnographic assessment of the political categories of time and space in social memory, the cultural anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin (1994, 27) asks, "Is it possible to conceive of a 'coalition' or 'dialogue' between the claims of dead ancestors and the claims of distant contemporaries?" This book answers with a resounding *yes!*⁵

As I elaborate in this volume, the concept of ancestry in Inner Asia has the specific connotations of mutual concern and leadership: if ancestral leaders are properly recognized and respected, then they may come to watch over and guide the living in turn. Ancestors' advice and blessing (collectively known as *bata*) together become a moral guidepost for contemporary families and communities. Such cycles of care, for many Kazakhs and other Central Asians, are also forms of interconnection and respect in the difficult and shifting political economy of the present. Here I take seriously the idea that any cultural imaginary is not a top-down project but rather the emerging product of interaction and contestation. All the conversations, prayers, and disagreements around and in an ancestral cultural imaginary—all of that talk is itself a politics of belonging. In the material I present here, I ask how forms of language and ancestry actually become a means of coping with and solving—as well as criticizing and changing—ongoing social and political problems in Kazakhstan today.

In answering these questions, I turn specifically to the spaces in which ancestors can communicate with the living and where a mutual relationship of care

and guidance is actively enacted in the world. As described in the epigraph quote for this introduction, the family's deceased are welcomed weekly into the home with the aroma of bread, freshly baked or fried, and the short prayers of their relatives. Many families and pilgrims also go to visit the lands, tombs, and monuments of ancestors more distant, famous, and widely shared. Such sites are places where their caretakers can interact with visitors, who learn about the lives of the ancestors and receive their blessing. In their contemporary performances of oral epic traditions, Kazakh poets regularly intone the words and wisdom of these ancestors, thus presenting current generations with a moral guidepost. Great ancestors like khans and *batyrs* (warriors) serve rhetorically as an exemplar of great leadership for their descendants in the present.

The ancestors come to be involved in many different contexts, in spaces of social interaction where their wishes and intentions are expressed and where they can “watch over” their living families. I do not take their care as predetermined or absolute but rather as something that emerges in the world only when and if the living allow channels of communication that transcend the conventions of conversation, such as space and time. The forms of language and interaction I present in these chapters—blessing and prayer, storytelling and conversation, and poetic tradition—are each conventions and moments of dialogue, moments of understanding or contestation, within which an ancestral worldview is negotiated. This is an ethnography of the dialogic emergence of an ancestral cultural worldview (see Tedlock and Mannheim 1995).

By characterizing an ancestral worldview as dialogic, I also intentionally include the multiple layers of voice and experience brought into any given interactive exchange by social relationships and roles compounded through history. Building upon the insight of Mikhail Bakhtin that text and social life alike are heteroglossic, Mannheim and Tedlock (1995) argue that dialogue (rather than structure or individuality) is the fundamental premise of language and culture and that every interaction must always be understood in the contexts of social history. The ways in which language is imbricated in social processes are semiotic (indexical) and performative: linguistic forms invoke and enact dimensions of some shared, lived reality as they come into being, an emergence that is negotiated by participants through talk in interaction. If we take the specific concept of “voice,” we can think about the ways in which the content and style of any given utterance may carry—in content and style—the perspective of a particular social and historical position, and we must also acknowledge that voices are not individual but multiple, carrying their previous contexts and forms of usage into the present (Bakhtin 1981, 262–66).⁶ Such a Bakhtinian approach to the understanding of language and culture allows us to take very seriously the “world-making” of speakers as emergent and plural (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995, 12; see Behar 1995), and it becomes analytically imperative to pay attention to dialogism at multiple levels of language and social life.

In the use or application of Bakhtin's principle of "dialogic emergence" to the realm of oral expressive culture, we move from text to talk, and here Erving Goffman's classic model of "participant frameworks" in social interaction becomes a helpful rubric. Participants are those social figures, physically present or absent, who actively and passively contribute to the framework of interaction and therefore to its social meaning. While Bakhtin's discursive world is populated with a diversity of speakers and speech types, Goffman's interactive world is also populated by "observers"—those who function consciously or not as some kind of audience for what is spoken and therefore necessarily structure the relational and perspectival impact or implicature of what is said. Just as Bakhtin's (1981, 263) characters speak across categories of person, genre, and history, so too does Goffman's framework allow us to take the concepts of speaking and listening beyond the constraints of the present and to explore the "conversations" that take place across multiple dimensions of social space and time. If, for example, we expand the classic conversation framework to include ancestors as both active participants and witnesses, we can see the performative implications of their involvement, such as evaluation, reassurance, or protection: ancestors are guiding both families and nations.

Interaction with ancestors has become more salient and prominent across Inner Asia in recent decades, in part a result of strong nationalizing campaigns that have stressed genealogy and a connection to heroes of the past as a basis for the legitimacy of new states. It is quite true that, as C. M. Hann (2002, 8) has explained, "many postsocialist elites have drawn . . . on ideas of culture as an integrated whole to create boundaries of exclusion." But a connection to genealogy as both ideology and oral tradition is also a highly personalized cultural strategy for individuals and families, as well as for nations in the post-Soviet period (Jacquesson 2016; Yessenova 2005a, b). Genealogy provides a source of grounding, orientation, and purpose in the shifting tides of postsocialist life (Gullette 2010). Indeed, forming a solid and conscious connection with familial and cultural ancestors has been a basic strategy for many Inner Asians coping with social and economic uncertainty and exclusion in the decades since the dissolution of socialist communism (Buyandelger 2007). In this introduction I identify not only particular forms of language and interaction with ancestors but also the general social, political, and economic contexts during which such interactions have become increasingly meaningful as a form of guidance and care.

