
CHAPTER 1

Polygyny in the Context of *Adat* and Islam

This chapter explains why and how the Kyrgyz practiced polygyny within the institutional milieu of *adat*, or customary law, and Islam prior to the first critical juncture I identify—the introduction of communist institutions. Existing work on polygyny practiced among Central Asians prior to the advent of communism provides context for my discussion. Though there is scant scholarship on this subject, the fact that the Jadids—the first generation of modern Central Asian intellectuals appearing at the end of the nineteenth century in Turkistan—criticized polygyny in their writings indicates its existence.¹ These primarily male reformers “criticized women’s excessive exclusion, [and] promoted women’s rights to education and divorce, and the right to refuse polygynous and child marriages.”² The Jadids, like the Communist Party decades later, considered polygyny a threat to what they understood as the most important pillar of a consolidated nation: the stable family. According to Marianne Kamp, the Jadids worried less about women and more about men because they considered polygyny an institution that deprived men of marriage opportunities.³ In his study of Jadidism, Adeeb Khalid describes a play published in Samarkand in 1916 called *The Oppressed Woman* that offers a Jadid lesson on the devastating and possibly fatal consequences of polygyny. The plot is as follows: a new-method teacher tries in vain to dissuade a wealthy merchant from taking a second wife; the merchant’s first wife objects, but her husband dismisses her feelings. The wealthy merchant

then takes an eighteen-year-old second wife. Six months later the second wife accuses the first wife of theft. Believing his new wife, the merchant beats his first wife. The play concludes with the first wife's death.⁴

While we do not know the extent to which polygyny was practiced among Central Asians, we do know that this lesson did not resonate with everyone. Esen Aman notes that polygyny was “an ordinary phenomenon” for Turkmen prior to the Party's penetration of the region.⁵ Mive Allaiarova concurs, arguing that polygyny was practiced during the pre-Soviet era primarily among upper class Turkmen but also among middle class Turkmen who could take a second wife if their first wife was infertile or seriously ill.⁶ Adrienne Lynn Edgar also notes that although they were “relatively rare,” polygynous marriages were present among Turkmen.⁷ Colette Harris argues that affluent sedentary Tajiks and Uzbeks “with far-flung business interests might take a wife in each place and entrust to her the running of their estates in that location.”⁸ And Kamp opens the first chapter of *The New Woman in Uzbekistan* with a description of Muattar: born in Bukhara in 1899, she became the second wife of her deceased husband's nephew.⁹

Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomads practiced polygyny as well. Culturologist Zira Nauryzbaeva argues that although polygynous marriages among Kazakhs were limited and the tokal (*tokol* in Kyrgyz), or second wife, was not a widespread phenomenon: “Kazakhs were indeed polygamists, they took up to four wives.”¹⁰ She notes that polygynous marriages were often the result of the levirate custom, “an ancient tradition when a woman is widowed and left alone; so that she is not alone without protection and her children do not become orphans, someone among the young relatives of her husband marries her.”¹¹ In reference to the lives of Kyrgyz nomads, Nurgul N. Djanaeva emphasizes the fact that some families were built on a polygynous basis.¹² One man who participated in an El-Pikir FG came from such a family: his grandmother was a third wife prior to the Soviet era.

It is difficult to reconstruct motivations for polygynous marriages among Central Asians centuries ago. Though this chapter references historical accounts whenever possible, it is based primarily on interpretations or recollections that my respondents voiced during interviews. While sometimes imperfect and incomplete, these interpretations and recollections of history nonetheless tell a story that is consistent with the literature discussed throughout this chapter and with what we know about nomadic societies in general. That story revolves around four factors—nomadism, the levirate custom, infertility, and affluence—that contributed to polygynous marriages among the Kyrgyz when their lives were governed by adat and Islam, both of which legitimized polygynous marriages.

