



FORUM 28: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ‘REGIONAL STUDIES’ IN CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY? — EXPLORING THE CASE OF CENTRAL ASIA

Abstract: The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent development of new nation-states in the post-Soviet space, along with the increasing momentum of social, political, and cultural reorganisation globally, have challenged the field of anthropology and ethnography to restructure how knowledge is acquired and systematised. One of the issues that has come up during the course of these changes is how to restructure regional studies: are regional studies possible as such, or should the concept be abandoned as the division between research interests becomes more ‘problematic’? If regionality is maintained, then how should researchers perceive these ‘regions’ and their borders? This question is particularly relevant for Russian anthropology and ethnography, which has long developed and institutionalised as a complex of clear-cut regional subdivisions. There is concern that without regional expertise, the profession of anthropology and ethnography will lose its disciplinary identity, continuity, existing schools of thought, and professionalism. At the same time, there is an awareness that prioritising regionality and maintaining the regional boundaries of the past is inconsistent with contemporary scholarly methods and the realities of a globalising and rapidly transforming world order. Another issue is the stake that governments and political elite have in the way regional studies are restructured, and the competition between various political interests to name a given region and define its borders. In this context, anthropologists and ethnographers need to self-reflect on their personal reasons for participating in political projects, and whether or not they will become neo-colonialist actors in the new ‘great game’. In this *Forum* researchers discuss these issues in the context of Central Asia, or Central Asian Studies

Keywords: Regional Studies, Area Studies, Central Asia, Central Asian Studies.

To cite: ‘Forum: What Is the Role of “Regional Studies” in Contemporary Anthropology? — Exploring the Case of Central Asia’, *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2016, no. 12, pp. 8–122.

URL: <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng012/forum.pdf>

Participants in Forum 28: What is the Role of 'Regional Studies' in Contemporary Anthropology? — Exploring the Case of Central Asia

Sergei Abashin (European University, St Petersburg / Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia)

Aida Aaly Alymbaeva (Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany)

Gulnara Aytpaeva (Aigine Centre of Culture Research, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)

Alima Bissenova (Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan)

Anna Cieślewska (Jagellonian University, Kraków, Poland)

Svetlana Gorshenina (University of Lausanne, Switzerland)

Diana Ibañez-Tirado (University of Sussex, Brighton, UK)

Aksana Ismailbekova (Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany)

Tokhir Kalendarov (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia)

Natalya Kosmarskaya (Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia)

Magnus Marsden (University of Sussex, Brighton, UK)

Kulshat Medeuova (L. N. Gumilev Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan)

Emil Nasritdinov (American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)

Boris Pétric (CNRS / Centre Norbert Elias / EHESS, Marseilles, France)

Madeleine Reeves (University of Manchester, UK)

Igor Savin (Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia)

Jesko Schmoller (Perm State University, Russia)

Tommaso Trevisani (University of Tübingen, Germany)

Zulaikho Usmanova (Institute of Philosophy, Political Science, and Jurisprudence of the Academy of Sciences of Republic of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, Tajikistan)

Forum 28: What is the Role of 'Regional Studies' in Contemporary Anthropology? — Exploring the Case of Central Asia

The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent development of new nation-states in the post-Soviet space, along with the increasing momentum of social, political, and cultural reorganisation globally, have challenged the field of anthropology and ethnography to restructure how knowledge is acquired and systematised. One of the issues that has come up during the course of these changes is how to restructure regional studies: are regional studies possible as such, or should the concept be abandoned as the division between research interests becomes more 'problematic'? If regionality is maintained, then how should researchers perceive these 'regions' and their borders? This question is particularly relevant for Russian anthropology and ethnography, which has long developed and institutionalised as a complex of clear-cut regional subdivisions. There is concern that without regional expertise, the profession of anthropology and ethnography will lose its disciplinary identity, continuity, existing schools of thought, and professionalism. At the same time, there is an awareness that prioritising regionality and maintaining the regional boundaries of the past is inconsistent with contemporary scholarly methods and the realities of a globalising and rapidly transforming world order. Another issue is the stake that governments and political elite have in the way regional studies are restructured, and the competition between various political interests to name a given region and define its borders. In this context, anthropologists and ethnographers need to self-reflect on their personal reasons for participating in political projects, and whether or not they will become neo-colonialist actors in the new 'great game'. In this *Forum* researchers discuss these issues in the context of Central Asia, or Central Asian Studies.

Keywords: Regional Studies, Area Studies, Central Asia, Central Asian Studies.

FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent development of new nation-states in post-Soviet space, along with the increasing momentum of social, political, and cultural reorganisation globally, have challenged the field of anthropology and ethnography to restructure how knowledge is acquired and systematised. While certain subjects and issues have become a thing of the past, new debates have emerged regarding methodology, the definition of disciplinary borders, and even the very understanding of 'the scientific' ('the scholarly') in anthropological research.

One of the issues that have come up during the course of these changes is how to restructure regional studies: are regional studies possible as such, or should the concept be abandoned as the division between research interests becomes more 'problematic'? If regionality is maintained, then how should researchers perceive these 'regions' and their borders? This question is

particularly relevant for Russian anthropology and ethnography, which have long developed and been institutionalised as a complex of clear-cut regional subdivisions. There is a concern that without regional expertise, the profession of anthropology and ethnography will lose its disciplinary identity, continuity, its connections with existing schools of thought, and all pretensions to professionalism. At the same time, there is an awareness that prioritising regionality and maintaining the regional boundaries of the past is inconsistent with contemporary scholarly methods and the realities of a globalising and rapidly transforming world order, because it restricts the exchange of knowledge and general discussion, as well as the search for new areas of inquiry, and limits comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Another issue is the stake that governments and political elite have in the way regional studies are restructured, and the competition between various political interests to name a given region and define its borders. In this context, anthropologists and ethnographers need to self-reflect on their personal reasons for participating in political projects, and whether or not they will become neo-colonialist actors in the new 'great game'.

In this issue of the Forum we will focus on discussing Central Asia, or Central Asian Studies. After the emergence of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as independent states, the question of what to call the region arose. 'Tsentralnaya Aziya' and 'Tsentralnaya Evraziya' were proposed to replace the Soviet label 'Srednyaya Aziya and Kazakhstan'.¹ Every term reflected different meanings and represented different territories. These competing terms were perpetuated in the titles of various departments, projects, academic societies, journals, books, and studies. This tangled web of terminology was further complicated by the fact that the region had fallen under two different umbrellas: Russian / Slavic studies, and Asian / Islamic / Central Asian studies. In addition, there is the sense of marginality that many researchers of the region share, along with the desire to distinguish their field as a unique and significant area of study. This state of uncertainty, contradiction, and inner polemics creates a convenient catalyst for discussing the place and meaning of regional studies in contemporary anthropology.

¹ In rendering this discussion into English we have grappled, not entirely successfully, with a terminological complication. The Russian neologism *Tsentralnaya Aziya* is a back-translation of the English 'Central Asia', but at the same time, the traditional Soviet term, *Srednyaya Aziya*, literally 'Middle Asia', was traditionally rendered into English as 'Central Asia'. In order to reflect the contributors' search for a new terminology of analysis, we have accordingly used 'Central Asia' to translate *Srednyaya Aziya*, and 'Middle Asia' to render the new term *Tsentralnaya Aziya*. [Eds.].

We suggested to contributors the following questions for discussion:

1

Is the concept of regional studies, and its institutionalisation (as separate institutes, centres, departments, academic societies, as well as separate programmes of study, and research and publication projects) useful or productive today, or should the main focus be the development of comparative research, and research on globality and transnationality?

2

How and by what criteria should the territorial borders of Middle Asian studies be defined, and to what degree is such a definition necessary? Should Middle Asian studies fall under Russian / Slavic Studies or Central Asian studies, or should it be considered a separate field entirely?

3

What research questions should Middle Asian studies explore? Is Islamism the defining feature of this region?

AIDA AALY ALYMBAEVA, AKSANA ISMAILBEKOVA

Reflections from the ‘field’,
or, ‘Anthropology at home’¹

*On the regional approach to Central Asia
and the marginality of the subject area*

The nineteenth issue of *Antropologicheskij forum* was devoted to the problem of ‘native’ and ‘provincial’ scholarship. To a certain extent the subject of this issue echoes it, via the invisibly present paradigm of ‘centre and periphery’. For whom and from where is the ‘regional’ perspective examined? It is obvious that from the ‘centre’ — Soviet, post-Soviet or Russian — each of these definitions has its meanings. It is, after all, a question of the ‘fate’ of regional studies in Russian scholarship, which is, directly or indirectly, reflected in the direction of research within the ‘region’ which is being discussed, even if it is only being discussed as an example.

Aida Aaly Alymbaeva

Max Planck Institute
for Social Anthropology,
Halle, Germany
alymbaeva@gmail.com

Aksana Ismailbekova

Max Planck Institute
for Social Anthropology,
Halle, Germany
aksana_ismailbekova@yahoo.co.uk

¹ The authors are grateful to Professor Günther Schlee, Dr James Carrier and Dr Eeva Kesküla for their comments on earlier versions of this text. The text uses material from the authors’ dissertation projects, which were supported by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Various meetings and discussions organised by the Halle-Zürich Centre for Anthropological Studies on Central Asia (CASCA) <<http://casca-halle-zurich.org/de/events/>> were also of great value to the authors.

Turning to the question of 'regionality', one might remember the roots of the European colonial projects on Africa or Middle Asia: the production of information about the local population and its knowledge and culture, with the aim of using that information for political and economic purposes. The methodological approaches of colonial regional research were feeble, and had no pretensions to theoretical generalisations. On the contrary, they were based on an accumulative approach with a static, essentialist view of culture and geographical boundaries.

A new approach, which has come to be known as 'Crossroads Asia', has been evolving in Germany over recent years, and may be assigned to the post-regional tendency in the social sciences.¹ This approach sees the world not as divided into fixed territories or 'regions', but as dynamic and mobile, mutable. This approach allows the conservative regional approach to be overcome and reinterpreted. As an example one might look at the migrants from Middle Asia who 'lead' a traditional way of life, which is not confined by national borders; a crossing and discussion of borders, an organisation of new spaces and a mobilisation of family members is constantly present in the everyday life of migrants. Methods for the study of everyday life, such as multi-sited ethnography (when the researcher chooses several places for study and moves from one to another, often following his informants) and analytical instruments are being developed, and such concepts within the social sciences as 'space', 'networks' and 'mobility', which allow one to overcome the institutionalisation of regional studies, are being reassessed. Outside the static understanding of regionalism, it is more productive to focus on people's everyday realities and on their actions and interactions. Such an approach assists in making visible the activities of the inhabitants of Middle Asia, who are not living in isolation in that region, but are connected with South Asia, Russia and China thanks to the flows of ideas, people and goods.

Considering the marginality of Middle Asian subject matter, one can nevertheless also observe a certain interest in Europe, where research into Middle Asia is minimal, often in the form of a comparative perspective for the study of Africa or the Middle East, or else as part of a wider region of study — the post-Soviet — for a certain circle of questions. The opening of a small Centre for Anthropological Studies on Central Asia (CASCA) attached to the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology and the Faculty of Anthropology of Zürich University shows that there is some interest in the region, although the 'region' includes Mongolia, Sinkiang and Tibet as well as the five

¹ Research is currently being carried out at ten German universities following this approach, focusing on problems of mobility, interaction and the construction of human space. For more on this approach, see: <<http://crossroads-asia.de/en/home.html>> and [Mielke, Hornidge 2014].

post-Soviet republics. Furthermore, attention paid to Middle Asia is strongly linked with a professor's personal interests: he or she may often put together a project in accordance with his or her own 'narrow' speciality (like Peter Finke at Zürich, Ingeborg Baldauf at the Humboldt University, or Roland Hardenberg at Tübingen).

The marginal status of Middle Asia in Russian (or, more widely, in post-Soviet) scholarship is well known, and is to be explained by the small interest shown in it, even in pre-Soviet times, by 'the Petersburg elite, in comparison with other "frontier lands"', and moreover the haphazard way in which many of the territories of the region were united with Russia in the past [Abashin 2008: 459]. Cuts in Middle Asian research at the Russian Academy of Sciences in the post-Soviet period show that the 'tradition' of marginalising this area of work continues. Yet an interest in the region in question could hardly have been called marginal in the Soviet period, even if it was largely dictated by political and ideological motives. Besides, whatever anyone might say, it was in the Soviet Union of the 1970s that research first began to be conducted 'within' and 'from within' the region. (And indeed, if one tries to think outside the 'regional' lexicology, it is hard to avoid the word 'region' itself, so firmly has it sunk into our language and modes of thought! And what other word can one use for the territory of several different states?) The remainder of the article is devoted to two examples of 'fields' from such research conducted 'within'.

What sort of anthropologists are we: 'native', 'local' or 'hybrid'?

Studying the region 'within' and 'from within' leads us to the perspectives of the anthropology of Middle Asia and of Middle Asian anthropology. The first perspective is wider, and includes both those who study the region 'from outside', and those who study it 'from within'. The second is narrower, embracing those who study 'themselves' in the region. To our mind, in the second perspective the dialectic between the centre and the periphery loses its vigour: 'we', who have grown up in the culture of the place, 'local people', are studying 'our own' culture. What, in 'our' case, is the centre, and what is the periphery? What is the 'region' for 'us', 'local people'? Most likely, we simply do not view the situation from this perspective.