LEVELS OF INTERACTION AND CARE

As I describe in chapter one, *bata* is a short blessing given by an elder within the family on a specific occasion. *Bata* is a blessing given and received, a dialogic marker of a personal relationship between generations, a form of cultural education. I present these blessings as words that act in the world, that "do" something (see Austin [1962] 1975). The wishes of ancestors enact particular social conven-

tions and commitments, specifically, the care and guidance of elders for the younger generations. The gifts of *bata* touch and hold the persons who receive them, gently shaping those persons to achieve a shared cultural future. *Bata* takes place in various contexts within the family, ranging from a small daily prayer over a shared meal to a special gift shared ritually at life-cycle events such as first steps, departures, anniversaries, or weddings. These blessings are at once commonplace and essential in the life course. My informants describe the deep sense of comfort they derive from *bata*, as well as their fear that if the tradition of blessing is difused or lost, families and communities will fracture as a result.

Typically *bata* is given by living relatives, but many people also seek blessings from respected elders who are not kin. Within every community there are various individuals known for their ability to give *bata*, and people visit them in times of trouble. *Bata* is also tied up with the world of dreams and with memories of those relatives who have passed and whose relationship with the living is still unfinished. The deceased must be cared for properly by the living, problems must be resolved, and love and support must be conveyed before the living can carry on in peace. These complex relationships, as they transcend time and worlds, also often merge easily into a very general mythic history: everyone with whom I spoke referenced a cultural history of great Kazakh leaders from whom it was important to ask for *bata*. It is as if the quality of a respected elder or leader can be transmuted into the blessing itself, imbued with a special quality or virtue. The moral ground of this practice stems from the basic cultural belief that elders are to be respected. But this principle is not absolute. Rather, a respected elder is someone who *earns* that position over time, by being a good son or daughter, spouse, parent, and family/community leader (see Beyer 2010; Ismailbekova 2014b).

Many people have actively taken on genealogical narrative traditions as a source of personal and cultural-historical pride, within and beyond the nation itself. It is important that these heroic traditions tend to re-create the deep past as glorious, a source of pride at the same time that the past is evoked directly into the present. Genealogically focused narratives typically bypass a Russian and Soviet history, which becomes an interruption in the Inner Asian (Turkic-Mongol, Islamic) history of much longer duration (see DeWeese 1994). Connecting to ancestors becomes not only the rebuilding of a cultural landscape across geography and history but also a personal or rhetorical strategy.

A reciprocal relationship between the ancestors and the living means that both must become guardians of people and land—custodians of a Kazakh cultural worldview. This worldview is encapsulated in spaces around the country's many sacred shrines or sites where caretakers live and greet pilgrims, who come to receive the blessings of those buried at the sites. Caretakers are able to pray with pilgrims, to tell them the “miracle stories” of their ancestors, and to offer *bata* on behalf of the ancestors. The *bata* tradition has become a controversial social movement in some areas of the country, where trained practitioners channel ex-

tended bata as a form of diagnosis and healing for groups of pilgrims who travel together. Here the performative power of bata is elaborated and mediated as an active form of awareness and care, part of a sacred ancestral landscape. As caretakers describe it, ancestors protect their burial sites and the people who travel there, just as their personal stories may serve as inspiration or example for visitors. Bata has not only a moral basis but also a potency or real efficacy, and this is because once ancestors (or elders) have gained the status of being respected, their lives become exemplars, their experiences models to replicate, their advice sought after, and their words endowed with a spiritual quality or force. Their blessings are part of their stewardship of younger generations.

It is impossible to generalize life experience for all those who consider themselves to be Kazakh. More than 60 percent of approximately seventeen million Kazakhs identified themselves in the 2009 national census as ethnically Kazakh, reflecting a continued increase in total numbers of Kazakhs in that state since independence.⁷ Millions of Kazakhs also live in western Mongolia and China. There are today broad and obvious distinctions in levels of education, wealth, urbanity, and worldview among these populations. Just as there is certainly a plurality *within* Kazakh culture, it is also true that Kazakhs hold much in common with *other* Inner Asian cultures, in various locales from Bishkek to Urumqi. With Kyrgyz and Uighurs, for example, Kazakhs share regional history, language, culture, and religious traditions. The very idea that Kazakh culture is distinct from that of other peoples stems from a complicated regional history and colonial past(s), as well as the nationalizing projects of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This book is concerned with the ways in which conceptions of a unified Kazakh culture are harnessed as a means of contending with a postsocialist environment in which the Kazakhstani state is a relevant but not a primary determiner of identity or opportunity, personhood or possibility. In the following section I give a brief overview of post-Soviet political and cultural history and describe the ways that local communities, families, and genealogical connections come to the fore as strategies of economic and moral survival and “well-being.”⁸

STATE PATERNALISM

The former Soviet republics were semi-autonomous but absolutely dependent on the vast “centralized allocative power” (Verdery in Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002, 16) of the Russia-centered political and economic system, led by communist elites, or *nomenklatura*. With the Soviet Union disbanded and the Central Asian states forced toward independence (see Jones Luong 2004), nationalization and privatization became among the basic functional and ideological tools of political and economic reorganization. These mechanisms benefited those already entrenched in power, along with their inner circles and children—groups that in the years since independence have grown and solidified into an elite class (see Cummings 2005; Dave 2007). Throughout the former Soviet Union, the presi-

dents of the new nations and their immediate families figure prominently at the very center of the elite cadres of emergent national political economies. The presidential parties control appointment to parliament, while ministry members as well as city and regional mayors are often hand-selected by the president, though there are regular replacements put into office, to discourage competing local loyalties. Political opposition of any kind is low, and any activity seen as dissent is typically met with disproportionate punishment.