The Institutional Milieux of Adat and Islam

Adat, or customary law, was a source of moral authority and guidance for nomadic peoples in Central Asia like the Kyrgyz.¹³ In her account of the role of *salt*, or custom, in how the Kyrgyz order their lives, Judith Beyer reminds us that we do not know a great deal about this type of legal sensibility in pre-tsarist times.¹⁴ But we do know that adat governed many aspects of daily life including those pertaining to marriage and family. In her well-researched account of the many ways in which adat structured the lives of the Kyrgyz prior to communism, Zhyldyz Chynarbekovna Tegizbekova argues that according to adat, the family was first and foremost the means to further the patrilineal line of descent.¹⁵

Adat provided men and women with different familial rights and responsibilities. As head of his family a man had the right to resolve all questions pertaining to family life, settle quarrels, punish his sons for disobeying his commands, manage and distribute the family's property according to his discretion, choose a man for his daughter to marry and resolve issues related to her dowry, and possess several wives.¹⁶ Women played an indispensable role in Kyrgyz nomadic society, as they were responsible for maintaining the household and raising the children. According to adat, a woman's status was based on equality within a marriage and respect as family caretaker: women were obliged to care for the home and raise children, but they also had the right to submit a complaint to the court, appeal for divorce, and claim their husbands' inheritance.¹⁷ Tegizbekova claims that while monogamy was the main form of marriage among the Kyrgyz, members of the propertied class practiced polygyny.¹⁸ Polygyny was rare, she argues, because payment of *kalym* for each new wife was onerous for most Kyrgyz. *Kalym*, or payment for a bride made by a groom's family to another family, was a critical pillar of Kyrgyz marriage customs.

Islam introduced different conceptions of order that operated alongside those of adat. Noor O'Neill Borbieva emphasizes this institutional overlapping when she argues that adat "comprised domestic, mortuary, and other customary observances that reinforce key Central Asian values such as family, hospitality, and reciprocity," while Islam informed some of these practices including marriage.¹⁹ Chris Hann and Mathijs Pelkmans fittingly describe the propagation of Islam in Central Asia as a "chequered and drawn out process."²⁰ We know that from the time the Kyrgyz encountered Islam at the beginning of the eighth century, conversion was gradual, contested, and uneven. The process ultimately generated a harmonious coexistence of religious, familial, and kinship identities and loyalties.

The connection between Islam and polygynous marriages among the Kyrgyz prior to the introduction of communist institutions remains a subject of debate.

Some scholars, like S. K. Kozhonaliev, argue that the Kyrgyz practiced polygyny prior to the Bolshevik Revolution precisely because Islam permits the custom.²¹ Others claim that polygyny has deep roots that predate the arrival of Islam. For example, Tegizbekova concludes that polygyny was not linked to conversion to Islam but instead was one element of large patriarchal families.²² Similarly, S. M. Abramzon argues that the Kyrgyz have been practicing polygyny for centuries and that Islam “only sanctioned” a preexisting custom.²³ In expressing her interpretation of the past, a representative of a local women’s organization offering coping skills to women navigating Kyrgyz society suggested, like Abramzon, that Islam simply legitimized an existing practice: “Polygyny was connected to our nomadic tradition because where in the mountains would a woman and her children go? And then it’s as if Islamic traditions found contact. And this—polygyny—unfolded.”²⁴

The introduction and subsequent observance of *nikah* was one of the most important ways Islam altered marital rituals among the Kyrgyz. As Tegizbekova explains: “Under the influence of Islam marital relations of the Kyrgyz underwent changes. For example, before the conclusion of a marriage the Kyrgyz must already have absolutely conducted a wedding ceremony ritual with the participation of a mullah—*nikah*—and subsequently this ritual became one of the steps in concluding a marriage.”²⁵ The Kyrgyz continued to adhere to norms of adat and Islam, including observation of *nikah*, during the colonial period when the Russian state tolerated religious practice among its subjects.

The Russian empire implemented indirect rule in Central Asia, a form of governance that did not substantively alter religious or cultural lifestyles.²⁶ As Beyers notes, the Russians failed to achieve consistent codification of customary law or the transformation of Islamic law into statutory law.²⁷ Russian authorities generally adopted a pragmatic stance toward Islam that Khalid summarizes as follows: Islam was ignored, not abolished.²⁸ He notes that the authorities viewed Islam among nomads in nonthreatening terms, as “a thin veneer over ancient customs,” and thus relied on adat as the principal form of governance for nonsedentary populations.²⁹ Serge A. Zenkovsky argues more forcefully that the Russian empire did not simply tolerate Islam “but recognized it as the official and obligatory faith of the Central Asian population.”³⁰ While policies toward Islam changed depending on who was at the helm of the empire, the category of religion was meaningful to the elite and the masses as it represented “collective belonging and the regulation thereof.”³¹ Julie McBrien notes that religion “was about collective belonging, collective ethics, and a communal ethos. It was understood as an important element of control in a state with a diverse population; it was an essential element of identity for those populations and the means by which they could be recognized.”³²