But here another question arises. 'We' are also people who receive our education 'completely outside', that is in the world which is 'outside' even for our previous colonial centre — in Europe. 'We' are studying 'our own', 'home' culture (anthropology at home). But at the same time we use an academic and theoretical apparatus which we have acquired from the West, and the academic base built up by our Russian colleagues occupies a large place in our research. Spending a fairly long time 'away from home' permits us that view

which, if not 'from outside', then is at least 'from the side', which is essential for a more or less critical examination of the phenomena of culture. Colleagues who have grown up in other parts of the planet and who come to Middle Asia to study, say, the problems of kinship or corruption, also inevitably come into contact and interact with the field, and the knowledge that they produce is also the result of that interaction. At the point when they are in the field it turns into their 'home', albeit temporarily. The concepts of 'home', and of 'inside and outside' become matters of convention.¹

The first version of this paper, which was much shorter than the present one, was written in English. Certain snags arose in translating it. Thanks to the commentary of our translator, Alexandra Kasatkina, on the Russian equivalent of the English 'native anthropology' (for which we are very grateful to her, forgive the repetition), we began to consider that it is difficult to accept any translation without qualification. In Russian-language literature (or, to be more exact, Soviet and post-Soviet literature) this point of view on the position of the researcher is not much in evidence. The variant 'tuzemnaya antropologiya' [a literal translation. — *Transl.*] cannot be accepted, because it raises a huge layer of colonial and post-colonial discussions about the correspondence between *tuzemnost*, *mestnost* (from *mesto*, 'place') and *lokalnost*² — because they, if one takes a brief look into the heart of the matter, also include that perspective of centre and periphery.

While this material was being prepared it became apparent that two terms may be used as equivalents, as interchangeable, but only where really necessary: *mestnyy* and *lokalnyy*. We all have the same aim: the study of culture.

During research, especially if it involves a long stay in the field, as classical anthropology requires, the scholar inevitably comes into contact with the culture. After a certain time he begins to experience events and relationships within the field, and not only does he begin to influence the field, but the field inevitably comes to influence him, and often continues to have a real emotional impact for a long time after he has left it. The mutual connection between the researcher, the informant and the field, the reflection and self-reflection of the researcher, are examined as the production of knowledge — local

¹ We are grateful to Dr Olga Ulturgasheva and Dr Madeleine Reeves for their opinion on this question, which we in part reproduce here. We are also grateful to Dr Alima Bysenova and Professor Kulshat Medeuova for their points of view, with which they acquainted us in the course of discussions on the Russian equivalent of the English 'native anthropology'.

² The words *tuzemnost*, *mestnost*, and *lokalnost* are different ways of denominating regional or local identity. In the first two cases, the words are derived from *tuzemets* ('a native', i.e. a member of local non-Russian populations) and *mesto* ('a place'). *Lokalnost* is a borrowed word, from the English 'locality' or 'localness'. [Eds.].

or situated knowledge [Adams 1999: 332]. In this interaction of researcher and field (sc. informant) the relationship of 'power' is influenced by the 'dynamic' of racial, class, national, age, gender and cultural identity and often makes the researcher give way to the field and the currents of power hidden within it [Narayan 1993: 671–2; Adams 1999: 332]. The researcher's recognition, as Narayan puts it, of his hybridity — his belonging at the same time to the world of participant research and the world of everyday life — must lead to the production of situated knowledge as a result of dialogues and as a part of the process that takes place [Narayan 1993: 671–82]. Jacobs-Huey writes of the importance of critical reflectivity for native anthropologists on the subject of their own positioning and 'voice', in the face of the monolithic and romantic treatments of culture [Jacobs-Huey 2002: 791].

Thus we bring the conversation round to our own reflections on our fields.

Social studies and power relationships are inseparable. As researchers all we can do in order to identify the position which we occupy in the power network relative to our research partners, academic community and society as a whole is to observe ourselves closely and constantly. In this text we wish to offer an analysis of our positions as 'native' anthropologists. As Cohen justly observes, researchers who study their own societies 'are themselves personally caught up in the same body of symbols which they try to decode. Most symbols are largely rooted in the unconscious mind and are thus difficult to identify and analyse by people who live under them' [Cohen 1974: 8].

He elegantly indicates one of the main problems of native anthropology, namely having to maintain one's distance from the 'native': 'It is hardly a fish that can discover the existence of water' [Cohen 1974: 8]. It is not our purpose here to justify or defend the position which we took in our fieldwork. Rather we are attempting to show what alternative means of collecting data are available to native anthropologists. Like Cohen's fish, native anthropologists studying their own society risk missing certain pivotal points rooted in their culture.

Usually, a good starting-point for anthropological fieldwork is the comparison of the local system of meanings with the conceptual framework of the anthropologist himself. However, since we ourselves belong to the culture which we have chosen for our anthropological research, the rules and norms of the society under study restrain us too, so that it is hard to look at it with the unfettered gaze of a visitor from outside — that gaze which, essentially, was the beginning of anthropology. Therefore our understanding of the Kyrgyz and the Qalmaq of Kyrgyzstan and their social life is to some extent founded on our limited position of 'insiders' and our point of view as young Kyrgyz women.

But still, we know what it is like not to be from Kyrgyzstan. We have a background for comparison and a starting-point for the analysis of the behaviour of our Kyrgyz informants: we have studied and worked in the American University of Central Asia, we have lived for several years in Germany, we have read a lot and devoted much time to research in this area. Besides, in our work we can use elements of Soviet ethnography, which was based on the collection of data for the compilation of the most detailed descriptions possible.

We hope that the combination of Western education, Soviet traditions of collecting ethnographical data, and our own 'local' origins will allow us to offer in our dissertations an alternative means of understanding culture in Kyrgyzstan through the study both of our own life experience and that of our informants. During fieldwork we understood that belonging to the local community could be a hindrance, since sometimes it prevented us from seeing social rules and norms clearly. Nevertheless we found that this position also has its advantages. We speak Kyrgyz well, and so we could note certain minor details which did not concern us directly, and understand the hidden meaning of metaphorical expressions which an external observer might have found meaningless.

We were often faced with an ethical dilemma: our contradictory position as researchers and young daughters-in-law (*kelin*) gave rise to problems. In the context of Kyrgyzstan these different positions could be incompatible, and then we found ourselves in an unpleasant situation in the field. A complex web of obligations is typical of our field, and conflict was inevitable. We had to take several factors into account simultaneously, in order to give their due both to the rules and norms of Kyrgyz society and to the professional ethics and responsibilities of academic researchers and the ethics of international research. We tried to find solutions to these problems that would be acceptable to everybody, but this was not always easy.

Now we give a few examples illustrating these conflicts of principle.

Field 1

Inspired by the ethnographic work of John Campbell [1974], Aksana Ismailbekova chose the village for her first ethnographic research, in particular the local institutions of patronage and kinship. However, having encountered the interesting and dynamic social activity of her informants, she unexpectedly found herself involved in multilocal fieldwork. By staying in one place Ismailbekova could not have penetrated the depths of that flexible and all-permeating system of patronage or its functions and mechanisms in different social contexts. By following her informants around, instead of spending the whole year in one place, she found out more about their everyday

practices and strategies. The observation of her informants' travels and their everyday routine helped her to understand the system of patronage more profoundly.

Ismailbekova's dissertation is based on prolonged fieldwork which began in March 2007 and ended in April 2008. During her fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan she lived in two villages. She began in Orlovka (population approx. 5 000), and then her focus shifted to Vostok (population approx. 5 700).¹ These were the main loci, but in addition she spent much time following her informants about while they engaged in agitation during the elections, and assisted in the preparations for a festival or in the resolution of a conflict in a neighbouring village. As a result she began to understand the dynamics of the local system of patronage (for more detail see: [Ismailbekova 2017]).

She was constantly having to give a new account of her position in the field. Reflections on the three basic positions are given in the following sections.

The woman

Many anthropologists have encountered suspicion on the part of their informants. Ismailbekova was no exception, because life where she was doing her fieldwork is not easy, people need to work hard all the time, whereas instead of working she was walking about the village, knocking on doors and talking to people. She heard that some of the villagers were worried by her presence and wanted to understand the reason for it. They thought that she might have been sent by the German government to see how a 'German' village was getting on after the mass exodus of the Germans to Germany. Others assumed that she was teaching children German, even though she was not doing so. Yet others thought that she was a member of a new Christian sect.² She had to explain every time that she was a student doing research in the village in order to understand the culture of the local inhabitants. Despite these explanations and despite a letter from the Max Planck Institute, her informants thought all their answers over carefully before divulging the least information. It is interesting, though, that there were several reasons for her role as a suspicious personage.

In rural Kyrgyzstan Ismailbekova had the status of a very young wife. The men did not perceive her as a person for whom it was 'fitting' to conduct research and take an interest in political questions.

¹ The names of the villages, and of Ismailbekova's informants, have been changed.

² This is connected with the frequent visits to houses in Kyrgyz settlements by adherents and propagandists of certain Christian sects, who have many Kyrgyz converts.

But neither did the young women recognise her as one of their own, and they would not let her into the circle of their conversations, because she could not help them to prepare food according to their rules. In spite of this Ismailbekova managed to conduct several interviews for her research.

But she cannot help admitting that it was her husband (who accompanied her throughout the whole field trip) who for the most part established relations with highly-placed officials, and he too led the people they were talking with into the political discussions that she needed. Once she had prepared a set of questions on private farming for her informants, but she soon noticed that they were not looking at her but at her husband, and answering him. Sometimes they hinted to her husband that to get further information he should come back later by himself. They did not expect the researcher to be Ismailbekova. And she understood that she was only 'an invisible presence' at 'a real masculine conversation'. When her husband asked questions or showed an interest in the informants' lives, the men took him seriously and found time to give him the information she needed. It was only thanks to her husband that she could get access to certain very important people and understand how they conducted their business and get them to acknowledge her despite her comparatively young age in a hierarchical society in which women have low status and their sphere of influence is limited.

But what does this tell us about politics in Kyrgyzstan? It means, of course, that so-called 'real politics' are only discussed among men, and that participation in them is entirely determined by gender. Because of the limits imposed by her sex, Ismailbekova had no access to the men's informal behind-the-scenes conversations. Besides, the men felt uncomfortable discussing political questions with a married woman to whom they were not related, so they would only talk to her in the presence of her husband. She often had to explain to her informants that her husband was an understanding man, and therefore permitted her to talk to men.

At the same time the local men regarded her husband with suspicion because he allowed his wife to discuss politics with complete strangers. Therefore Ismailbekova had to study patronage by taking part in various events and analysing those promises which the patron made publicly in front of his people. Sometimes she managed to talk to his close friends, but they expressed scepticism and were not always open with her, preferring to discuss the questions that interested her with her husband.

As a result she concluded that all that she could do as a woman was to observe the behaviour of the men, for example the methods by which they resolved their problems. This thought came to her when she found the men's resolution of one problematic situation unusual,

whereas her husband found nothing surprising in their behaviour, and she thought that it would be interesting to understand these two different points of view.

Because of her gender, status and age, Ismailbekova was perceived in the community as a young wife (*kelin*). What is expected of a young wife is incompatible with the status of a researcher: a researcher is independent, free of obligations and can ask questions freely. By 'tradition' a young Kyrgyz wife must live with her husband's parents, prepare their food and look after the children. In the village her position as a young wife was one of the lowest, and so she joined in those activities which were suitable for her 'official' role: as a *kelin* she was allowed to clean the houses of some of her elderly informants, wash their dishes and cook for them. The village women did not tell her what to do. It was expected that she would know for herself the duties of a young wife and would help them without being reminded. Otherwise she would have got a reputation as 'a bad young wife'. If a foreign researcher had taken upon himself to help about the house in this community, he would have been surrounded with respect and admiration and received with honour. In this particular case it was expected of the researcher that she would know her place in society.

In spite of all her efforts to be a good young wife, Ismailbekova could not always achieve that status, because she was writing a book and doing research, and consequently she had to talk freely with people irrespective of their age, sex and status. Young wives do not usually address their fathers-in-law or other older relatives on their husband's side directly, nor must they pronounce their names. At the same time she was not free from pressure from her older informants, who wanted her to behave properly. She was regarded as a bad *kelin*.

The anthropologist

When Ismailbekova began her research in the villages, one informant told her about a man who had been trying to get support for getting rid of the village headman by accusing him of selling and renting the village lands to the Dungans (a small ethnic group). She found this case very interesting, and she decided to try and find that man and write his biography.

It was a young, purposeful man, who wanted to become village headman by means of blackmail, manipulations and incessant complaints to the head of the regional administration. When Ismailbekova asked this complainant for an interview, he unexpectedly turned out to be very open and well-disposed, unlike other Kyrgyz men. He spent almost half a day telling her about the difficult circumstances of the village and his intentions to build houses and give them to the homeless. He wanted to do this with the help of the Habitat

Foundation (a Western organisation), which gave long-term loans to private individuals. He allowed Ismailbekova to record their conversation on condition that the recorder would not be obvious. He began to accuse the village headman of irresponsibility and of embezzling the village taxes.

Suddenly he started to question her about herself, her status and the purpose of her work. When Ismailbekova told him about herself, her work and her role as an anthropologist, he asked her for a favour. Before making it clear what he wanted, he told her that he respected her as an educated person. And then he asked her to go to the head of the region and make a complaint about the village headman. In his opinion, her status as a scholar would add conviction to her arguments. The head of the region was responsible for appointing and dismissing the headmen in the territory that was entrusted to him. Ismailbekova was shocked, because her informant had put her in an extremely embarrassing position. Moreover, he had not even asked, but had expressed his certainty that she would agree: he gave her the man's address, and was on the point of telephoning to arrange an appointment with him for her.

In Ismailbekova's eyes a local resident who wanted to get rid of his village headman was trying to manipulate her position as a researcher. On the other hand, he had told her so many interesting things... She felt obliged to do something for him.