Such leadership has created a general atmosphere of repression and censorship in the former Soviet Central Asian republics, along with some fear or distrust of seated government officials, who are often perceived to be acting out of self-interest rather than the interests of those they purport to represent. I would stress, however, that the strongly personal and dominant nature of presidential power is not in and of itself perceived as necessarily problematic by Kazakhs. In fact, in traditionally paternal environments across Inner Asia such traits harmonize well with the figures of the great judges, warriors, and khans of the past. Rather, for average citizens it is the lack of moral and social welfare that is perceived as most hurtful. Strong leaders are good, as long as strength is defined as providing for those under one's care.

As Liu (2002, 2005, 2012) has described so well in the case of his ethnographic research on political authority and urban social life in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, what citizens tended to expect from their state was “a moral relation of stewardship with respect to the republic's productive resources and to its people. What they advocated is more accurately termed *state paternalism*, rather than ‘authoritarianism.’ State paternalism means that the state reserves for itself the nearly exclusive prerogative for directing the economic, political, and social course of a country. It involves more than central control, however, but the moral notion that the nation properly falls under the care and guidance of a state that knows what is good for it” (2005, 229, original emphasis). Liu's informants identified the state closely with the personality of its leader: if the leader was moral, the state was, too. They expected *boqmoq*, or stewardship and routine care, from the state as part of its provision of economic opportunity and social welfare. Liu's informants also believed that the state (and its figurehead, the president) should guide the “moral transformation of the people”: “the relation of state to citizen is analogous to how Uzbek parents and elders are supposed to raise children in *mahallas*” (230–31). Family, neighborhood, and country function ideologically as varying levels of a single authority structure.

In my own experience, these ideals are widely held throughout Inner Asia and certainly resonate clearly with the material I present here from Kazakhstan. This general vision of some idealized form of leadership does exist in many ways; one need look no further than the culture of respect toward the authority of elders in communities (Liu 2005; Beyer 2010), the intergenerational cycles of caregiving and economy structuring most households (Werner 1998; Ismailbekova 2014a),

the spiritual leadership of ancestors, religious leadership (Rasanayagam 2012; Louw 2007), or even at the many local business and political leaders, chosen by and involved with their constituents at a regional or local level, who *are* giving back (Ismailbekova 2014b). Strong (male) leadership is desirable for many in Central Asian postsocialist spaces, where paternalism and social welfare are seen to go hand in hand. Such leadership may even reconcile with local understandings and forms of democracy (Ismailbekova 2014b; Sabloff [2013] 2016).

However, these ideals tend to become more performative for seated government officials, that is, a network of favors rather than the moral prerogative of care. I have seen that for my own informants, families, and friends in Central Asia, judiciary and policing systems, as well as government bureaucracy, are widely perceived as corrupt—full of individuals acting for bribes or powerful interests, rather than in accordance with any rule of law. There is a painful gap between ideal leadership and the everyday reality with which most citizens have to cope.

ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY

The largest and wealthiest among the post-Soviet Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan has seen immense growth and has maintained a crucial strategic position due to its vast reserves of oil and location at the junction of the Eurasian pipeline system linking China, Russia, and Europe. Kazakhstan is certainly far richer than its Central Asian neighbors, and the billions of dollars generated by the sale of its natural resources have created an emergent and quickly growing elite class. While the president's inner circle has controlled a highly centralized political economy in the decades since independence, it is also important to note that Kazakhstan's government has pursued a multipronged international economic strategy, including resource cooperation and the pursuit of foreign investment. Within the country, the government has simultaneously undertaken a domestic financial strategy, including multiple phases of privatization and neoliberal economic reforms such as shock therapy, with varying degrees of success.⁹ Despite these efforts, however, there continues to be wide economic disparity. The visibility of economic growth and an aspirational middle or upper class in urban areas like Astana and Almaty might suggest more widespread wealth, but wide swaths of the population are still far less well off. As the socialist systems of social and economic security (ranging from jobs and housing to education, health care, and social security) have weakened in the post-Soviet period, Kazakhstan's national government has tried but not yet been able to develop systematic alternatives or replacements for social welfare to serve its population, particularly for those in more rural village (*Kaz: aul*) areas.¹⁰

Individual communities were left to deal with the local reorganization of Soviet industrial and agricultural collective infrastructure, at times without government help, while social support for children and families disappeared and pensions and state salaries dried up for long periods of time.¹¹ Many institutional jobs disap-

peared, leaving teachers and engineers alike to search for alternative employment. Many in the former Central Asian republics, including nearly all of the families with whom I lived in different regions of Kazakhstan, turned to informal trade in the period after independence as their only sustainable livelihood. While cross-border trade proved to be a phase of transformation during the 1990s in Kazakhstan, in other Central Asian former Soviet republics, notably Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, labor remittance economies continue to structure national economies, with regional and transnational networks and goods—from Turkey to Russia to China—providing income for millions of families.¹² Within Central Asia, Kazakhstan figures prominently as a host country for regional labor migrants (Marat 2009). The Kazakhstani state grew wealthy due to resource extraction and has therefore functioned as a labor importer, rather than exporter, and thus fostered a growing elite and supported an urban middle class. However, millions of Kazakhstanis (particularly in rural areas and villages) are still living in relative poverty.

Those with whom I lived and worked during nearly a decade of research (2004–13) in four different regions across Kazakhstan certainly represent another “new normal”—those who have relatively little access to resources and possess little specific knowledge about government programs. People see an increase in wealth among the wealthy but no significant improvement in their own circumstances, and they thus view government “reform” (such as liberalism or privatization) as highly corrupt. In the political and economic transformations taking place in recent decades,

the relation between macro structures and everyday practices is that the collapse of party states and administered economies broke down macro structures, thereby creating space for microworlds to produce autonomous effects that may have unexpected influence over the structures that have been emerging. . . . This presents an opportunity for local improvisations that may press either in novel directions toward a “return” to socialism, [but] the innovation and reversion are responses to unstable environments, at least as much as they are evidence of socialism’s legacies or its culture. Postsocialism has represented a period of constant change, so actors [have tended] to strategize within time horizons that are short. (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, 2)

Sustainability and social security have become an intense focus for many families and communities across Central and Inner Asia.