Under this policy of noninterference in the religious and cultural lives of Central Asian Muslims, the Kyrgyz practiced polygyny on an open but limited basis. Tegizbekova identifies three reasons for this. In terms of offspring, she argues that polygynous marriages were motivated by infertility, the desire for male progeny to continue the lineage, and/or high rates of child mortality. In terms of household economics, she argues that polygynous marriages were motivated by the need for additional labor to maintain large households owned by members of the upper class. In terms of emotions, she argues that polygynous marriages were motivated by the fact that arranged marriages often generated unhappy spouses and, in these cases, the husband had the right to independently choose a second wife.³³ When expressing their interpretations or recollections of the past, my respondents identified four factors that contributed to polygyny: nomadism, the levirate custom, infertility, and affluence. However, the quotations below demonstrate overlap between these factors and those identified in Tegizbekova's monograph. In confirming and expanding upon Tegizbekova's research, my research reveals how straightforward and simultaneously complex polygynous marriages were among the Kyrgyz.

Nomadism and the Levirate Custom as Motivators

The factors my respondents saw as contributing to polygynous marriages among the Kyrgyz prior to the introduction of communist institutions were not mutually exclusive—more than one could motivate a particular marriage. In fact, most respondents quoted in this chapter identified multiple causes of polygyny among the Kyrgyz during this period; few argued that polygyny was caused by a single factor.

One theme that arose in discussions with my respondents is the idea that the nomadic lifestyle of the Kyrgyz lent itself to polygyny in two ways. First, nomadism required female participation in the local political economy: as fairly autonomous agents, women formed the core of the labor force. Their economic contributions necessitated freedom of movement. This meant that nomadic Kyrgyz women were not secluded and did not wear any head covering other than traditional garments worn on certain occasions. Zh. S. Tatybekova underscores the fact that seclusion and covering would have hindered a woman's ability to contribute to the local economy: "In discussing the difficult situation of Kyrgyz women, it's necessary to emphasize the fact that they did not entirely submit to their husbands like women of other Central Asian peoples, and they were not covered with ritual coverings (*parandzha*, *chachvan*, *yashmak*), and they didn't know seclusion. The Kyrgyz woman exercised independence and freedom in household activities, as this was linked to the nomadic way of life of the Kyrgyz

people, in which the woman was the foundation of the work force, and covering and seclusion would only interfere with women's work."³⁴

It is within this context that polygyny served a practical economic purpose: a woman acquired additional labor to carry out arduous household chores when her husband took additional wives. Here my research coincides with Tegizbekova's research, which finds that members of the upper class needed additional household labor. But ordinary Kyrgyz families needed additional household labor as well, particularly when a woman reached an age that rendered physical labor difficult, if not impossible. A producer of *My Father's Wife*, a Kyrgyz film that depicts the struggles of a woman whose husband has taken a second wife, emphasized the plight of elder nomadic women still responsible for household chores: "Of course polygyny existed among the Kyrgyz prior to the Revolution. Many children were necessary. Once a woman's effective age had been reached, she herself wanted there to be young wives because there was a lot of difficult women's work that an old woman couldn't do. If young wives appeared, she simply directed the process and they completed the difficult nomadic women's work. . . . When a man reached out to additional women, as a rule no one opposed it; they were even glad."³⁵

While this respondent's generalization of how first wives felt is likely based on pure speculation, other respondents voiced similar views on how a nomadic lifestyle contributed to the formation of polygynous marriages. For example, a local historian argued that nomadism compelled a gendered division of labor in which men were hunters and gatherers who captured and brought sustenance to the family, while women took care of everything else.³⁶ This gendered division of labor placed a burden on women that additional wives could alleviate. According to a former government official, the gendered division of labor among Kyrgyz nomads created "tons of work" for women that a wife could not accomplish without "assistants":