This incident shows that sometimes Ismailbekova was regarded not as a low-status *kelin*, but as an educated person. But still, she did not do as he asked, and she overcame the temptation to include his stories in her dissertation, considering that that would be unethical.

The international observer

Ismailbekova had the opportunity to take part in the local elections for members of parliament and was a witness to that process, which was full of abuses. But she could not inform the international organisation Inter-Bilim,¹ with which she was collaborating at that time, because in such a case she would have become an outcast in the village, which was her main field. Ismailbekova was confronted with an ethical dilemma. She was saved by the fact that before coming to the village she had not signed any papers for the organisation stipulating her duty to uphold the truth. The organisation had only asked its 'observers' to report certain particular manipulations on the part of the chairman of the electoral commission, which she had not seen.

¹ During training the Inter-Bilim instructors told stories of their experience of skulduggery during elections in the villages.

During the elections there was a question of whether she would take some blank voting papers (that is, fifty potential votes) to do a ‘top-up’ for the candidate from their village, even though she was an Inter-Bilim observer. One of the villagers decided for her, being sure that since she was ‘one of their own’ in the village, she would obviously support their candidate. Ismailbekova said that she did not need any blank voting papers, and after long debates she finally succeeded in convincing the villagers they should not insist and should not give them to her.

Having the official status of an ‘international observer’ from the Inter-Bilim organisation during those elections, she supposed that being neither a member of the village community, nor a person entrusted with enforcing the electoral regulations, she would occupy a neutral position. This situation during the elections made her think again about her role as a researcher and convinced her how difficult it was to maintain a balance: to adopt such a position that would not irritate the villagers, but would allow her to continue her observations.

Overall the position occupied by Ismailbekova allowed her to discover a great deal about the social life of the village and its inhabitants’ views on the role and position of women. The niche that they found for her in that society shows that a clear gender division and a marked hierarchy of age are in force there. Being simultaneously a researcher, and an election observer, and a *kelin*, she encountered several ethical dilemmas.

Her intermediate position, half-resident, half-visitor, often led to awkward situations. At the same time her position served as a behavioural model for other people: Ismailbekova discovered that, as a ‘bad’ *kelin*, she added legitimacy to the positions of the other *kelinler*, who did not attract any reproaches, because they knew their place. Her position was not stable: sometimes her high status as a researcher was recognised and respected, so that she was even asked to speak to the head of the region on behalf of a man who wanted to be the head of a village. Her position made it possible for her to see and feel for herself the local values and notions about what is right and proper.

Field 2

Aida Alymbaeva’s dissertation was about how people express their attitude to two ethnic categories, ‘Qalmaq’ and ‘Kyrgyz’, taking the example of the village of Chelpek, which is not far from the city of Karakol.¹

¹ For more detail see: [Alymbaeva 2014].

Among the Kyrgyz-speaking population of Kyrgyzstan, the village of Chelpek has the reputation of a Qalmaq or Sart-Qalmaq village.¹ Both names refer to a group of West Mongolian or Oyrat origin, who migrated from Tekes in Sinkiang at the end of the nineteenth century [Burdukov 1935; Zhukovskaya 1980]. Based on this information, and remembering that they speak Kalmyk, the people of Chelpek are usually associated with the Kalmyks living in the Russian Federation. Everyone connected in any way with this village is regarded as a Qalmaq or Sart-Qalmaq. The people who live in Chelpek can call themselves Qalmaq, Sart-Qalmaq or Kyrgyz, depending on the situation.

In the Chelpek context the categories of 'Qalmaq' and 'Sart-Qalmaq' can cross over, combine or be opposed to each other in different situations. Therefore Alymbaeva prefers not to use ethnic categories, but the neutral term 'people from Chelpek', when possible, or else put a / between them to indicate their interconnection. The people from Chelpek can count themselves as Kyrgyz because Kyrgyz has been their main language for a long time, and their culture and way of life are practically the same as those of the Kyrgyz. The villagers themselves note the high degree of mixing due to intermarriage with the Kyrgyz, which has been known ever since the period of migration.

What the field experience of Alymbaeva and Ismailbekova had in common was the way female anthropologists were perceived. Alymbaeva's research interests determined the differences in the kind of interest that she attracted as a researcher.

Interest in the researcher in the field

One of the fundamental roles that her interlocutors imputed to Alymbaeva was that of an historian. During her fieldwork in Chelpek in 2011–2012 she was surprised more than anything by the efforts of many of the villagers to find out the 'historical truth' about their origins. In this way they hoped to find and answer to the question 'Who are we really?' This requirement (knowing about their roots) was conditioned by the attitude of their neighbours (the inhabitants of the nearest settlements), the media and the Kyrgyz majority. People's concern about their roots, and not only in Chelpek, has also been formed by the contemporary ethno-political realities of Kyrgyzstan, and the inheritance of Soviet nationalities policy.

The villagers expected Alymbaeva to find out the truth about their origins or to show them how to find it. She did not rebuff her informants, she was even touched by their desperate desire to find

¹ 'Qalmaq' in the Chelpek context means something different from the usual 'Kalmyk', and is therefore written in the way that is significant for the inhabitants.

out historical truth. Moreover, she had come to the village in order to find out what it means to be a Sart-Qalmaq or a Qalmaq, and it is impossible to answer this question without knowing 'the truth' about their origins.

This rather primordialist question first arose for her in 2008, when she first encountered the concept of 'Sart-Qalmaq'. It was summer time, and the Aygine research centre in Bishkek, where Alymbaeva was then working, had organised a little project. One of the tasks was to conduct a small survey about the identity of the Sart-Qalmaqs, and she was entrusted with compiling the questionnaire. When, afterwards, she saw the results, she became interested in knowing more about the people who call themselves that.

Ethnicity, as a dimension for categorisation, was often a question relative to the researcher in the field. Alymbaeva's interlocutors were interested in her own ethnicity and asked her who she was, a Kyrgyz or a Qalmaq. It was not only the people in Chelpek who asked her this; so did some scholars at the Academy of Sciences in Bishkek, and also at Elista at a conference in which she participated in 2011. After a time Alymbaeva took to telling the villagers that she was of mixed race (a 'métis¹'): 'My father is Kyrgyz and my mother is Kazakh.' She decided that she might be better received that way than if she had been a 'pure' Kyrgyz. When, at first, she had said that she was Kyrgyz, the perception of her had been somewhat different. For some of her interlocutors 'hybridity' was a substantial element of their self-identification.

After finding out what relationship Alymbaeva had to the Sart-Qalmaqs, people usually wanted to know why she had decided to study them. This is the norm in post-Soviet academic practice, at least in Middle Asia: the culture of a particular ethnic group is studied by people belonging to that group. During the first months of her research Alymbaeva was also asked why she was studying the Sart-Qalmaqs, and not the Dungans, or the Uigurs, or the Uzbeks, or some other 'better-known' minorities. On the first two occasions she patiently recounted the whole history of her interest as described above. But she noticed that this was not understood and did not satisfy her interlocutors. Alymbaeva asked the late Bektur Mansurov (an enthusiast for local history and one of Alymbaeva's key informants) for advice about what answer would be the most suitable and at the same time honest. Together they decided that it would be best for her to say that she was studying the so-called 'small peoples'. And this answer was successful, it was favourably received and understood, because it underlined the Sart-Qalmaqs' status as a minority.

¹ Although the term 'métis' is more often used of the children of mixed marriages between Kyrgyz and Russians or other Slavonic ('European') groups.

Methodological reflections as part of fieldwork

The results of Alymbaeva's fieldwork and her interaction with her informants were determined by her roles as a woman, a Kyrgyz and a researcher. On the one hand, she was perceived as a Kyrgyz because when she greeted people, conversed with them, ate or cooked with them, she followed the unwritten 'traditional Kyrgyz' rules which a person absorbs as a result of socialisation in the same milieu (or a very similar one) as the culture of the field. On the other hand, her constant meditations on what she had seen, heard and experienced in the field were reflected in the process of writing, were transferred from her field notes to the section on methodology in her dissertation as part of the production of knowledge about the field.

Alymbaeva tried to be objective during her fieldwork and even after leaving the field. 'Objectivity' here is to be understood as the effort to maintain a distance from her own emotional involvement in the field. She was not always successful precisely because of her constant reflection, and sometimes conflicts between what she had observed and heard, and her own baggage as a 'Kyrgyz woman' and a researcher. The analysis of such conflicts helped her to analyse her own prejudices which she had brought from 'her own' culture, private life and academic experience. This in its turn helped her to understand hidden meanings in the field that she was studying.

One such case was her observation of the organisation of a three-day visit of two guests, literary scholars from Elista, one of whom had come to recruit school-leavers for the Kalmyk State University, and the other to collect examples of spoken Kalmyk. The Chelpek local administration arranged meetings for them with the school-leavers and with elderly residents who remembered the Kalmyk language, meals and trips to the mountains and to the lake. There were a number of meetings that Alymbaeva was unable to attend, and she was worried that she was missing something interesting for her work. The chairman of the village council, who was responsible for organising the visit, has promised a couple of times to take her to the meetings taking place outside the village, but 'forgot'; he probably really did forget. Then, half in jest, he explained to Alymbaeva that the reason was that she was Kyrgyz, and they were afraid that she might write something that would have unpleasant consequences for them.

A year later, Alymbaeva managed to see how this story looked from outside. Her fieldwork had not been easy, but it had nonetheless been more or less independent of external forces — some variant of the state, if one sees the village council as the local expression of the state. If Alymbaeva had 'entered' the field via the local council, she might have got access to what was considered Qalmaq / Sart-Qalmaq in that place more quickly. But, in the long run, she would have been allowed to see and hear 'the accepted version', that is a sort of

spectacle or play-acting. Indeed, Chelpek is visited quite often by guests from outside, journalists both home-brewed and from the wider Mongolian-speaking world (Kalmykia, Buryatia, Mongolia). They all come looking for ‘Qalmaqishness’ (as indeed did Alymbaeva).

The outside visitors come for short periods and make their arrangements through the village council, which receives them. Therefore a certain itinerary has established itself: a meeting with those residents who remember the Kalmyk language, and visits to those households where there are very old people who ought to remember the times when there was less ‘Kyrgyzishness’. Then the journalists or sociologists give an interview and write their articles about the Kalmyks of Kyrgyzstan (for example, [Lidzhiev 2008; Nanzatov, Sodnompilova 2012]). Alymbaeva succeeded in entering the field independently of the village council and its influence, through the local enthusiast Bektur Mansurov. Therefore she took more time to find the people she needed, while Bektur was occupied with his everyday concerns.

On the one hand, during that long time while Alymbaeva was meeting people and forging a relationship with them, they got used to her and gave her access to their everyday life. Even the fact that they occasionally ‘forgot about her’ shows that they had accepted her and took her for part of the village. On the other hand, by that time people had understood what she wanted from them and could tell her what, in their opinion, she needed. That is one important dimension of fieldwork: when we are conducting research, or are simply present in the field, we have an impact on people’s lives, and they form their own opinions of what we are after.

This story illustrates the dialectical relationship between the positions of the ‘local’ and ‘outside’ anthropologist. In the social structure of Chelpek, which is regarded as a Qalmaq community where everybody speaks Kyrgyz, and where the customs and way of life are practically the same as those of the Kyrgyz, Alymbaeva was a Kyrgyz woman and a researcher studying what was almost her own culture. But that ‘almost’ meant that she was ‘not local’ in Chelpek, if not exactly ‘alien’. This ‘almost’ is present in the narratives of the Qalmaq roots, in the discourse about the distinguishing features of a ‘Qalmaq’, and in the still preserved knowledge of the Kalmyk language.

Instead of a conclusion

In Kyrgyz society the Chu and Issyk-Kul valleys, where our research fields lie, are generally regarded as relatively liberal both in respect of gender and age relations and of ethnic relations, particularly in connection with the greatest level of influence of Soviet Russification

in these areas. Nevertheless our field experience has shown that age and gender continue to play a large role in many areas of life. Relative youth, and the status of a young Kyrgyz daughter-in-law may be the dominant factor in informants' perceptions of the researcher, and have a corresponding influence on the course of her research, particularly if it is focused on problems of kinship and patronage relations. The field, and the existing correlations of power and gender in everyday life may exclude the researcher from 'serious' discussions of questions of politics and patronage.

Reflection on this sort of correlation of forces led Ismailbekova to the point where she had to observe the men and their means of solving problems. Informants may try to manipulate us in order to achieve their aims within the local power relations, appealing to our level of education. This is an example of how 'local' anthropologists may also be used as 'talismans' (see: [Adams 1999] on the 'mascot researcher').

Age does not always determine people's attitude to the researcher, although in Kyrgyz society (and in Middle Asian society as a whole) people always find things to quibble over (the age of one's child, and the fact that s/he is an only child, whereas other women the same age as the researcher have lots of teenage children). But what is more significant is that the focus of the research may place the researcher and her informants in different positions relative to each other. Her ethnicity may become one of the informants' main objects of interest. This interest, together with the roles and expectations they impose upon her may, as a result of reflective analysis, show up processes that are underway in the society being studied, such as doubts about their origins and thus about the legitimacy of including themselves in particular ethnic categories.

On the basis of the examples which we have brought 'from inside Middle Asia', we should like to assert that self-reflection as a form of writing can be an effective method of knowledge production as a means of overcoming the dichotomy between the 'home' and 'in-comer' researcher and the fixed regionalism in research approaches. Nevertheless it must be admitted that the field may impose its own rules which must be obeyed.