In the post-Soviet period, as socialist infrastructures and securities unraveled and as the demand for cash and goods increased, those without a strong social network or family structure were left highly vulnerable—the elderly, single mothers, young urban workers. Despite impressive and highly visible growth in urban capitals and areas of resource extraction, un(der)employment has persisted elsewhere, particularly in rural areas.¹³ Substance abuse and male violence have also been widespread sources of stress for many in Central Asia, as has been the case

elsewhere in postsocialist spaces.¹⁴ The fracturing of families due to urban and international labor migration, as well as the stress of what is often semi- or extra-legal labor in bazaars or abroad, also cannot always be solved by the household, but family structure remains ideologically central. In the absence of steady state support (or *boqmoq*) to resolve these dynamics and problems, families and communities must act on a local level to encourage ideologies and practices that provide alternative narratives and trajectories to post-Soviet “chaos” or “abandonment” by the state.¹⁵

This approach resonates with an ethnographic focus on what anthropologists have termed “well-being,” as well as local sense-making in the Central Asian post-Soviet republics. “Well-being” refers not to happiness but to “both the sufferings and the joys of life in relation to the social transactions necessary to be at peace with one’s surroundings and the quality of striving for a better future” (Montgomery 2013, 424) and is a category of both meaning and physical, socio-economic, and spiritual health. Till Mostowlansky has described in the eastern Pamir region of Tajikistan a strong parallel of paternalism undergirding the family and the state; in the absence of strong state support, it is the male head of the family who must step forward to assert a patriarchal “ideology of harmony” (2013, 472). Strategies of well-being range widely—from entrepreneurship and development projects, to negotiations over ethnic and religious identity, to simply sharing food and hospitality.¹⁶ Analyses of these strategies emphasize the ways in which local communities and even the homestead can become the center of an economic and moral order.

In the post-Soviet era the household economy has functioned as a basic form of social security for families (see Werner 1998). But it is not easy. The domestic household economy requires constant labor inputs from all its members to grow and prepare food, care for children, maintain the house, share a car for necessary errands, obtain enough cash for needed goods and services, and to hold regular life-cycle celebrations for family and friends (see Ismailbekova 2014a; Roche and Hohmann 2012). This model exists in smaller towns and villages throughout the region, but it is more difficult to maintain in larger cities, where people are living in smaller apartments or where there are disparities in the income and priorities of family members (e.g., urban relatives who cannot or do not wish to contribute to a household economy but prefer to focus on their nuclear families). Those who have a household group are very fortunate because it can function as a safety net, but many people do not have such support. The strength and legitimacy of the household typically reside at the center of a patriarchal family and its extended relatives, both living and deceased.

As leaders and providers of care for both households and communities, ancestors can occupy a more permanent or reliable position in such a challenging political and economic context, and thus they become critical in the context and ideology of well-being, even when families are fractured by political or econom-

ic circumstances. Saulesh Yessenova (2005a, b) describes how the recitation of family genealogy (Kaz: *shezhire*) can become a coping mechanism for urban labor migrants in Kazakhstan, offering a source of legitimacy, pride, and purpose. An appeal to ancestral authority has had a heightened value in the postsocialist era particularly because of the conditions of state control, social and economic exclusion, and the cultural or ethnic nationalism characteristic of newly formed nations, which must also be read in turn as the legacy of Soviet rule.

CULTURAL NATIONALISM

There is no question that the territories and peoples of the former Central Asian republics occupied a very particular space in Russian and Soviet colonial imagination—the exotic (Islamic) “other” in need of modern education and liberation (Brower and Lazzarini 1997; Khalid 1998; Northrop 2004), as well as a vast expanse of land instrumental to the agricultural, industrial, and nuclear infrastructure of the Soviet Union. As Katherine Verdery has urged, “just as post-colonial studies examines the colonial pasts that shaped societies in present-day Africa, Latin America, and Asia, so we might now explore these same processes for Soviet imperialism” (in Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002, 16). In Central Asia, as elsewhere throughout the former Soviet Union, people’s contemporary understandings of everything from ethnic identity to political power are undergirded by the legacy of Russian ideological imperialism and the inequitable reformation of Soviet economic structure.

In the early Soviet system, communist leaders and activists were tasked with an ideological and practical mandate: from the existing structure of the former Russian Empire, they were to create a new multinational state. That project contained many fundamental contradictions and impossibilities. “Nations” or “peoples” were to be identified and celebrated but also taught to speak Russian and to read Russian literature (see İgmen 2012). The nations were to be semi-autonomous but also to operate firmly within the centralized communist hierarchy, with its pinnacle in Moscow. All the “peoples” were also to be liberated from any “traditional” systems of oppression, to be educated in “Soviet culture” (see Grant 1995), and to participate in the state redistributive economy (within which no single nation except perhaps Russia was individually sustainable). From an ideological, economic, and political perspective, Soviet intervention in Central Asia was statist but also colonial. While national cultures were celebrated, they were made functionally dependent on the broader Soviet system, what Francine Hirsch (2005, 14) has called “double assimilation.” Each new Soviet republic became a container for its titular nationality, and all were ultimately to be “national in form, socialist in content.”¹⁷