The fact that we had a nomadic lifestyle contributed to polygyny. Women had tons of work compared to men. What has man done from time immemorial, historically? He's tended livestock and guarded his pasture and home. And he has fought, and on occasion he's accumulated cattle and then taken and married someone's girl. But the woman gave birth and raised children; she sewed clothing and yurt curtains since the Kyrgyz had nothing. Then she milked the animals. Only the woman did this. The woman was in charge of production—cheese, meat. And she prepared for winter—do you know how much work this is? Naturally a woman never had enough time. She needed an assistant; the more help the better. Sure

there were family altercations. But an assistant was necessary. In other words, since time immemorial polygyny was an ordinary phenomenon among the Kyrgyz.³⁷

The views of respondents quoted above focus on first wives and their economic needs rather than additional wives and problems they encountered upon joining a man's household. As we will see below, there was a hierarchy among wives that lent superiority to first wives and required obedience from additional wives. Abramzon argues that polygyny exploited female labor precisely because additional wives were in many cases brought in to handle burdensome housework.³⁸

The second reason nomadism lent itself to polygyny was that it was based on a general commitment to preserve the family and a specific commitment to prevent the unnecessary loss of sons, who grew up to defend the family and its livestock and continue the family lineage. Care was thus taken to make sure that widows and their children, particularly their sons, were not abandoned. The Kyrgyz observed the levirate custom, which sometimes resulted in polygynous marriages, for this reason. The levirate thus had a moral dimension (to keep a family intact) and a practical dimension (to maintain the family lineage).³⁹ Adat permitted a widow to marry a close relative of her deceased husband, usually his youngest brother, who in many cases was already married.⁴⁰ Although it also permitted a widow to marry a stranger, this occurred only with the permission of her deceased husband's relatives.⁴¹ Permission was required because the widow's deceased husband's family would not easily relinquish the *kalym* investment it had in the young bride. As a government official who worked on gender issues explained, "Traditions, customs—these were the sources of law. For example, if a husband was killed—there *were* acts of war—in order for the wife to stay with the family she married his younger brother. This practice existed."⁴² Although adat permitted a widow with children to remain single and manage her deceased husband's property until her sons reached adulthood as long as she continued to live among her husband's family, women tended to marry again via levirate custom to ensure support for themselves and their children. According to Tegizbekova and some of my respondents, levirate marriages were a form of mutual assistance because they ensured continued lineage and provided support to widows with children.⁴³

A representative of a local human rights organization told me that in her opinion, which is based in part on what her grandparents told her, polygynous marriages among Kyrgyz nomads cannot be properly conceptualized without taking the levirate custom into account: "The Kyrgyz are a small, nomadic people, and in principle polygyny was economically advantageous for the nation

and the preservation of the family. My grandmothers and grandfathers told me that the nomadic way of life created opportunities to spend three months on the *jailoo* [summer pasture] and then head down during the winter; so there were such relationships. Polygyny was practiced because it was linked to caring for children; this isn't an excuse, it's just what they told me. So it existed.⁴⁴ In the interpretations and recollections of many of my respondents, levirate marriages were a source of care and support for children who lost a father to old age, disease, or war. Another representative of a local human rights organization linked the levirate custom directly to the survival of women and children in an environment characterized by frequent tribal warfare: "We were nomads, we didn't live in one place, and women couldn't survive independently without men. It was survival; there were tribal wars and men often died. Women were left without support, without a man in the family. At that point, the closest relatives took responsibility to care for widows and their children."⁴⁵

A government official I spoke with explained how polygynous marriages were often the practical consequence of levirate marriages among Kyrgyz nomads by telling me about his grandfather. When he was a young married man, my respondent's grandfather lost his older brother in a Basmachi attack. Worried about his deceased brother's wife and three children, he consulted a mullah and subsequently decided to marry his deceased brother's wife in order to keep the woman and her children in the family:

My grandfather and his older brother prepared thoroughbred horses in Toktogul. The older brother sold the horses at another location and then returned on horseback to the village. The Basmachi killed him on one of his return trips, leaving his wife and three children. She grieved for a year in mourning clothes and then for two years without mourning clothes. The Kyrgyz say that for one year she sits in black, and after that she celebrates and wears a white shirt. But she had already sat for three years. According to custom [adat] her relatives must take her in, but she had three children and it was difficult. Though there was hunger in the streets, my grandfather fed and clothed her. He was young, he had a wife, they had a daughter. Three years after his brother's death, he asked the mullah, "How is it possible to abandon her and the children? According to custom, I cannot abandon her. Is it possible to keep her?" The mullah said, "If she agrees to marry, you may marry her. Can you support her?" He said, "Yes; if she leaves, the three children will be orphans." So he asked her, and she agreed. . . . From this I draw a conclusion. . . . The Kyrgyz always thought first about children, so that they would not be orphans. But secondly, they

thought about the woman—who would marry her with children? She’s young, attractive—she’ll be without a husband her whole life. So they resolved this problem too. It wasn’t savagery, it was a reasonable solution to a problem.⁴⁶

Other respondents articulated a version of this practical understanding of the levirate as a source of polygynous marriages among nomadic Kyrgyz. For example, a representative of a local women’s organization that seeks to strengthen relationships between men and women argued that the levirate custom had practical and moral dimensions: “In Kyrgyzstan, there was polygyny in the past. If a man went to war and died, leaving a young wife with children, they took her into the family, the clan, and cared for her so that she wouldn’t live poorly, wouldn’t die from hunger; they would never drive her out. They tried to place her with someone, to give her to a relative—an uncle, a first cousin. To prevent the children from becoming orphans so they wouldn’t be alone. And in this, in principle, there is nothing bad—in fact it’s the opposite: it’s caring for the family. This was the position.”⁴⁷ One respondent told me a personal story of how the levirate custom led a man with two wives to take a third wife: “My mother’s father died when she was born, and his brother—a merchant who brought goods back from Kashgar—had to marry his late brother’s wife. There was a custom—the levirate—to ensure that children of this marriage did not become orphans. . . . This brother already had two wives because the first wife didn’t give birth.”⁴⁸

Though the consensus among my respondents was that the levirate custom benefitted women and children, one respondent, who presumably focused on a widow’s lack of choice, disagreed with this interpretation. According to this representative of a local association coordinating women’s organizations in Kyrgyzstan, “We’re nomads, and back then there were second wives for a series of reasons, not just because a husband wanted a second wife. Maybe there weren’t children. And then there was a horrible tradition—when a husband died, his wife married one of his brothers because otherwise she wouldn’t have survived.”⁴⁹ In expressing her view of the levirate custom, this respondent also suggested that infertility motivated polygynous marriages consecrated within the institutional milieu of adat and Islam.

Infertility and Affluence as Motivators

Like Tegizbekova, I have found in the course of my research that infertility contributed to polygynous marriages among Kyrgyz nomads. Anara Tabyshalieva argues that the importance of bearing children in the region stems from a “centuries-old fear” of child mortality, the pervasive belief that “children are

always good fortune and are pleasing to God,” and the yearning for more sons. She places what she calls “the fertility cult” within the context of traditional society: “A woman’s fertility or barrenness determined her status in the traditional society of Central Asia. In the past, a barren woman among the Kyrgyz was called derogatorily *kuu bash*—‘dried-up skull.’”⁵⁰ A woman’s fertility—or barrenness—determined her communal status precisely because it indicated in a highly visible way her ability to continue the family lineage through the birth of male progeny. The importance of children was reflected in Kyrgyz proverbs like “In a house where there are children there is animation like at a bazaar, while in a house without children there is despondency like at a cemetery.”⁵¹ Some of my respondents, like the government official quoted below, considered polygynous marriages consecrated prior to the Bolshevik Revolution a solution to grave problems such as a man’s death in battle or a woman’s infertility. This respondent interpreted polygyny as a necessary practice that stemmed from the levirate custom and infertility:

There’s a big difference between polygyny then and now; it’s become distorted. Back then it was necessary—if a man died in battle, they kept his wife in the tribe, as we have tribal relations, so that women with children didn’t leave the family. It was shameful if children from one family went to another family. So they gave the widow to the youngest brother. That was the tradition. Or a married man loved his wife, but she was infertile—she physically could not bear children. He maintained good relations with her but married another to continue the family lineage. But these were very weighty, logical reasons. Today it’s distorted.⁵²