The intermediate position between 'local' and 'visiting', one aspect of the hybridity of which Narayan writes, becomes problematic in some situations in the field. We, especially as women, despite our 'Western' diplomas and expertise, were perceived in the Kyrgyz field primarily as Kyrgyz women and daughters-in-law, and things were required of us in accordance with those roles, in which we were constantly wordlessly 'replaced'.

But reflection on those requirements and silent reminders allowed us to understand both ourselves and the culture we were studying.

References

- Abashin S., ‘Razmyshleniya o “Tsentralnoy Azii v sostave Rossiyskoy imperii” [Thoughts about ‘Central Asia within the Russian Empire’], *Ab Imperio*, 2008, no. 4, pp. 456–471. (In Russian).
- Adams L., ‘The Mascot Researcher: Identity, Power, and Knowledge in Fieldwork’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 1999, August, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 331–363.
- Alymbaeva A. A., ‘Mezhdru “sartom” i “kalmakom”’: Politika identichnosti v Kyrgyzstane’ [Between ‘Sart’ and ‘Kalmak’: Politics of identity in Kyrgyzstan], *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 2014, no. 4, pp. 45–55. (In Russian).
- Burdukov A., ‘Karakolskie kalmyki (sart-kalmaki)’ [The Kalmyks of Kara-Kol (Sart-kalmyks)], *Sovetskaya etnografiya*, 1935, no. 6, pp. 47–78. (In Russian).
- Campbell J. K., *Honour, Family and Patronage. A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, 393 pp.
- Cohen A., *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, 156 pp.
- Ismailbekova A., *Blood Ties and the Native Son: The Poetics of Patronage in Kyrgyzstan*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017.
- Jacobs-Huey L., ‘The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among “Native” Anthropologists’, *American Anthropologist. New Series*, 2002, Sept, vol. 104, no. 3, pp. 791–804.
- Lidzhiev D., ‘Kalmyki Kirgizii’ [Kalmyks of Kirgizia], 2008. <http://www.bumbinorn.ru/hamagmongol/1165134345-kalmyki_kirgizii_48654.html>. (In Russian).
- Mielke K., Hornidge A.-K., *Crossroads Studies: From Spatial Containers to Social Interactions in Differentiated Spatialities* (Crossroads Asia Working Paper No. 15). Bonn: ZEF, 2014, 60 pp.
- Nanzatov B., Sodnompilova M., ‘Karakolskie sart-kalmaki: Polevye ocherki’ [The Sart-kalmaks of Kara-Kol: Field notes], *Tartaria Magna*, 2012, no. 2, pp. 128–151. (In Russian).
- Narayan K., ‘How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist?’, *American Anthropologist, New Series*, 1993, Sept., vol. 95, no. 3, pp. 671–686.
- Zhukovskaya N. L., ‘Issyk-Kulskie kalmaki (sart-kalmaki)’ [The Kalmaks of Yssyk-Kul (Sart-kalmaks)], *Etnograficheskie protsessy u natsionalnykh grupp Sredney Azii i Kazakhstana* [Ethnographic Processes among National Groups of Middle Asia and Kazakhstan]. Moscow: Nauka, 1980, pp. 157–166. (In Russian).

GULNARA AYTPAEVA

1

Is the dilemma between regional studies and the development of comparative studies, global and transnational studies, a current one? In the course of specific research, the priority of one or another approach, or the use of different approaches in particular combinations comes about of itself; and at this stage the initial mutual exclusiveness or oppositions are seen to be unnatural and unproductive.

If we begin by acknowledging that all research has to have a focus, whatever that may be, including a spatial focus, then it is hard to avoid the concept of the region. It is logical then that some institutionalisation of 'regional studies' should take place. If we begin by acknowledging that all research requires some sort of support and context, the idea of regionality may also have a function, though it is probable that not all supports are to be found in the region under study, nor all contexts limited to it. The task may be to perceive 'regional institutions' as mechanisms (or instruments?) that maintain and systematise research in a particular region; and in that case we must also recognise that all mechanisms wear out, break down, and are replaced.

When anthropological or ethnographic research is being carried out, the concept of the 'region' is usually reduced to one or two points (a village, a town, some other unit), and in this sense institutions and projects are always directed towards a concrete 'regional' point, but equally the research at some stage always goes beyond the boundaries of the region in which it is being conducted. The ability to indicate tendencies that are manifesting themselves in different parts of the world may be a sign of good research.

Not long ago we completed a pilot week of fieldwork in the villages of Iskra and Andarak, in the Batken province of Kyrgyzstan. Every evening we sat down as a team to discuss what we had achieved, noticed and recorded. This is how the

Gulnara Aytpaeva

Aigine Cultural Research Center,
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
office@aigine.kg

very first analysis of the field or empirical experience takes place in the field. In the course of this, one day one or two of us started to use the words ‘theory’ and ‘theorising’. The question was raised of what theorising was, and how it could evolve on the basis of our empirical observations and analysis. We thought hard about this in a ravine near Andarak. It became clear that we could not confine ourselves to a particular ravine, even with two villages thrown in: we needed much more empirical data from colleagues working on similar questions in other regions of the world — ethnic minorities, the infrastructural approach, interrelations between neighbours. Research rooted in a region — once it reaches the writing-up stage — needs a much wider perspective than its own region provides, and at that point, in fact, it ceases to be regional, although that does not by any means mean that it will deal with matters global or transnational.

Insofar as the process of research and the process of the institutionalisation of research belong to different spheres of human activity, they differ in nature. At the stage of ‘pure’ research (not committed to any cause) and conceptualisation, the concepts of regionality, globality and transnationality may naturally be combined. Whether such combinations (or, conversely, mutual exclusivity) are possible in institutionalised research depends on the institution.

2

I have not thought much about the territorial limits of the region where I live. This is strange, given that name-changes have taken place during my lifetime. I grew up when there was ‘Central Asia and Kazakhstan’ — which meant that Kazakhstan was not part of Central Asia. The definition ‘Middle Asia’, of which I first heard from American colleagues, includes Kazakhstan, which from my point of view was its rationale. But it does not, apparently, include Mongolia, which is part of what is called ‘Inner Asia’.

By its very nature any ethnographic research is rooted at a particular point on the globe, but by no means confined to it. It seems to me that for this reason — from the position of a researcher — the definition of a region need not be in terms of strict territorial limits. On the other hand, giving a name to a region and distinguishing it is a kind of supplementary indicator at any stage of research.

Obviously, the study of different regions under a single roof or in a single institution has taken place, or does take place, on the basis of particular ideas. For example, situating a subsection for the study of Middle Asia under the wing of the study of Russia is for me indicative of the approach that might be broadly termed ‘Western’, as is popular at the moment. From the conceptual distance of the USA, and even Europe, when these departments were formed, Russia and Middle Asia were one big region with one dominant language and a myriad of processes in common. The logic is both explicable and comprehensible. It seems to me that this logic focuses more on the

political component, even though the majority of works will not deal directly with politics. Might one assume that if Middle Asia is studied in the department, say, of Middle Eastern studies, the accent will fall on other meanings? This is theoretically possible. In practice, if we start with what the regional field actually contains, the same processes and phenomena may be studied as when Middle Asia is subordinated to other departments. Perhaps there would be a different sort of theorising about them?

Having for many years studied the practice of pilgrimage to the holy places in Kyrgyzstan, I used to think that it would be a good idea to visit the 'strict' Muslim East, to have a look at how they do it there. I supposed that there might be a common foundation for what happens there and at certain mausolea in Kyrgyzstan. In 2013 I was at a conference in Iran dedicated to the descendants of the great imams, and also to their sacred mausolea (*mazārāt*). I observed how fundamental the difference is between the religious practices of Muslim pilgrims there and at home. It seemed to me then that in a certain sense our Muslims are closer to certain Christians of the Upper Altay (in the Russian Federation) and to other peoples who are not Muslim at all. I am not sure that this is the most perspicuous example, but I cite it in order to show that the context itself, or its expansion / alteration affect our research. And the programme within which a teaching / research department functions, and the languages that are taught there, are an integral part of that context. It would be a good thing for the structures which study Middle Asia to be administratively separate, but often this is not only a question of ideas, but also of funding and personnel.

3

The study of Middle Asia ought to cover all questions relevant to the field. In this sense there is room for hundreds of isms: nationalism, traditionalism, fundamentalism, sexism and so on. According to my observations the Islamic factor is not in itself, as a religious factor, the chief peculiarity of the region. In conflict with the traditional spiritual values of the different peoples who inhabit the region, and in combination with social evolution, gender and education, the Islam factor gives rise to hundreds of research questions and prospects. It would be a good thing if disciplines in the humanities such as literature, spirituality, painting and languages became closer to the core of Middle Asian studies, instead of being somewhat marginalised, as can be seen at present.

ALIMA BISSENOVA, KULSHAT MEDEUOVA

**On the problems of regional studies
in/on Middle Asia**

One of our ‘observations’ of local and outside, or, as they often say, ‘international’ researchers is that foreign researchers write about an identity being ‘constructed’ or ‘imagined’, and local ones write that it is being ‘sought’. It may be that Middle Asian studies is suffering from a dual colonialism — with regard to Russia and with regard to the West, while the West, just like Russia, is not a monolith, it includes different schools and different academic hierarchies. But both colonialisms — the one that arose as the inevitable result of our history within the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, and the other, that has arisen quite recently, in the post-Soviet period, as the result of the processes of an unequal globalisation — manifest themselves in various ways and have various modalities and consequences.

One might say that post-colonialism with regard to Russia, when Russian is perceived as the *lingua franca* of the Middle Asian region, actually unites us in regional Middle Asian research. Whereas previously Russian was the dominant language of the academy and of theoretical discourse, now, having lost its dominance in scholarship, it has become the almost obligatory language of the field. The majority of anthropologists, political scientists, historians and sociologists who work in Middle Asia usually know Russian, even if they do not know any other regional language. Thanks to this same language factor, scholars working in Xinjiang or Afghanistan do not always fit into the context of Middle Asian Studies. The borders of the old Soviet Union have remained the borders of academic practice, separating scholars within the region, although, of course, there is some point in scholars from China (Xinjiang) and Kazakhstan, or from Tajikistan and Afghanistan working together on some questions.

Alima Bissenova

Nazarbayev University,
Astana, Kazakhstan
abissenova@nu.edu.kz

Kulshat Medeuova

L. N. Gumilev
Eurasian National University,
Astana, Kazakhstan
mkulshat@gmail.com

Knowledge of Russian is a considerable advantage, but when combined with ignorance of other regional languages it can also be a hindrance. For example, when working on the history of Kazakhstan, where most research is done on the basis of Russian sources, we return willy-nilly to the fold of 'imperial history', even if the research is being undertaken from an anti-colonial or post-colonial viewpoint [Remnev 2011].

Virginia Martin, the historian of nineteenth-century Kazakh-Russian relations, pointed out while speaking at Nazarbayev University on 10 September 2015 that a comprehensive study of the position of the Kazakh elite of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries requires extensive linguistic erudition, because the sources for this period are in Calmuck, Chinese, Russian and Chagatay or some other Turkic language, but since the study of the sources is dominated by Russian, our understanding of this period remains somewhat one-sided. A similarly one-sided understanding, unfortunately, may also be observed amongst ethnographers studying the present day.

Amongst ethnographers and political scientists there is an unspoken distinction between the languages of the countryside and the town, it being considered, for example, that for studying the countryside Kazakh or Kyrgyz are necessary, but for studying the town or the elite Russian is enough. This is not so. Huge swaths of the town will remain beyond the knowledge and understanding of anyone who does not understand the language of certain cultural practices. Bilingual and sometimes even trilingual practices are becoming common everywhere, for example, in the administrative and educational establishments of Kazakhstan.

As for colonialism with respect to the West, this is primarily a 'colonialism of knowledge' [Tlostanova 2015: 39–40]. In overcoming the Soviet academic tradition with the help of new practices from global academia, we find ourselves in the situation described by Tlostanova in her article 'Can the Post-Soviet Think?' At the level of the colonisation of knowledge, Soviet Middle Asia has jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire, in the sense that no sooner did it emancipate itself from the Soviet discourses of civilisation and development in the framework of Marxist-Leninist theory that had been forced upon it than it found itself inside another global framework where the obsession with 'backwardness' and 'feudalism' was replaced with an obsession with 'corruption', 'authoritarian regimes' and 'Islamism'. This discourse (in simplified form) proposes just the same sort of colonial evolutionary approach to the development of society 'from East to West': in order to achieve modernity (the West) it must overcome corruption, the authoritarian regime and Islamism. These topics have become so prevalent in Middle

Asian studies that it is very hard to describe what ‘normality’ might be — because it is always taken for granted that nothing is normal. Even when studying seemingly normal phenomena, such as the middle class in Kazakhstan, a scholar always has to answer the ‘obligatory list’ of questions: ‘What about corruption? How can you put up with an authoritarian regime? What about islamisation?’

There are not many people who want to write about that ‘modernity’ that already exists, in the form of normal roads, a developing infrastructure, or electronic taxes; they would rather write about ‘lifts that don’t work in the skyscrapers’, or some deficiencies in our inner understanding of modernity: ‘What do you want skyscrapers for in the steppe?’ To be fair, it should be said that this sort of prejudice is more prevalent among political scientists than anthropologists. Anthropologists do try to combat such preconceived ideas.

It is interesting that local researchers deliberately avoid such ‘exotic’ topics as bride-stealing and ritual life and choose cases that typify Kazakh ‘modernity’, such as urban anthropology and the sociology of modernisation (S. Yesenova and A. Zabirova), the art market (Zh. Nauryzbaeva), financial markets (A. Begim), and networking among NGOs (A. Rodionov).