Soviet nationalities policies had obvious and major ramifications in the areas of religion and culture. In Central Asia, the policies meant that, despite early cooperation with modernist Islamic leaders (Khalid 1998), by the time of the purges Soviet Central Asian officials were actively targeting religious leaders and places

of worship and implementing the *hujum* (the antiveiling campaign targeting women).¹⁸ By the 1960s, the Central Asian nations also included an institutionalized state Islam, in order to promote a “soft Sunnism” as normative (Khalid 2007). The Soviet culture ministry helped develop and promote “national” styles of music, song, and poetry (see Hirsch 2005) that celebrated local “cultural folklore” while at the same time promoting a modernist Russian-language education and academies of arts, literature, and sciences.¹⁹ Genealogy itself became a tool of nationality creation and politics, in Turkmenistan, for example (Edgar 2004). All of these phenomena helped to shape (and maintain) conceptions of cultural and ethnic identity in the broader context of Russian cultural hegemony; in Kazakhstan, this hegemony also flew in the face of what was in fact a highly pluralistic, multiethnic state. But by the end of the Soviet period, ideologies of “nationality” were contributing to the performative and political dimensions of ethnic nationalism, and they have been actively reclaimed in the post-Soviet period as the cultural face of new nations.²⁰

Soviet Russian incursion to Central Asia was multilayered and caused extreme damage to the steppe environment. A number of projects caused particularly egregious damage, including the early Soviet collectivization of nomadic Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples onto farms. Irrigation projects designed to grow crops in the steppe environment (as opposed to using the steppe for grazing and herding activities) created a water crisis and drained the Aral Sea, resulting in ecological disaster in that region. Northern Kazakhstan housed the Soviet nuclear testing zone (known as the Polygon in Russian), irradiating a massive area; to this day many people in the region suffer from cancer and other related illnesses. Compounding these issues is the lingering sadness over lives lost during the Stalinist purges as well as in the Great War (World War II). Today Kazakhstan has a narrative of tragedy and depression surrounding Soviet history, and this narrative emerged as one of the early faces of ecological ethnic nationalism in the post-Soviet period, under well-known leaders such as Olzhas Suleimenov (see Laitin 1998; Olcott 1995).

In Kazakhstan, in addition to general resentment over the fate of millions of Kazakh lives lost to famine, exile, and war over a century, there is also a clear contemporary moment in the “awakening” of a *Kazakh* identity as read against Soviet Russia: the events of December 1986. Those events, known simply as Zheltoksan (December), also clearly marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan. Then-Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Dinmukhamed Kunayev, who was First Secretary of Kazakhstan’s Communist Party, with a Russian, Gennady Kolbin. This move represented a direct break with Soviet policy and tradition, specifically, the idea that the head of each republic should be of that republic’s titular nationality. Kazakhs were outraged, and thousands joined a large student protest in the central squares in the cities of Almaty, Taldykorgan, Shimkent, and Karaganda. For three days (16–19 December), protesters clashed with police special forces. In addition to immediately arresting and

jailing hundreds of citizens, police continued to hunt, interrogate, and imprison people for months after the protest had ended, as the police had filmed all those present at the demonstrations.²¹

The events unleashed waves of bad sentiment between ethnic Kazakhs and Russian leadership (which of course translated to interethnic conflict on the ground). The Kazakhstani government was trapped somewhere in between, wishing to ameliorate Kazakh concerns but reluctant to move toward complete autonomy. Kolbin was eventually replaced as First Secretary by Nursultan Nazarbayev, who assumed the presidency after independence on 16 December 1991, in a blatantly symbolic move meant to link Zheltoksan directly to national independence. Zheltoksan, not surprisingly, is an episode consistently invoked in popular nationalist discourse as the last egregious act of the Soviet Union against the Kazakh people. In the years following the December events, active efforts among poets, artists, musicians, and supportive cultural producers began to revamp traditions seen as particularly “Kazakh,” to reclaim their pre-Soviet (and even pre-Russian) glory. Government, too, began to propel that activity in its promotion of pro-Kazakh natalist policies and a massive Kazakh repatriation program.²²

However, Kazakh nationalism has run counter to competing internationalist visions and realities for the country over recent decades. Despite extensive pagantry at the national level, the state has provided little sustained or systemic support for Kazakh language and culture, leaving its citizens with a certain paradox: at the state level, Kazakh culture is celebrated in theory but not always in practice. Thus, when one looks at forms of culture and historical imagination that have been “nationalized” (such as ancestral figures, narratives, poets, music, and dance), it might seem that these forms are largely the products of state retraditionalization projects (as well as Soviet ideological projects). However, the argument of this book is that these cultural strategies are necessary and successful at the state level because they call upon and resonate with forms of pride and belonging that already exist in many different ways for people and communities struggling to make sense of political change and identity in the present.

Since Kazakhstan achieved independence in 1991, its state government has not been consistently providing for its citizens in terms of political integration, economic opportunity, or social welfare. As a result, people are increasingly turning to broader alternative cultural geographies and conceptions of leadership and care. In particular, ancestors have emerged as a powerful dialogic trope serving to unify and orient families and communities, as well as nations. At regional and local levels, many leaders are very actively involved in building, promoting, and inhabiting a new nationalized ancestral landscape that state funds have also sometimes helped to build and sponsor. The spiritual guidance of ancestors in the physical geography of the steppe, together with the practical and legal guidance of community elders (see Beyer 2010) fashions a cultural, historical, and political world that overlaps—but is not coterminous—with the nation-state of Kazakhstan.

THE STORY OF ONE FAMILY

Throughout my years of research in Kazakhstan, I was privileged to live with several Kazakh families in different areas across the country. For those families, as well as for most of my friends and colleagues, it was more comfortable for them to think of me doing research about Kazakh “culture,” rather than “politics.” While the category of “culture” is an enduring one and a source of pride, in general “politics” was perceived by all those around me as dirty—corrupt, shifting, and unstable. Without exception, my Kazakhstani families, friends, and colleagues tried to limit their interaction with and exposure to government offices and to organize their household economies and personal security through a network of social ties instead. While all citizens have to interact with bureaucratic offices at some stages of life, particularly for employment or travel, most people try diligently to avoid other spheres of governance perceived as the most dangerous: police and the judicial system.