It was not uncommon for a married man to take a second wife if his first wife was unable to bear children. Preserving the family lineage was and remains critical to the Kyrgyz.⁵³ Some of my respondents spoke of infertile grandmothers who, during their childbearing years, asked their husband to take a second wife. For example, a representative of a local Islamic organization had two grandmothers on the same side of her family because her grandfather’s infertile first wife told her husband to take an additional wife: “My grandmother and her ‘sister’—their husband had two wives. These women lived peacefully in one home. The old one didn’t give birth, the second one did, and the old one raised all the children. . . . The first wife said, ‘I can’t have children so take a second; she’ll give birth, but the children will be ours.’ She said this to her husband.”⁵⁴ A representative of a local women’s organization focused on gender equality relayed a similar story concerning the impact of infertility on her grandmother,

who had her husband take a second wife so that there would be more children in the family:

My grandmother married my grandfather; they had one daughter and then she couldn't have any more children. The question emerged—a second wife? Because she gave birth to one and then couldn't have any more, and for us it is customary to have many children. . . . So my grandmother took a wife for her husband . . . under established conditions. She said, "I'll live in the house, I'll be the oldest, the house manager, and you will have children; I'll be the boss of everyone." This family was preserved; I knew the old grandmother and the young grandmother. They lived together in harmony.⁵⁵

These stories suggest a marital dynamic in which a first wife who is infertile or is unable to give birth to a sufficient number of children or has not produced male offspring gives her husband permission to take a second wife for the purpose of reproduction. The research I discuss in chapters 6, 7, and 8 indicates that reproductive concerns continue to motivate Kyrgyz men and women to practice polygyny.

Demonstrating just how difficult it is to disentangle motivations for polygynous marriages among Kyrgyz nomads, some of my respondents saw infertility *and* affluence as contributing to the practice. For example, a representative of a local organization focused on eradicating bride theft argued the following: "It did exist prior to the Soviet era—a rich man could take a few wives. Or a man could marry a few women if his first wife couldn't give birth; he'd take another wife in order to have one who could. And they were able to live in one house."⁵⁶ A representative of a women's organization focused on politics relayed her interpretation of polygyny among Kyrgyz nomads in similar terms:

Polygyny existed before and during the Soviet era, but there were entirely explainable reasons. Since time immemorial, the Kyrgyz have never allowed themselves to marry [more than one woman] simply for the sake of it. Absolutely the first wife either couldn't bear children or was ill, and she gave her consent; these were the reasons. Or he had a huge house and she didn't have time to take care of it so she herself gave consent. These were well-to-do people. Not everyone was able to marry; only those who were able to support [additional wives], these people were able to have [more than one]. But this wasn't discussed in society, it was an understanding. Take a man who had a first wife, lived well with her, loved her, but they had no children. She gives her consent to take a second wife.⁵⁷

Historical accounts support the assertion in the above quotation that wealth permitted men to marry additional wives because it enabled them to support additional wives. Conducting research in the early twentieth century in the mountains of the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast, P. Kushner found that “only the poorest Kyrgyz had one wife. . . . Affluent Kyrgyz had two, but the rich—three, four. Because Islam doesn’t permit more than four wives at a time, rich Kyrgyz divorced one and sent her to relatives if they wanted to marry a fifth.”⁵⁸ Abramzon concurs, pointing out that polygyny was not equally accessible to all Kyrgyz—it was prevalent only among the highest ranked members of society.⁵⁹ Many of my respondents echoed this view. For example, a representative of a women’s organization focused on politics echoed Tegizbekova’s claim that polygyny was rare because payment of kalym for each new wife was onerous for most Kyrgyz when she argued that before the Bolshevik Revolution rich Kyrgyz had multiple wives, while ordinary “slaves” could not afford to pay kalym more than once.⁶⁰ A representative of a local women’s organization focused on gender equality also emphasized the importance of affluence in her claim that although polygyny was not widespread, it was practiced among wealthy Kyrgyz prior to the communist era: “It existed before the Revolution, but it wasn’t as explicit and universal as it was in Arab countries. Only rich people were able to have a few wives, and they were few. As a rule, ordinary poor Kyrgyz didn’t have two or three wives. It wasn’t a mass phenomenon.”⁶¹ A first wife who participated in an El-Pikir FG told a riveting story about her wealthy great-grandfather who had four wives. During the conversation she highlighted a violent incident that resulted in new power dynamics between the wives:

My great-grandfather had four wives before the Soviet era. My grandmother said that he was rich and thus able to have four wives. She said that every wife had her own yurt. Their husband would spend a night at each one. The wives would prepare for their night—they’d get dressed, cook, meet him. . . . When he spent a night in a particular yurt, the rest of the wives came to that yurt to eavesdrop. . . . One night he was spending the evening with the oldest [first] wife, and when she saw them eavesdropping, she grabbed an awl and stuck it into one of the wives. . . . Then the first wife became majestic, stately, and began to eavesdrop on the others to know what *they* were doing. That was her status as the first wife. And he had a status that meant he could have four wives.

Hierarchy of Status in Polygynous Families

Historians have noted a hierarchy among wives in polygynous marriages among Kyrgyz nomads that reflects the outcome of the awl incident described above.

For example, Kushner argues that affluent Kyrgyz men provided each wife with a yurt and took turns visiting the yurts but gave respect to the oldest wife and attention to the youngest wife: “The relationship between a husband and his wives was regulated by custom: in rich households, for every wife there was a separate yurt and the husband took turns visiting each of them. The youngest wives almost always received the most attention from the husband; nevertheless, the first wife got more respect, particularly from relatives and guests.”⁶² Tegizbekova agrees a typical husband gave his “younger” wives more attention than his first wife.⁶³

Each wife’s status was clearly demarcated by widely understood and accepted norms of adat concerning family dynamics among the Kyrgyz. The *baibiche*, or first wife, held a privileged status that required additional wives to pay her respect.⁶⁴ Kushner claims that the first wife managed the household—or yurt—by delegating laborious tasks to the other wives: “She divided the work among the rest of the wives, indicating to them the terms of work, doling out punishments. No one could punish her, but a complaint against the *baibiche* would serve as a threat for the lazy and disobedient. The oldest husband would beat [those in] his household, curse at them, if the *baibiche* pleased.”⁶⁵ Abramzon’s description of a polygynous family in pre-communist Kyrgyzia coincides with Kushner’s observation: The family was composed of fifteen people and governed by sixty-four-year-old Toktonazar, who had two wives. The first wife managed household activities and could scold women in the family, including Toktonazar’s second wife. The second wife obeyed the first wife and served as her assistant in all matters. The first wife was submissive only to her husband, addressing Toktonazar formally like all family members.⁶⁶

Though we do not know with certainty the extent to which polygyny was practiced among the Kyrgyz within the institutional milieu of adat and Islam, research suggests that it was generally limited to members of the upper class who could afford multiple *kalym* payments. While adat and Islam legitimized polygynous marriages, nomadism, the levirate custom, infertility, and affluence fueled such unions prior to the introduction of communist institutions. One of my respondents, a crisis center representative, acknowledged that although Islam “permitted” polygyny, affluence and the levirate custom generated polygynous marriages prior to the advent of the Communist Party, which, in her opinion, prevented a “blossoming” of polygynous marriages for decades: “Our ancestors married more than one wife when, for example, there were wars. There were several children, a father died, his oldest brother would marry the widow. Then rich men took wives for themselves to have more children; they took young wives—well, they bought them. This was before the Revolution, before the

Soviet Union. It's permitted in Islam, although there was no blossoming like we have now."⁶⁷

This respondent's emphasis on the importance of communist institutions in changing marital practices among the Kyrgyz is the focus of the next chapter, which explores the Communist Party's role in eradicating what it defined as detrimentally backward vestiges of the past like polygyny. From the Party's perspective, polygynous marriages threatened the stability of the family—and thus socialist society—because they generated unstable “snake pit” households in which wives fought each other for their husband's attention.⁶⁸ Whether a realistic interpretation of dynamics among wives in polygynous marriages or not, this outlook influenced the Party's policies.