Despite the problems of ‘dual colonialism’, it should be noted that the discovery of Middle Asia by Western researchers has been a great advantage and a stimulus for new work and new topics for scholars both in Middle Asia and outside it. As rightly observed by Madeleine Reeves in her assessment of ‘the state of the field’ [Reeves 2014], English-language Middle Asian Studies are experiencing a boom, in the positive sense of the word: the inclusion in anthropology and ethnography of the most diverse so-called ‘modern’ (as opposed to ‘exotic’) topics, numerous exchanges and collaborations, the publications of both local and foreign researchers (though the foreign outnumber the local), and a gradual involvement in comparative and global theoretical discussions outside the region.

But from the point of view of the colonialism of Middle Asia as a subject of research, it still seems to us that ‘the glass is half-empty’. Middle Asian studies continue to develop in a state of asymmetry of power (according to the paradigm that ‘knowledge is power’) and epistemology. Many young researchers ‘go to the West to study the East’. And those who have ‘remained’ within the framework of their old (Soviet) academic practices and continue to use Russian as the language of theoretical discourse are suffering academic marginalisation. The space in which research can receive approbation is shrinking, education through the medium of Russian is losing its status, and works written in Russian or regional languages are less frequently cited.

Colonialism is also expressed in the presumption that all the communities and countries of Middle Asia must be ‘discovered’

by foreign researchers, whatever they want to research. That is, it is assumed that people in Middle Asia are always ready to become their object. But if people do not want to be 'objectified', this may be understood as an infringement of 'academic liberty'. For example, imams in Kazakhstan refused to speak to a female researcher from the West who was studying the relations between the state and religion. She applied to Nazarbayev University for institutional support. We understand colleagues' frustration when they are refused access, and as a friendly research structure are obliged to act as mediators to support our colleagues from abroad. But suppose the situation were reversed: suppose a researcher from the Eurasian University or from Nazarbayev University had come with a grant from the Kazakh Ministry of Education to study the relationship between the Anglican Church and the state, with permission only from her own university in Kazakhstan, a strong accent, and not being a specialist in the theological questions of the 'local church', but still insisting upon her 'rights' as a researcher.

We know that it is complicated, but we must imagine this 'de-stabilisation of the established relations between subject and object' [Tlostanova 2015: 40] and understand that the appearance on the horizon of people who want to study you may be suspicious and unpleasant independently of any of political freedoms in the country where you live. Refusing to be interviewed or to have any contact with the researcher are enshrined as the rights of the subject by many an Institutional Review Board, but in our country that sort of refusal will be associated with the authoritarianism of the regime, inwardlookingness and a 'particular' mentality.

If anthropology is to be understood as a project which presupposes honesty with regard both to the informant and to oneself, the following questions must be answered. What good will your research do your informants? Will it be useful to them? How will it affect their community? And more generally — or perhaps more emotively — what will your research give to humanity and scholarship, apart from the advancement of your own personal research interests and career?

We talk a lot about the globalisation of knowledge and collaboration in the production of knowledge, often forgetting that this collaboration is unequal. Someone might think that we are speaking from a position of post-colonial nationalism, since we are part of national projects aimed at revitalising our social sciences and making them part of global science, but we know that many of our colleagues from Western countries, who have found themselves 'on the margins' of their institutes and universities, have also had similar experience of 'unequal' collaboration, and if regional studies in Middle Asia are currently going through a period of self-reflection, our questions also have a right to be asked.

References

- Reeves M., 'Antropologia Srednei Azii cherez desiat let posle "sostoianie polia": stakan napolovinu polon ili napolovinu pust?' [The Anthropology of Central Asia Ten Years after 'The State of the Field': A Cup Half Full or Half Empty?], *Antropologicheskij forum*, 2014, no. 20, pp. 60–79. (In Russian).
- Remnev A., 'Kolonialnost, postkolonialnost i "istoricheskaya politika" v sovremennom Kazakhstane' [Coloniality, Postcoloniality and 'Historical Policy' in Contemporary Kazakhstan], *Ab Imperio*, 2011, no. 1, pp. 169–205. (In Russian).
- Tlostanova M., 'Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge. External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference', *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 2015, no. 1(2), pp. 38–58.

ANNA CIEŚLEWSKA

'The Islamic factor'

3

First of all I should like to thank the organisers of the forum for proposing such interesting and relevant questions for discussion, dealing with regional studies in contemporary anthropology as exemplified by Middle Asia. I shall attempt to answer the third question, which deals with the Islamic factor and its significance for the study of the region. Is the Islamic factor this region's chief peculiarity?

If we assume the importance of the '*Islamic factor*', we should first define the context in which we speak of Islam.

Religion is undoubtedly an important factor in the formation of the culture in question. If we think of Islam as a way of life, relevant to all its aspects, both material and spiritual, the Islamic factor really is important and must be included in any research project connected with Middle Asia irrespective of its topic. The influence of culture and religion on all phenomena in the social, political and economic spheres of life must be examined. At the same time the research must take into account the cultural difference which, in addition to religion, determines the functioning of the various ethnic groups and peoples that inhabit Middle Asia.

This sort of approach to research equally demands a detailed analysis of the processes of transformation of social institutions typical of any given ethnic group. As we know, there are various factors that influence change in religion and tradition: the political situation, the economy, migration, and the processes connected with globalisation. Islam is itself influenced by the policies of various states and connected with an intensification of contacts with other Muslim countries, which leads on the one hand to a raising of the level of religious education and religious knowledge, and on the other juxtaposes new spiritual movements within Islam with the local practices and traditions and stimulates the activities of various groups, among them some that are orthodox and even radical in character (these two concepts must, of course, be defined in detail, since both phenomena are often regarded as almost one and the same, even though in many cases the approach to religion, activities and aims of groups that may be regarded as radical are quite different from those that are considered orthodox).

In the context of the study of Islam it is impossible not to make use of ethnographical research, paying special attention to the analysis and description of various rituals, religious practices, etc. Modern fieldwork is not the only important source of data, but so are Soviet ethnography, historical archives, theological texts, etc.

Another question which deserves close attention is that of the various aspects of Muslim ethics, and their influence on the contemporary ethics of the peoples of Middle Asia: Islam as a factor in regulating the unstable life of post-Soviet Middle Asia, as a form of social stability — the Islamic factor as ideological opposition to globalisation and Americanisation — the slogans of which certain groups are so fond. Such an approach will allow the Islamic factor to be considered in a wider context and the processes currently at work in Middle Asia to be analysed. These include some connected with radicalisation or with the popularisation of orthodox Islam. These in turn have an effect on the transformation of traditional religious practices.

Connected with this last aspect we also find the concept of 'traditional Islam', a term often used in various contexts in opposition to 'non-traditional Islam', which is often called a phenomenon hostile to tradition, and connected with orthodox Islam or even radicalism. In this context the Islamic legal schools other than the Hanafī must also be considered, as must other tendencies independent of the *madhahib*, since elements of these may be discerned in the new ritual practices of the region's Muslims.

In connection with the above there also arises the question of the methods of research into Islam, which are becoming more complicated by the year. The situation is affected by the policies of Middle Asian governments. At present fieldwork on Islam is practically

impossible in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and extremely difficult in Tajikistan. The governments of these countries make it practically impossible for foreign scholars to work there. Furthermore, the worsening relationship between the West and Russia, and also between European civilisation (understood as Judeo-Christian) and Islam, affects the attitude of the native population towards foreign researchers (often without regard to the latter's religion or ethnicity).

For example, the law on 'foreign agents' under discussion in Kyrgyzstan has had a negative effect on the attitude of the local population towards researchers, who are often suspected of espionage or gathering intelligence for foreign powers, or even of harmful intentions towards Islam. This kind of conspiracy theory may be felt in the quality of scholarly research, which it is very hard to conduct under such conditions. As a result, research into Islam is more and more often fragmentary in character and even superficial. In Kazakhstan one can actually do research, but only under state control, which hinders the independence of action on the part of the researcher which is an essential condition of effective work. One could of course ask a general question on this *Forum* what interest Islam has for the representatives of particular states and what the personal motives of scholars participating in various political projects are, but equally one must not forget that research into various aspects of Islam allow us above all better to understand current processes in the region.

It is possible to draw the overall conclusion that the Islamic factor is very important in research carried out in Middle Asia, and requires to be studied from every angle. Because of the unstable situation in the region the future of research into Islam is in question.

SVETLANA GORSHENINA

Central / Middle Asia: nothing more than a 'label' for a complex historico-cultural region with fluid borders

The sense that the terminological confusion in the naming of the *Central* or *Middle Asian* region and the impossibility of defining its borders 'scientifically' is a hindrance to the acknowledgement of the results of scholarly research into this region is nothing new, nor is it a product of post-Soviet geopolitical disintegration. However, in many contemporary publications — not only in anthropology and ethnography — terminological considerations are confined to brief surveys of the tendencies of the last three

decades, usually with serious gaps. Despite this, the history of the conceptualisation of the region, its denomination and the definition of its borders goes back to the eighteenth century.¹ This was when the scholarly community first began to feel the awkwardness of using the general denomination 'Tartary' for the whole region from Astrakhan to the Far East and from the Urals to Persia.

Rejecting Ptolemy's cartographic representations, and taking as their starting-point the critical lucubrations of Claude Visdelou, Petr Pallas and Iakinf Bichurin, researchers — mostly geographers and travellers — in both Russia and the West formulated new criteria for defining the region as a single whole within defined, 'scientifically based' borders, and possible new names for it. The process of the formation of nation-states, which rely structurally on the concept of frontier lines and work in terms of 'ethnic unity' and 'spheres of interest' began to define an intellectual and political context which required a re-examination of the former schemes of representation and denomination.

Rejecting the ethnic definition of the region as 'Ta(r)tar', with its evident pejorative overtones, researchers also tried to avoid making generalising terms out of the existing politico-ethnic denominations of the numerous components of this wide geographical area, which were rooted in both Arab / Turkic / Persian and European traditions ('Bukharia', 'Kokandia', 'Khwarezmia', 'the country of the Turkmen / Turcomans', 'Transoxania', 'Tashkentia', 'Turkestan', 'Turan', 'the steppe'). Their point of view, formed under the influence of rationalism and the ideas of the Enlightenment, gave preference to rational geometrical and spatial criteria. The idea of the centrality of the region, which later led to the sacralisation of a sort of abstract 'centre of the continent', began to be formed almost simultaneously in the eighteenth century in several independent publications (François de Tott, Pierre-François Tardieu, Nicolas Lenglet du Fresnoy, Claude Malte-Brun). Following Filipp Nazarov's definition of '*the Central Part of Asia*' (1813–21) and Pansner's mapping of '*part of Central Asia*' (1816), Russian travellers and geographers such as Nikolay Muravyev, Aleksey Levshin and especially Georgiy Meyendorf began to use the new term *Central Asia* in the 1820s and 30s, opening at the same time a new branch of the discussion of where its borders were to be drawn. This wave of discussions has nothing to do with Marco Polo's term '*Asya Media*', nor with the mediaeval cartographic tradition which sacralises the centre of the world and biblical history, nor with Fedor Skryabin's marginal

¹ In order to save space, I do not give any references to the works that I analyse; the interested reader is referred to the more detailed analysis in my book devoted to the crystallisation of numerous concepts, from *Tartary* to *Central / Middle Asia*, that have described the region that interests us over the *longue durée*, from antiquity to the present day: [Gorshenina 2014].

mention of '*Central Asia*' in the context of his journey to the city of Turkestan in 1697.

The term was transferred to Western Europe between 1823 and 1826 thanks to Julius Klaproth's work as a translator. This scholar used the term '*Asie centrale*', but gave contradictory geographical limits for the region in his publications, placing it approximately between 62° and 119° of latitude and 27° and 52° of longitude. It may be because of the vagueness of Klaproth's many definitions that many modern scholars still associate the 'scientific definition' of the region with Alexander von Humboldt in his work *Asie centrale. Recherches sur les chaînes de montagnes et la climatologie comparée* (1843).

After his visit to Russia in 1829 Humboldt rejected the names for the region that he had previously used, such as '*Asie intérieure*', '*partie moyenne et intérieure de l'Asie*', '*Asie occidentale*', '*Inner Asia*', '*Haute Asie*'. Inspired by the botanical, zoological and geographical works of his predecessors and contemporaries, and heavily influenced by the positivist philosophy of Kant, Humboldt based his vision of the region on the theory of the volcanic nature of the earth's surface, parallel mountain ranges and the contrasting geological profiles of high plateaux and lowlands. Completely ignoring the local geographical tradition, he defined the region with the French toponym '*Asie centrale*', translated a year later into German as '*Central-Asien*'. Humboldt's new construction was applied exclusively to the '*terres hautes*', from which the Turanian plain ('*terres basses*') was excluded by definition. Underlining the previous terminological problems, and also the provisional and limited nature of his chosen terms, Humboldt acknowledges on the first pages that the arbitrary use of the terms '*Asie centrale*' and '*Haute Asie*' conceals a mass of meaningless synonyms intended to denote 'the central or unknown regions and those situated in the depths of the continent'.