I should note that of the four families with whom I lived for the longest periods of time in completely different regions of the country, *all* of them contained one (young, male) officer of the law, but nonetheless all of them were quite nervous about police, border customs, and the legal system in general, as they saw these realms as highly corrupt. These families were low- to middle-income multigenerational households in which grandparents, their children, and their sons’ wives, as well as grandchildren, lived together and in which grown children had jobs. If the grandparents were still young enough, they worked as well. Families shared responsibility for the household and for child care. I was staying with one of these families during a politically contentious period of national elections, one in which an opposition leader was murdered in a large city far away from our small town.²³ Because the incident was highly relevant to my work at the time, I wanted to stay in touch with my friends in the city, to find out what was happening day to day. I had limited cell-phone reception and so at night would stand outside on tiptoe by the backyard fence, in the one spot where there was enough coverage to make a call.

Several of my friends and colleagues had personally known the murdered opposition leader, so the period following his death was intense in that way, as well as being a national tragedy. One friend in particular was very upset, so I suggested that she leave the city and come out to our smaller town to stay with my host family for a while, until things calmed down. She agreed that it might be best, so I went to check with my hosts. In general, it is both a great stereotype and a great truth that Kazakhs and other Inner Asians are incredibly hospitable, and they welcome guests. In this case, however, when I explained the circumstances, my family became very quiet. The kind grandfather, who had never really said much in my presence to this point, finally leaned forward over the living room table to tell me that this was not a good idea. He was adamant that we could not

bring politics into their safe homestead, explaining that outsiders do not always understand how things work. He gave me several examples, including that of a man at his work who had apparently written an editorial piece for the newspaper that was critical of a local politician and had subsequently disappeared. “We still don’t know what happened to him,” said Grandpa. My friend would definitely not be allowed to visit.

I realized that there were other signs of my hosts’ suspicion and discomfort, to which I should previously have paid more attention because those signs would have led me to understand the family’s perspective. That family, who lived in a multiethnic residential area of private homes (rather than block apartments), also worried sometimes about their neighbors, in particular one woman who watched her neighbors for extra economic activity and reported them to the local tax police. For that reason, I was never allowed to mention that I contributed financially to my family’s household economy—it was very important to them that I was seen only as a guest. They had saved up enough money to buy their youngest son a car, so that he could help the family with transportation, but were often too nervous that he would be stopped by the local police to let him drive anywhere at all (they considered traffic cops to be tied to organized crime syndicates). I knew all of this but had nonetheless acted in a selfish and cavalier manner. I was completely ashamed. I had not considered their sensitivities and had invited a guest without their approval, putting them in the incredibly awkward position of having to refuse hospitality they might otherwise have been willing to give. I felt horrible and apologized at length, but the incident introduced a slight tension in our household that did not go away.

In order to help make up for my mistake, I tried to support my family in other ways. The daughter of the family was my own age, in her late twenties—as yet unmarried but hoping to wed her boyfriend for love, though he was not in a strong financial position and had an estranged first wife. The youngest son had gotten into trouble with his parents for sneaking out, hanging around with a girl they did not approve of, and even sometimes having beer (the family were nondrinkers). When the grandparents decided it was best for their children to go participate in a local healing group to help solve (or prevent) problems, I went with them as well. The leaders of this group, which was called *Ak Zhol* (White Way), were mostly women, and they ran their organization out of a house in my family’s neighborhood. The point of the group was to encourage active adherence to Kazakh ancestors as part of being a good Muslim, to encourage respect for male leaders within families, and to discourage the use of alcohol and drugs. I went with my family’s daughter and youngest son to meet the group on a day they were receiving new visitors for introductory sessions.

When we arrived at the crowded house, we removed our shoes and entered a large interior room, joining a line of people moving forward to pray at a low shrine, which housed a Koran, a small dish for coins, and a colorful laminated

sheet of instructions in Kazakh telling us to bow three times, hold a wish in our heart, say a short prayer (words provided), and if desired, put a few coins as alms in the dish. I did all this, then sat with my family against the back wall of the room, eyes carefully lowered. We were waiting to have our fortunes told through the channeling of the ancestors. On the other side of the room, there were active healing sessions happening with a healer, who symbolically used the Kazakh *kamcha* (horse whip) to beat evil spirits and sickness out of his patient's body.²⁴

When one of the group leaders came in to greet us, my host sister explained that I was an anthropologist and that I had come to study the Kazakh poetry tradition *aitys* (described at length in chapter four). She replied in Russian, "Klassno!" (cool). She was younger than I but very clearly in complete control of the situation. She explained that she would take the first step of the center with me, telling me my diagnostic fortune through *bata*, to see what areas of my body or life needed further attention and care. As she was going to be channeling the words of the ancestors (Kaz: *ata-babalar*) in a semitrance state, there was a scribe—another woman, who sat to the side against the wall with large journal and a pen, ready to record. They would then together read and interpret what had been said. Here the term "ancestors" refers to a cultural amalgam, a general category. I personally cannot claim any Kazakh genealogy, but here the point was that I was being addressed by *those Kazakhs who have come before* and who embody the wisdom of Kazakh "family" in its broadest historical sense, even for a stranger.

The channeled *bata*, the words coming through the body of this female leader, came out loud and intense. The blessing lasted many minutes, blowing forth in a heavily cadenced stream of rhyming lines. Because of the heavy repetition and volume, and because as a listener you are required to kneel, to cast your eyes down, and to hold your hands up in prayer, the experience is like being pushed by words—it is a bodily listening. When she finished, the two women read back through what had been said and interpreted it to me. I was welcomed by the ancestors, they said, who were pleased by my interest in Kazakh poetry and who would facilitate my research. They noted several dates and numbers that were significant for me, as well as a few past life events that were somewhat accurate or relatable. My channeler said that I understand people well, that it is a gift. Whether this was flattery or commentary about my being an ethnographer, she decided that I was ready for the next stage of center activity: pilgrimage.

The following week, my host family helped with the necessary preparations for me, my sister, and younger brother; we were all going to travel together with a large group from the center. We were each to take seven loaves of baked bread to eat and share, seven white cloths (each a square meter) to lay atop burial sites at mausoleums, and to wash in the Muslim fashion in the early morning before leaving home on the day of the pilgrimage. We were all required to cover our heads (scarves for women, hats for men). We returned to the center, where five old

sky-blue school buses were waiting for us, a group of some 140 pilgrims. Two or three group leaders came on each bus to act as our chaperones and guides.

On the ride to the first shrine site, after a brief welcome, a male channeler standing in the center of the rocking bus began to deliver a lecture about the best way to comport oneself in this lifetime. Some lessons were straightforward: he urged the group not to drink alcohol, because it sets a terrible example for the younger generation and because it makes it impossible to hold a family together. He then noted that people who drink can't be good citizens. He reminded our group of the great leaders (Kaz: *biler*) of Kazakh history—Aiteke Bi, Tole Bi, Kazibek Bi—the ancestors who were able to form a good government for their people. A *bi* is a judge, a position of judicial authority in society (see V. Martin 2001). Historical *bi* figures are widely incorporated in the new “national” history, considered to be cultural heroes, and featured in the new nationalizing canon of historical identity: for example, streets have been renamed after them in many cities, and anniversaries of their passing are celebrated. In the context of pilgrimage, the *bis* were invoked in order to establish a sense of cultural rules or norms created by a Kazakh authority. (I think here “citizen” is a good metaphor for proper cultural and moral comportment, as well as for Kazakh sovereignty.) These realms—of political and cultural belonging—were very much conflated on our tour that day, during which we actively sought the ancestors' guidance and blessing.

On the pilgrimage tour we visited seven shrine mausoleums in and around town. At each, we circled the shrine and removed our shoes to enter and pray together with a shrine caretaker, who could recite a *sure* from the Koran. We left our white cloths at the shrine or tied them to trees around the sites. One site was next to a natural spring, where we filled plastic bottles with holy water to bring home to our families. At the three sites with an outdoor assembly space, we crowded together on benches to hear center leaders deliver the words of the ancestors to particular members of the group, called out by name. Each individual was called at least once over the course of the day. These *bata* were done one after the other, channelers taking turns and other center members monitoring our prayer stance to ensure that it was correct for receiving these words. During *bata* sessions we were supposed to keep our head bowed, hands up in prayer, arms away from body, and feet planted on the ground. I was reprimanded twice, for letting my arms fall and for crossing my ankles. By the end of the day, my back and shoulders ached.

Pilgrimage is one step or stage in a process of commitment and transformation at the center; after this, people continue to come to weekly healing sessions, during which problem regions of the body and psyche are identified and a corresponding cure is administered. A mantra of the center was that the totality of their message, about how to live and how to follow a righteous path in life, was simply too complicated to convey in less than several months.²⁵ Pilgrimage and healing were

each essential aspects of the journey, each guided by the words of the ancestors, actively embodied in the present. At the center, prayer, *bata*, and conversation were all spaces in which ancestors are dialogically present. Ultimately, the goal is to attain a pure heart, in order to strengthen families and communities. Scared by the broader political environment but desiring a strong familial center and purpose, my own host family was very much attracted to this mode of interacting; the worldview espoused by the center made sense to them as a way to cope with their at times uncertain world. It was also something they could share and teach me, which sparked my own interest and commitment to the topics that have grown into this book.

In her study of the Naqshbandi Sufi shrine pilgrimage in Pakistan, Pnina Werbner (1996, 309) notes that “the mapping of differential ‘knowledges’ onto culturally constructed space is a commonsensical discursive tendency, deployed not only by anthropologists but by the people we study, to define topographies of good and evil, truth and falsity.” In the case of Kazakhstan, the cultural topography must be made so as to claim Kazakh bodies as the most valuable—not only the living but also those who have passed, those quite literally interred in shrines everywhere, those metaphorical grandmothers and grandfathers whose invocation comes in words. Their words can make the present more possible for the living, for those trying to cope with a variety of political, economic, and new social realities from day to day. Ancestors are guides and exemplars, moral pillars—different from the “corrupt” officials and forms of governance people experience from the state. An ancestral worldview becomes not only alternative to the state but actually a dialogic ground of criticism and confrontation: what would the heroic leaders of times past think of leaders today?

DIALOGIC LEADERSHIP

In the second half of this book I analyze extended examples from *aitys*, the oral performative tradition in Kazakhstan (or *aitysh*, in Kyrgyzstan).²⁶ In *aitys*, certain ancestral figures are commonly referenced in verse. Coming from the verb *aitysu* (to speak to each other), *aitys* is a verbal duel between two poets performed live before an audience. In this performance, the poets accompany their song, ideally improvised, by playing the *dombyra*.²⁷ This tradition also exists among Kazakhs in Mongolia and China.²⁸ There have been efforts among high-level cultural organizers to encourage international meetings and performances incorporating the *dombyra*. Poets speak as and for their lineages of kinship and learning, as well as their regions of origin. Thus, many cultural and historical voices are layered within each performance; ultimately, poets within the tradition of *aitys* speak as and for the “Kazakh people” (Kaz: *yel*) as a totality. More specifically, poets claim to voice the “truth of the people” to public audiences and to seated government leaders. This truth often takes the form of commentary and news sharing about national and regional events and ongoing problems in the country.