In spite of criticism by Vasilij Bartold, who regarded all Humboldt's efforts as the end of the old era, and not as the beginning of a new one, the German scholar's books were received with enthusiasm by Russian scholarship, which took no notice of the inner contradictions of Humboldt's definitions. However, when the title of Humboldt's book was translated in the adulatory reviews, the terms '*Central*' and '*Middle*' *Asia* were used as interchangeable synonyms without any specific logic. Moreover, despite Russian scholarship's marked respect for the German geographer, it is Klaproth's earlier term '*Central Asia*', more inclusive in a geographical sense, which becomes more and more firmly entrenched, ignoring the principle of opposition between mountainous and lowland regions and preferring the summary definition of 'the lands of the interior of the continent'. Following Iakinif Bichurin (1851) and Vasilij Vasilyev (1852) — though differing from them in details regarding the Caucasus and the

Far Eastern regions — Nikolay Khanykov, beginning with the idea of the geometrical centre, gave his own, likewise 'strictly scientific' definition of the region (1861). According to his convictions, the 'correct' configuration of the region could be obtained by joining the sources of all the rivers of Eurasia with a single line, from the Euphrates and the Volga to the Ganges and the Yellow River: the figure of the 'inner lands' within this wide perimeter would be the best configuration of '*Central Asia*', embracing both Humboldt's 'mountainous lands' and his 'lowlands'. The geographers Ivan Mushketov and Lev Berg were later to identify themselves with this wide definition. The European scholarly community, and above all German scholars, did not accept this 'Russian' definition, behind which the geopolitical projects of the Russian Empire could be guessed at. In 1877 Ferdinand von Richthofen, strongly influenced by Carl Ritter and Alexander von Humboldt, and realising that 'Central Asia has already made several journeys across the map of Asia', proposed dividing '*Inner Asia*' on the basis of its hydrological and geological characteristics, into a 'central zone', from which there is no flow of water into the surrounding oceans and where elements of geological decay remain on the surface of the earth, a 'transitional zone', a 'peripheral zone', open to the ocean, and a 'zone of the continental border'. In this scheme of things the name '*Middle Asia*' was given exclusively to the dried-up ancient sea of Hanhai, from which no water flows into the oceans and which had earlier been referred to by Humboldt as two regions, '*Middle Asia*' and 'the Himalayas'. Richthofen proposed retaining the term '*Central Asia*' for the Russian possessions, emphasising that it was not part of '*Middle Asia*'. Even though Richthofen's arguments were acknowledged as 'scientific', the definitions of '*Central / Middle Asia*' remained extremely chaotic in the many Western encyclopaedias of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

These considerations were given a new sense by political geography, and later by geopolitics. The contributions of Élisée Reclus (1894), and especially Halford Mackinder (1904) opened a new series of intellectual manipulations of the metaphysical 'centrality' of the region. In accordance with the context of the 'Great Game', the region was defined as 'the heart of the continent' or as a 'pivot area', possession of which guaranteed world domination.

At the same time, the scholarly community was still far from according *Central* or *Middle Asia*, connected as it was with the great steppe or nomadic empires, a central role at a particular moment in history somewhere between the years 1000 and 1500; centrality, in these turn-of-the-century constructions, was entirely confined to the region's position in between a notional 'North' and 'South' and to a selection of those natural and geographical average characteristics so important for the epistemological constructions of environmental

determinism (the region's geographical past, the structure of the soil, the organisation and origin of mountain ranges, the orientation of the water flow, the climate, vegetation, etc.). Even though certain local toponyms, such as 'Turkestan' or 'Turan' were used, often in an arbitrary fashion, by Russian and European geographers, these new constructions lacked any real interest in the terminology of *Central / Middle Asia* and its definition.

In the period preceding the appearance of the megatectonic theories of continental drift, beginning with the works of Alfred Wegener (1920) and Émile Argand (1922), researchers continued to refine the terminology. In particular, while recognising the authority of the German geographical school and arming themselves with the definitions that it had constructed, Russian geographers expanded the boundaries of Humboldt and Richthofen's '*Middle Asia*', including all of 'Turan' within them. In 1886 Ivan Mushketov had proposed defining linguistically the region identified by Richthofen as '*Middle Asia*', and a more extensive area, coinciding in basic terms with the limits drawn by Khanykov, as '*Central*' or '*Inner Asia*'.

Despite numerous attempts at refining them, the correlation of '*Central*' and '*Middle Asia*' at the level of the cartographical use of terms and their hierarchy remained as unstable as before. Such Russian geographers as Petr Semenov-Tyan-Shanskiy, Vasilii Semenov-Tyan-Shanskiy, Vladimir Masalskiy and Ivan Mushketov, who preferred administrative terminology ('the Governor-Generalship of the Steppe', 'the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan', 'the Emirate of Bokhara'), had recoured to the generalising term '*Central Asia*' relatively seldom; '*Middle Asia*' appeared even less often in their publications; but at the same time both these terms were relatively close in meaning to the generalising toponym 'Turkestan', which included 'Russian, Afghan and Chinese Turkestan'. '*Central*' and '*Middle Asia*' were understood rather as synonyms which could easily be correlated with '*Inner Asia*' (1880s and 1890s).

However, the ongoing military consolidation of Russia on the territories of the Turkestan khanates led to a different crystallisation of terminology directly connected with the establishment of the frontiers of the Russian Empire in Asia and the legal division of the Russian and British spheres of interest concluded in 1895, and later that between Russia and China (1915). The new subordination of toponyms took place in the wake of the ideas of the Slavophiles and Panslavists, especially Rostislav Fadeev, Nikolay Danilevskiy and Vladimir Lamanskiy, who defined Russia as 'the Central World' or 'the Third Continent', superior to peripheral Europe and Asia. Starting from the 'natural' and 'organic' character of the newly-discovered '*Eurasia*', Russian thinkers represented the conquest of the territories of Turkestan by the Russian army as its 'natural

continuation', constituting and 'inseparable whole' with the Russian Empire. This 'natural part of a single whole' could not be called anything else but '*Central Asia*', phonetically reflecting 'the Central World'. Not only that, the researchers of this tendency, carried away by their 'central' projections, place the centre of the whole Asian continent on 'Russian land', that is, 'in their own home', in the Qulzha region or in the Pamir mountains. The term '*Middle Asia*' was reserved for the territories bordering the Russian colonial possessions (Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan and Mongolia); these last formed a wide area with potential for a progressive Russian conquest. At the same time, the elements of this 'southern crescent' could change in accordance with the political situation and Russia's ambitions: Iran or Turkey could disappear from the list of necessary components '*Middle Asia*' as a direct consequence of political events, but nevertheless any change was supported by deterministic argumentation regarding the frontiers, which were always 'natural'. The elasticity of the term was also evident in the fact that it could be extended northwards to subsume the whole of '*Central Asia*'.

The later Eurasian theories of Petr Savitskiy (1920s — 1930s) considerably strengthened the scientific argumentation for separating a 'middle' region from the neutral continuum. The core of this, delineated by numerous contour lines indicating average climatic indicators, the soil, the vegetation, the temperature and so on, coincided with the 'Steppe Rectangle', the 'Mongolosphere', the 'three reference points of the spatial evolution of the Russian people or the Central World', and 'the heart of the continent'.

Another important terminological battle of this time arose from the necessity of firmly attaching to the Russian colony the name 'Turkestan' and providing it with the epithet 'Russian', with all its political and state connotations, in the hope of soon uniting this element with 'Afghan Turkestan' and 'Chinese Turkestan' to produce a single global 'Turkestan' under Russian rule. 'Turan' was a close synonym of this toponym, and towards the end of the nineteenth century also acquired positive connotations in the context of the ambiguous Aryan-Turanian theories which were intended to legitimise the Russian presence in the conquered territories. Originally local terms, once integrated into the Eurocentric system of the organisation of geopolitical space, these two names effectively ceased to reflect any other, 'originally' *Central / Middle Asian* meaning and were assimilated to the other terms which had been brought in from outside.

Despite this abundance of scholarly, philosophical and geopolitical constructions, it was the national and political demarcations carried out by the Soviet government in 1924–1936 that proved decisive in

the establishment of the concept of '*Central / Middle Asia*'. This political action gave birth to a new series of terminological manipulations and confusions. The expression '*Central Asia and Kazakhstan*', in which '*Central Asia*' was taken to mean the newly formed republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgizia and Turkmenistan, would henceforth coexist with the '*Central Asian Economic Region*', in which the aforesaid four republics were joined by the southern regions of Kazakhstan. This last configuration was systematically used by Soviet scholars working in the humanities, who by 1936 had reduced it to '*Central Asia*'. In the natural sciences, however, '*Central Asia*' was frequently understood to mean all the Asiatic structures of the Soviet Union, which thus included within this toponym the whole of Kazakhstan.

However, the process of purging Soviet terminology and codifying and official scholarly language produced a new stage in the refining of the terminology under Stalin, beginning traditionally among the geologists. Dmitriy Mushketov (1936) and Vladimir Obruchev (1942) went back to Richthofen's old idea and proposed to apply the term '*Central Asia*' exclusively to Soviet territories, and '*Middle Asia*' to a partial sum of the German geographer's 'central' and 'transitional' zones, but limiting it in the east at the state frontier of the USSR; the configuration of this '*Middle Asia*' was to continue to change from one publication to the next.

From the 1920s to the 1960s, in parallel with the debates among Soviet scholars, there was a transition in Western scholarship from the architectonics of 'continents', in accordance with which all scientific knowledge had hitherto been constructed, to the logic of 'cultural regions'. In the course of this epistemological revolution the territories in the interior of the Asian continent were divided, from an area studies point of view, between the Russian, Iranian, Turkic and Chinese worlds and became practically invisible to the scholarly community and the political establishment. Interest in *Central / Middle Asia* was reawakened in the 1980s, and with it, in a new twist of terminological activity (as a reading of the many encyclopaedias and dictionaries published in the 1980s and 1990s will show), the whole range of previous topographical and geographical names also reappeared.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and a desire on the part of the independent republics to distance themselves from their Soviet heritage led at first to some hastily concocted hybrids. For example, when Uzbek specialists rejected the term '*Central Asia*', which was connected with the Soviet past and Muscovite overlordship, in favour of '*Middle Asia*', they retained its conceptual content and started publishing maps with the title '*Middle Asia and Kazakhstan*' (1994–1998). Another common configuration was calling all the former

Asiatic republics, including Kazakhstan, '*Middle Asia*', a term officially adopted unanimously at a summit of the leaders of the newly independent republics in 1993. The disappearance of the Iron Curtain also brought back '*Inner Asia*' and 'Eurasia', long forgotten in the Russian-speaking Soviet world, which for a long time became more popular than '*Central Asia*'. Behind this choice the desire of the independent republics to mark their new status in the political arena is clearly visible. Declaring their 'central role in the Asian region', the new political leaders thus symbolised their intention to reject Russian tutelage, at the same time attempting to make a distinction between the post-Soviet Asian territories and other large geopolitical units such as 'Greater Turkey' or 'Greater China'.

The first acts of terrorism in Uzbekistan in 1999 brought back the term '*Central Asia*' to denote the whole conglomeration of the former republics, which hoped by this terminological gesture to set themselves apart from those countries on the other side of George Bush's 'axis of evil', and affirm their position in the 'Second' (post-Soviet) World, thus distinguishing themselves from the Third World of developing countries. The same aim actively revived 'Eurasia' ('Greater', 'Middle' or 'Inner'), which was easily interchangeable with *Inner Asia* and the outlines of which became vaguer and vaguer, and there was a new demand for Mackinder's theories, from which 'Eurasia's Heart' was derived. Meanwhile '*Middle Asia*' remained current as an approximate synonym for any of these terms.

In this situation, while the political map of the world was being redrawn and the Iron Curtain between the Soviet / post-Soviet and Western systems lifted, the scholarly community was again faced with a terminological dilemma. While they draw upon at least two centuries' worth of terminological heritage (not counting classical authors), publications over the last three decades have shown a certain inertia in the conceptual re-evaluation of spatial structures and fields of study. The principle of exclusion and of drawing the boundaries remains fundamental in the definition of '*Central / Middle Asia*', so that today many different scenarios are based upon it, from the minimalist, which confine '*Central Asia*' within the boundaries of Uzbekistan, to the global, which inflate it to a 'Greater Eurasia' stretching from sea to sea, from north to south, and from east to west.

At the same time, researchers were being offered interesting developments for a new definition of the area which were to be free of environmental determinism, the principle of 'centrality', the geopolitical interests of nation-states and trans-national groupings, and likewise of linear positivism with its links to Eurocentrism and Western imperialism. Among the important results of these discussions of the area and its terminology, which took place on many occasions since 1983, is an understanding, now fully formed, that the

definition of the region does not depend on its position in space, nor on its climate, nor on its geographical relief or distance from the ocean shore. Researchers have also reached agreement that the region's borders are neither naturally geographical nor metaphysical, and that their definition depends on the categories chosen for the construction of any given concept, be it natural and environmental or social-cultural-religious-ethnic-linguistic-political.

Even though these many arguments have not so far led to any single conclusion, and though the discussions are still directed by imaginary criteria, the following ideas could be a significant point of departure for future considerations:

— the *Central / Middle Asian* region should first and foremost be defined as 'cultural and historical' and not as 'natural and geographical' or 'political';

— the telescopic approach which proposes the analysis of historical reality through the prism of the modern political map should be rejected;

— it is important to acknowledge the changes in the contours of the region at different historical stages;

— 'average' values of imaginary indicators and strict notional schemes must be rejected in favour of a focus on historical processes, together with the social, intellectual and spiritual practices that form human communities;

— the definition of regions should not be effected from an isolationist perspective, taking only internal characteristics into account, but with regard to interactions with neighbouring 'worlds'.

The acceptance of such a perspective will mean that the contours and contents of *Central / Middle Asia* will always be vague and changeable, depending on the perspective and period chosen. Nevertheless the definition of *Central / Middle Asia* will remain constant as a region which, being the transcontinental crossroads for several neighbouring 'worlds' (Turkic, Iranian, Indian, Chinese and Russian), was in the past represented mainly by Tartar-Mongol and Iranian culture, determined by the interaction of pastoralism and oasis agriculture, and enriched by many vectors of cultural transference and a wide range of religious beliefs, with Buddhism and Islam predominating.