Aitys poets have powerful elite sponsors who tend to be Kazakh nationalists using the celebration of Kazakh language and culture as a platform from which to critique contemporary problems. Poets and sponsors alike consistently invoke a mythic Kazakh past in which deeply respected poets traveled widely, entertaining throughout the khanate, then returning to report to the khan, in poetry and song, about the condition of his people. While the poet's words might anger the khan, the poet was not directly responsible for what was said, as the messenger simply voices the sentiments of other Kazakhs. Most poets consider their membership in this oral tradition today to be a gift of God and of the ancestors, and they believe that their talent is embodied in their genealogy. Talking to me about their experiences as contemporary poets, many explain that they feel compelled to perform, feel a duty to help educate Kazakhs about their language, culture, and history, and have a duty to provide sociopolitical commentary about present conditions.

The aitys tradition presents an alternative model of leadership to the uncaring and autocratic state government. Poets' performances and their more successful relationships with sponsors invoke and enact a dialogic leadership in which the people can voice their concerns and in which leaders are present and responsive. In this sphere, "the people" are Goffman's (1981, 144) principal figure, a unified "someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say." The principal figure cannot be reduced to any one set of participants in the tradition (ancestors, poets, audiences, cultural organizers, sponsors); rather, all these together contribute continually toward the figure. The principal is someone who is always coming into being. Over time, the principal figure of aitys is engaged with government officials as an "addressed recipient" (1981, 133) in a conversation that thousands of people can be verified to have heard, a conversation with a thousand "shadows" (Irvine 1996).

One consistent trope of performances is the invocation of both mythic history and famous Kazakh ancestors. In this performative context, the mythic ground of just and sovereign rule lies in the great khanates of the past. The warriors and leaders most strongly associated with Kazakh self-determination are described and celebrated, often within the broader context of nationalist holidays and anniversaries. But at the same time, the greatness of those heroes' achievements and leadership becomes the standard by which contemporary leaders—at the local, regional, and national level—are negatively judged, for their failure to live up to the legacy of the past. Aitys poetry is a prominent public space in which a conversation with the ancestors performatively becomes a vehicle of cultural expression and sociopolitical critique (see Dubuisson 2009, 2010). In this genre of performance, forms of dialoguing with ancestors become a mode of reflecting on the patriotism of the present: what can and should be the nature of communication and accountability between leaders and their people?

Cultural performance is one way in which expression organizes experience,

how we come to see and know ourselves; it is an “explanation of life itself” (Turner 1982). In their study of cultural performances (like the oral tradition of aitys) anthropologists have emphasized the spaces of exception that these “framed” encounters necessarily create, where social mores are revealed, held suspended, and either reinvigorated or challenged (see Conquergood 1998).²⁹ These spaces allow flexibility and change in the social order and become vehicles for the emergence of new or alternate critical “voices” in culture (see Fabian 1990). Culture itself is dialogic, requiring continual collusion in social interaction (Tedlock and Mannheim 1995). Thus, even in routinized traditions, cultural performances are emergent and therefore unpredictable: there is always both a powerful potential and the threat of complete failure. Cultural performance becomes an opening and a center for conversation and negotiation over moral understanding (and in turn for ethnography itself; see Conquergood 1982, quoted in Madison 2012).

In the sphere of aitys, a dialogue over legitimate governance is threatened within a complicated political economy of sponsorship; powerful and wealthy patrons may overpower (or literally “buy”) the voice of poets for their own interests. A successful aitys is therefore one in which poets and patrons have mutual and balanced concerns and in which a dialogue is not foreclosed (Dubuisson 2014).

What is also clearly demonstrated not only in poets’ performances but also in their lived relationship with their sponsors is that dialogue itself in turn becomes a basic model for leadership and good governance. In chapter four I examine three different sponsorship stories: three different politicians negotiate a relationship with aitys poets and cultural organizers in order to enhance their own prestige and leadership with the historical authority of oral tradition. Their sponsorship, in turn, provides a backbone and political legitimacy to the aitys tradition and its contemporary communities. These relationships constitute a form of dialogic authority and are an example of the patronage politics highly characteristic of Inner Asia, a politics of mutual accountability, cooperation, and respect.³⁰

Qualities of care and leadership are paramount in a mythic retelling of the past, specifically, the great and lawful rule of khans, the sage advice of judges (Kaz: *biler*), and the heroism of warriors (Kaz: *batyrlar*) in the steppe. Rhetorically, that great past becomes a legitimate ground from which to judge the present and to condemn modern leaders for their failure to live up to the glorious precedent of their genealogical forebears. The uncertainty, precariousness, or perceived “corruptness” of the present is often contrasted negatively to an idealized cultural past where law was strong, leaders were caring, and the blessing of the elders was enough to help Kazakh warriors (Kaz: *batyr*) defeat their worst enemies. These stories tend also to be part of the state nationalizing narratives emerging through the Soviet and post-Soviet periods; part of my purpose is to understand why and how such a rhetorical strategy is so effective at both a personal and national level in a particular political, cultural, and historical environment.

I wish to underscore the performative potential of language and oral tradition

in general—not only as my own topic or method but also as a political project in the world. This book is structured telescopically, describing the contexts in which conversations with ancestors occur: from the highly personal and immediate contexts of bata-giving within family relationships, to the more general forms of bata-giving and miracle-storytelling practices at shrines, to the very public performance of poetry and politics in a traditional sense. These are all moments in which ancestors dialogically come to be in the world in a “participatory politics” (Wedeen 2008) both within and beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in Kazakhstan.