As for the name of the region, *Central / Middle Asia* is already overburdened with a contradictory terminological heritage and has no need of the invention of any new terms supported to a greater or lesser extent by 'scientific criteria'. Nowadays it is more productive to think that the existing terms should be used as a sort of label which could have a somewhat mutable configuration for each specific research context. Such a cautious and by no means revolutionary

approach would help to avoid any further terminological escalation based on criteria that have already been introduced more than once and discarded as inadequate.

This position does not mean a refusal to affirm the independent significance of *Central / Middle Asia*. The traditional association of the region, or of its individual components at the level of structural hierarchies, with the Turkic, Iranian, Indian, Tibetan, Mongol, Chinese and Russian worlds only leads to its dismemberment amongst those 'worlds', making its position in the humanities even more marginal. Therefore, for all the 'vulnerability' and burdensome heritage of the terminology, it seems to me that the affirmation of *Central / Middle Asia* as an independent object of research within the regional structuring of intellectual space remains an important task for all those specialists who are interested in it.

References

- Gorshenina S., *L'invention de l'Asie centrale. Histoire du concept de la Tartarie à l'Eurasie*. Genève: Droz, 2014, 704 pp. (Collection: Rayon Histoire, no. 4).

DIANA IBAÑEZ-TIRADO, MAGNUS MARSDEN

Anthropological works on Central Asia in Western academia

During a speech in February 2013, the USA Secretary of State John Kerry applauded American diplomats working in 'Kyrzakhstan' for their efforts in supporting democratic institutions. Two years later, in January 2015, the *New York Times* referred to 'Kyrzbekistan' in an article about Tom Caldwell, a mountaineer kidnapped by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Soon afterwards, the *New York Times* itself clarified that Kyrzbekistan had been 'misidentified' and the paper apologised because of the error. Blog and twitter users soon picked up the *New York Times'* mistake and claimed Kyrzbekistan's right to exist: a national anthem was created and posted on Youtube, the country was described as an 'authoritarian democracy' and the first travel guide to Kyrzbekistan was published online. Other commentators, including the writer Leonid Bershidsky, did not, however,

Diana Ibañez-Tirado

SOAS, University of London /
University of Sussex,
Brighton, UK
di1@soas.ac.uk
di40@sussex.ac.uk

Magnus Marsden

University of Sussex,
Brighton, UK
m.marsden@sussex.ac.uk

find much to laugh about in terms of the Kyrzzbekistan or Kyrzakhstan mistakes. Bershidsky [Bershidsky 2015] described this type of error as a ‘manifestation of our strange indifference to, or even contempt for, countries that appear remote, small or unimportant’, such as the so-called Central Asian ‘stans’ (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan). Both these errors and the jokes in which they resulted are signs of how, despite of the changing landscapes produced by increasing although unequal global mobility of people and capital, Central Asia continues to be thought of in much public discourse as being formed by the ‘unfathomable’ five republics which were once part of the Soviet Union.

In the 1990s, Eickelman [Eickelman 1998] suggested that innovative debates about the shifting boundaries of area studies were necessary especially because of the increasing levels of migration and new patterns of economic interaction across Central Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Until very recently, however, Central Asia was seen in academic writing as an ‘overdetermined yet understudied region of the world’, and frequently treated either as a ‘periphery’ of social phenomena that had their centres in other regions (for example Islam and Islamic revival in the Middle East), or as a region to analyse an emerging nationalism and so-called post-Soviet ‘transition’ [Liu 2011: 116]. Scholars have now begun to critically recognise the ways in which Central Asia has been romantically imagined as either the renewed space of the ancient Silk Road [Megoran 2004; Marsden 2015], as an obscure and oriental space of ‘danger’ [Heathershaw, Megoran 2011] or as an all-encompassing post-Soviet spatio-temporal marker [Ibañez-Tirado 2015]. In this contribution, we track the first developments of Western scholarship in Central Asia understood as a region primarily formed by a ‘core’ of five Soviet / post-Soviet countries. We then address the ways in which anthropologists in Western academia have moved towards a study of Central Asia beyond the geographies posited by well-bounded nation-states in order to productively incorporate historical and more contemporary geographies, temporalities and mobilities that emphasise trans-regional plurality, connectivity and heterogeneity. We conclude with a discussion about the politics of the production of knowledge concerning area studies, and the role of Central Asian studies in such debates. Because of the length and focus of this discussion, we have chosen to review only published anthropological works in Western academia. We acknowledge, however, that we are not making justice to all the excellent scholars who have conducted anthropological and inter-disciplinary research in Central Asia in diverse parts of the world.

Scholarship about the Central Asian region in Western academia was regularly produced throughout the twentieth century [Myer 2002]; indeed, as Mitchell [Mitchell 2003] suggests, area studies have a clear

interconnection to geopolitical agendas and strategic funding that dates back to the Second World War. Soviet Asia attracted the attention of scholars who saw in the Soviet Union a potential force for radical change in the Middle East [Myer 2002]. In the second half of the twentieth century, Western interest in the study of Central Asia centred its discussions on 'coloniality' (e.g.: [Stahl 1951]; more recently [Cole, Kandiyoti 2002; Kandiyoti, Azimova 2004; Khalid 2007b; Chari, Verdery 2009; Morrison 2009; Kalinovsky 2013; Mostowlansky 2014a]) and the so-called 'anti-colonial' movements of Central Asia: the Basmachi Revolts [Caroe 1953] and the anti-Soviet movements of the Jadidis ([Wheeler 1960], more recently: [Khalid 1998; Abashin 2012]).

Furthermore, studies of Soviet Asia were characterised by their focus on Muslim populations and Islam [Myer 2002]. Scholars addressed in particular the ways in which Islam was able to 'survive' the communist system; the term 'Soviet Islam' became commonly used to describe official forms of religion (e.g.: [Carrère d'Encausse 1974; Bennigsen, Wimbush 1985]). The debates about how Islamic practices came to be understood as 'tradition' during the communist era were influential in later studies of post-Soviet Islam [Khalid 2007a], and in the discussions about radical Islam and its causes in Central Asia [Rashid 2002; Naumkin 2005]. Debates about the nature of Islam in Central Asia frequently coincided with discussions on ethnicity and national-identity [Gross 1992; Roy 2000].

The importance of nationalism, ethnicity and identity to the political projects of the Soviet and post-independence states have remained important features of the scholarship on Central Asia until today (e.g.: [Schatz 2002; Ilkhamov 2004; Hirsch 2005; Bergne 2006; Collins 2006], cf.: [Gulette 2010; Kudaibergenova 2016]). It is in this context that anthropologists began to conduct long-term fieldwork in post-Soviet Central Asia and to prioritise research that takes into account not only 'official' and 'unofficial' forms of Islam, shifting power-structures, crafted identities and nations and well-bounded ethnicities, but also the life-histories, experiences and everyday entanglements of Central Asian populations with such processes and categories of analysis.

A key contribution of this new anthropological works has been to bring attention to the complexity, agency and creativity of everyday life in Central Asia. In this sense *Everyday Life in Central Asia* [Sahadeo, Zanca 2009] highlights the ways in which taken-for-granted concepts such as Islam, communism, culture and identity are understood and lived differently by a great diversity of contemporary Central Asians in their day-to-day practices. The focus on lived experience is developed further by Reeves, Rasanayagam and Beyer. Their *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia* brings together

anthropological works analysing the nature of the state in Central Asia from the perspective of localised ethnographies that explore how politics are performed, practiced, invoked, and experienced [Reeves, Rasanayagam, Beyer 2014].

A series of full-length ethnographic monographs focusing on Islam in Central Asia and based on long-term anthropological fieldwork in Uzbekistan have also recently seen publication. Challenging existing literature that posits that Soviet Islam in Central Asia is peripheral, unorthodox, official and only barely survived seventy years of secularisation, Louw [Louw 2007] analysed the ways in which people in Bukhara understood and performed their ways of being Muslim and Uzbek. Rasanayagam's work in the Ferghana Valley emphasised the increasing fear of repression that Muslims faced in Uzbekistan, as well as the deployment of creativity in the face of such situation [Rasanayagam 2010]. Challenging the study of Islam as a global objectified category of analysis from which one can measure the diversity and orthodoxy of practices, Rasanayagam engaged with everyday experiences as the ground of Muslim moral reasoning and selfhood. Adams analysed the production of national culture in Uzbekistan by means of a consideration of the staging of highly controlled mass spectacles and concerts [Adams 2010]. As Reeves has already pointed out, Uzbekistan's increasingly restricted public sphere and controlled ideology have led to major difficulties for researchers wishing to work on the country [Reeves 2014]. This is also the case for Turkmenistan where such difficulties have made it basically impossible for researchers to undertake independent and long-term fieldwork.

In contrast to Uzbekistan, fieldwork in Tajikistan was possible once the violence of civil war (1992–1997) receded, and the process of strengthening state institutions based on discourses of peace building were reinforced by the government [Heathershaw 2009]. Harris' first work on gender, control and sexuality in Tajikistan [Harris 2004] was followed by her study of the Muslim youth of Dushanbe that asked whether young men were a threat to Tajikistan's post-war stability [Harris 2005]. Roche continued this debate by turning her attention to Tajikistan's youth treating this category of person not as simple risk or potential source of instability, but as creators of affirmative social and political dynamics [Roche 2014]. Earlier Roche had also analysed the collective post-war commemorations led by Tajikistan's government and the gendering effects that such commemorations have on female villagers in the Karategin Valley [Roche 2012]. In relationship to the theme of masculinity, memories of the war and post-cosmopolitanism, Marsden studied rural-urban migrants from the Pamir region, who moved from their home villages to Dushanbe and Khujand, and explored their modes of interaction with non-Pamiris — the very same actors they confronted during the war

[Marsden 2012]. Based on fieldwork conducted in Kulob southern Tajikistan, Ibañez-Tirado has explored the ways in which life-histories are narrated differently by men and women of different generations, and thus questioned the validity of the category 'post-Soviet' for locating 'alternative temporalities' experienced by Kulob residents and Central Asians more broadly [Ibañez-Tirado 2015]. Research on Tajikistan's Pamirs has also been prolific in recent years both by Western and local scholars (the latter are mentioned in more detail below). Mostowlansky's works concentrate on the Eastern Pamirs and the ways in which the new Pamir highway, running from Tajikistan to China, has had an effect in the mobility of people and goods in this region [Mostowlansky 2014b].

In Kazakhstan, anthropologists have studied violence against women, for example, how domestic violence is portrayed as being linked to cultural politics and primordial notions of ethnicity [Snajder 2005; 2007]. Werner has also explored violence against women in the form of 'bride abduction' — a practice that was banned during the Soviet period but that is currently widely interpreted as 'traditional' [Werner 2009]. The other strand of anthropological literature on Kazakhstan deals with materiality, cities and architecture. From the late 1990s, major architectural projects have been a pronounced feature of the development of the flashy new capital of Kazakhstan: Astana. Buchli has studied how, despite the government's efforts in portraying and building Astana as the epitome of urban planning, the decay in old and new buildings are the materialisation of Astana's inhabitants' dissent [Buchli 2007; 2013]. Laszczkovsky studies the ways in which the cityscape in Astana is imbued by the experiences of the city's inhabitants, and how both architecture and the everyday practices of Astana's dwellers results in specific 'aesthetics of the future' [Laszczkovsky 2011; 2014]. Linking both past and notions of future harmony, and based on research conducted in the former capital of Kazakhstan, Alexander explores the relation between urban rational planning and contingency in the making of Soviet and post-Soviet Almaty, as well as the local notions of harmony vis-a-vis failed projects of urban planning [Alexander 2007].

Scholars working in Kyrgyzstan have also been especially prolific in their contributions to theories of place, space and landscape in relationship to mobility. Madeleine Reeves' *Border Work* offers a detailed ethnography of the Ferghana Valley, where the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan coincide [Reeves 2014]. The author explores the agency of this region's inhabitants in producing the state and its international borders despite governments' efforts of demarcating and separating territories, patrolling and reinforcing check points. In a similarly complex zone bordering Uzbekistan, Liu has produced a detailed ethnography of the city of Osh [Liu 2012]. Liu analysed the embodied practices and bodily experiences of the

Uzbek communities in this city that has seen serious outbreaks of violence involving communities that identify themselves as being Kyrgyz and Uzbek in recent decades. In a series of articles, Beyer has focused on the courts of elders in both rural and urban Kyrgyzstan [Beyer 2015], and on the ways in which elders' narratives of descent and local books of genealogies are intimately linked to the landscape in Talas, north-western Kyrgyzstan [Beyer 2011]. Based on fieldwork conducted in the Toktogul Valley, Féaux de la Croix analysed the contrasting metaphors of stationed water in the reservoir formed by the Toktogul dam, and the flowing water of the working dam, the mountain pastures and the scared places [Féaux de la Croix 2011]. More recently, Féaux de la Croix has engaged with her informants' visions of the future in relationship to the privatisation of water resources and the prognosis of building more dams in this region [Féaux de la Croix 2014]. A further strand of work in the literature on Kyrgyzstan has explored the shifting understandings of what it means to be a Muslim [McBrien 2006; 2009]. Finally, new perspectives have also developed on the study of migration in the context of Kyrgyzstan. Reeves has explored largely male migration to Russia and assessed its effects in women's mobility [Reeves 2011] while Isabaeva has addressed the sociality of elderly people and children who do not migrate [Isabaeva 2011].

For some decades, the scholarship of Central Asia revolved around the conceptual unity of the nation-state, and focused on the legacies of the Soviet enterprise. The questions this scholarship attempted to investigate were buttressed by an emphasis on the exceptionality and particularities of the Soviet / post-Soviet phenomena in Asia. As a result this body of literature developed in a manner that was relatively disconnected from literature concerning broader and comparative projects across Asia and the Middle East. More recently, anthropologists have sought to bridge gaps between such bodies of regional scholarship. As Bellér-Hann and others highlight, there are historical and contemporary contacts and dynamics between China and Central Asia in the realms of intimacy, migration, trade and education that can shed light into particular forms of cultural hybridity and patterns of mobility [Bellér-Hann 2008; Hann 2011; Rippa 2014]. Similarly, Marsden developed a comparative analysis of literature of Central and Southwest Asia (mainly Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran) in order to 'encourage work on the important role that ideas of the "region" in addition to those of the local, nation-state and global are playing in adding further texture and complexity to everyday life, identity, political economy and religion in Central and Southwest Asia'. Increasingly more anthropological studies on Central Asia have engaged with themes of trans-regional movement and connectivity: Marsden and Hopkins explored processes of interaction across Cold War and colonial boundaries through

a consideration of the Afghan frontier region [Marsden, Hopkins 2011]. Mostowlansky has analysed diverse experiences of colonial rule and orientalist projections in Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan) and Ghorno-Badakhshan (Tajikistan) thus challenging the classical periodisation of colonial / postcolonial [Mostowlansky 2014a]. More recently, Marsden has turned his attention to networks of Afghan traders that both connect Central Asian to multiple Eurasian contexts, as well as to settings beyond (Yiwu, China) [Marsden 2016]. The historical and more contemporary connections between Eastern Europe (via socialism), Mongolia and Russia with Central Asia have also positively criss-crossed different area studies' scholarship (e.g.: [Hann 2002; Humphrey 2002; Humphrey, Marsden, Skvirskaja 2008; Kandiyoti 2002; Mandel, Humphrey 2002]). From an ethnographic perspective, Werner and coauthors analysed the religious experiences of Kazakhs in Western Mongolia who have not migrated to Kazakhstan in the post-socialist period [Werner et al. 2013]. Dubuisson and Genina examined the imaginaries of 'homeland' by Kazakhs in Mongolia and their notions of belonging through their moving in space and time [Dubuisson, Genina 2011]. With a focus on mobility, migration and diasporas, scholars have also contributed to new configurations of the Central Asian region in relationship to other geographical areas it has historically been associated with: Reeves has explored the perils of Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow when procuring their documents to be able to work and live there [Reeves 2013], and Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado have studied the importance of mixed marriages to the anchoring of Afghan traders in Ukraine [Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado 2015]. From a more inter-disciplinary perspective, yet emphasising globalising processes of inequality and mobility, Laruelle has edited a volume on labour migration in Central Asia [Laruelle 2013].

The growing interests by scholars in trans-regional and trans-national connections have developed in the wider intellectual context of critiques of area studies. Area or regional studies, understood as a way of producing inter-disciplinary knowledge about particular geographies and cultural areas of the world, have been at the source of constant debate in the humanities and social sciences for at least the last twenty years. These debates have addressed the challenges of 'fostering particularism <...> ideological, theoretical or merely parochial clientelism' [Guyer 2004: 501], the impact of reproducing 'gatekeeping concepts' (e.g. caste for India [Appadurai 1986]) or 'zones of theory' (e.g. Islam, gender and segmentation for the Middle East [Abu-Lughod 1989]), and the necessity of grounding globalising phenomena into the particularities of a specific region's history of inequalities [Eqbal 2003]. Area studies have also been criticised because of the way academic institutions are organised and funded, and because of the disparities and topo-

ographies of knowledge that these produce [Tlostanova 2015] (cf. [Amsler 2007]).

Tlostanova explains the problems of production of knowledge as a phenomenon of ‘coloniality’ of the ‘modern’ West (or the rich ‘global North’) aiming to study, interpret and theorise ‘humankind’ thus creating an ontological ‘other’. These hierarchies of knowledge-production, she suggests, have ignored post-Soviet spaces and thinkers, and have thus resulted in a ‘post-Soviet condition’ being determined by ‘external imperial and double colonial difference transparent in the West / East and North / South division’ [Tlostanova 2015: 46]. Indeed, one could interpret area studies scholarship as a Western construct for Western audiences about non-Western societies. But the problems of asymmetrical knowledge-production cannot simply be reduced to a formula West (‘global North’) against the rest, or to Tlostanova’s conclusion that ‘post-Soviet’ space / scholars are being held by their Western counterparts as being unable to think. On the one hand, such a line of argument oversimplifies the historic relationship between different centres of scholarly knowledge production and new trends and networks of funding that do not originate in the West / North (e.g. Ibañez-Tirado’s research on Tajikistan has been funded in the past by CONACYT-Mexico). On the other hand, it also fails to take into account important changes in the field of Central Asian studies. The scholarship produced by Ismaili Pamiris about their own home-region in Tajikistan’s Badakhshan Autonomous Mountainous Region, for example, questions the relevance of one-dimensional theories of the dominance of Western colonial knowledge to the study of Central Asia. Such research is often sponsored by the Aga Khan Foundation International Scholarship Programme, and defies the categorisation of being ‘Western / North’. Although this programme generates other types of inequalities within the Central Asian region (e.g. non-Ismaili Tajik students complain that they cannot aspire to obtain scholarships and funding that Ismaili-Pamiris are able to aspire to), Pamiri scholars have produced excellent works localised in the historical and geographical particularities of Pamiri villages, yet that also contribute to broader literature on the history of Muslim societies. Engaging with research conducted in Tajik, Wakhi, Russian and English languages, for example, Iloliev’s work analyses the life of the Ismaili religious scholar Mubarak-i-Wakhani, and through the works’ of this scholar, Iloliev explores indigenous Pamiri perception of Ismailism [Iloliev 2008]. Furthermore, the work of Mastinbekov focuses on the history of religious functionaries in Pamir vis-a-vis processes of secularisation brought about by Soviet rule in this region and beyond [Mastinbekov 2014].

As Mirsepassi and coauthors put it, ‘in the absence of the detailed knowledge that area studies have generated about regions of the

world that <...> are considered to have no policy relevance', parts of the world that are widely conceived of as having little utilitarian value would likely not have attracted the degree of research interest that they have done [Mirsepassi et al. 2003: 2]. While now, many universities and academic institutions in the UK are seeing cuts in funding for social sciences, humanities, as well as language training. Area studies constitute an important space for language training and interdisciplinarity, as well, more broadly, for grounded approaches to the study of globalising processes on particular world-regions. This would all be placed at risk by the further weakening of the area studies paradigm. This is, perhaps, especially the case in a context where hard sciences that are judged as having a 'direct impact' on society and economy, and globalised soft disciplines such as Business and Management, proliferate. In this context, rather than advocating for the disappearance of Central Asian studies or yet another attempt to reinterpret the region's geography or the nation-states that make it up, there is an urgent need to ensure as plural and flexible understandings of the region as possible, for doing so will allow it to assume its maximum theoretical value. As Sidaway suggests, in order to transcend traditional area studies, we have the 'broader intellectual task of recovering the interconnected spaces of the past and apprehending those of the globalizing present' [Sidaway 2012: 507]. Finally, we advocate that recent anthropological scholarship on Central Asia has been, and can continue to be, successful at capturing the wider trans-regional imagination not by emphasising the region's 'landlocked' geography or the exceptionality of Soviet / post-Soviet history, but by focusing on Central Asia's vantage point of connectivity, mobility and hybridity, and on the agency, localised experiences and undergoing inequalities of Central Asia's populations in the context of globalising processes in the broader Asian expanse.

References

- Abashin S., 'Nation-Construction of Soviet Central Asia', Bassin M., Kelly C. (eds.), *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*. Cambridge: University Press, 2012, pp. 150–68.
- Abu-Lughod L., 'Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1989, vol. 18, pp. 267–306.
- Adams L., *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*. Duke: University Press Books, 2010, 256 pp.
- Alexander C., 'Almaty: Rethinking the Public Sector', Alexander C., Buchli V., Humphrey C. (eds.), *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia*. London: UCL, 2007, pp. 70–101.
- Amsler S., *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia: Science between Marx and the Market*. London; New York: Routledge, 2007, 188 pp.
- Appadurai A., 'Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1986, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 356–61.

- Bellér-Hann I., *Community Matters in Xinjiang. Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008, 476 pp.
- Bellér-Hann I., Cristina Cesaro M., Harris R., Smith Finley J. (eds.), *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007, 276 pp.
- Bennigsen A., Wimbush S., *Muslims of the Soviet Empire*. London: Hurst, 1985, 294 pp.
- Bergne P., *The Birth of Tajikistan: National Identity and the Origins of the Republic*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, 178 pp.
- Bershidsky L., 'Kyrzбекistan Isn't Funny', *Bloomberg View*, 2015, January 9. <<http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-01-09/kyrgyzbekistan-isnt-funny>>.
- Beyer J., 'Settling Descent: Place Making and Genealogy in Talas, Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 2011, vol. 30, no. 3–4, pp. 455–68.
- Beyer J., 'Customizations of Law: Courts of Elders (Aksakal Courts) in Rural and Urban Kyrgyzstan', *POLAR, Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 2015, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 53–71.
- Buchli V. A., 'Astana: Materiality and the City', Alexander C., Buchli V., Humphrey C. (eds.), *Urban Life in Post-Soviet Asia*. London: UCL, 2007, pp. 40–69.
- Buchli V. A., 'Surface Engagements in Astana', Adamson G., Kelly V. (eds.), *Surface Tensions*. Manchester: University Press, 2013, pp. 84–95.
- Carrère d'Encausse H., 'Islam in the Soviet Union: Attempts at Modernization', *Religion in Communist Lands*, 1974, vol. 2, no. 4–5, pp. 12–20.
- Caroe O., *Soviet Empire: The Turks of Central Asia and Stalinism*. London: McMillan, 1953, 300 pp.
- Chari S., Verdery K., 'Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism and Ethnography after the Cold War', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2009, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 6–34.
- Cole J. R. I., Kandiyoti D., 'Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia: Introduction', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2002, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 189–203.
- Collins K., *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 376 pp.
- Dubuisson E., Genina A., 'Claiming an Ancestral Homeland: Kazakh Pilgrimage and Migration in Inner Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, 2011, no. 3–4, pp. 469–85.
- Eickelman D., *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998, 384 pp.
- Eqbal A., 'Knowledge, Place and Power: A Critique of Globalization', Mirsepassi A., Basu A., Weaver F. (eds.), *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World. Recasting the Area Studies Debate*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003, pp. 216–29.
- Féaux de la Croix J., 'Moving Metaphors We Live by: Water and Flow in the Social Sciences and around Hydro-electric Dams in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 2011, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 487–502.

- Féaux de la Croix J., “‘Bringing Lights to the Yurts’: Visions of Future and Belonging Surrounding Pastures and Hydropower in Kyrgyzstan”, *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 2014, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 49–67.
- Gross J. (ed.), *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992, 240 pp.
- Gulette D., *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State and ‘Tribalism’*. London: Brill, 2010, 272 pp.
- Guyer J. I., ‘Anthropology in Area Studies’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2004, vol. 33, pp. 449–523.
- Hann C. (ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge, 2002, 360 pp.
- Hann C., ‘Smith in Beijing, Stalin in Urumchi: Ethnicity, Political Economy and Violence in Xinjiang, 1759–2009’, *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 2011, vol. 60, pp. 108–23.
- Harris C., *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*. London: Pluto Press, 2004, 216 pp.
- Harris C., *Muslim Youth: Tensions and Transitions in Tajikistan*. London: Westview Press, 2005, 208 pp.
- Heathershaw J., *Post-conflict Tajikistan*. London: Routledge, 2009, 240 pp.
- Heathershaw J., Megoran N., ‘Contesting Danger: A New Agenda for Policy and Scholarship on Central Asia’, *International Affairs*, 2011, vol. 87, no. 3, pp. 589–612.
- Hirsch F., *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2005, 392 pp.
- Humphrey C., ‘Does the Category “Postsocialist” still Make Sense?’, Hann C. (ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 12–15.
- Humphrey C., Marsden M., Skvirskaja V., ‘Cosmopolitanism and the City: Interaction and Coexistence in Bukhara’, Mayaram S. (ed.), *The Other Global City*. New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 202–31.
- Ibañez-Tirado D., “‘How Can I Be Post-Soviet if I Was Never Soviet?’ Rethinking Categories of Time and Social Change — a Perspective from Kulob, Southern Tajikistan’, *Central Asian Survey*, 2015, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 190–203.
- Ilkhamov A., ‘Archaeology of Uzbek Identity’, *Central Asian Survey*, 2004, vol. 23, no. 3–4, pp. 289–326.
- Iliiev A., *The Ismaili-Sufi Sage of Pamir: Mubarak-i Wakhani and the Esoteric Tradition of the Pamiri Muslims*. New York: Cambria Press, 2008, 260 pp.
- Isabaeva E., ‘Leaving to Enable Others to Remain: Remittances and New Moral Economies of Migration in Southern Kyrgyzstan’, *Central Asian Survey*, 2011, vol. 30, no. 3/4, pp. 541–54.
- Kalinovsky A. M., ‘Not Some British Colony in Africa: The Politics of Decolonization and Modernization in Soviet Central Asia, 1955–1964’, *Ab Imperio*, 2013, vol. 2, pp. 191–222.

- Kandiyoti D., 'Postcolonialism Compared: Potentials and Limitations in the Middle East and Central Asia', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2002, vol. 34, pp. 279–97.
- Kandiyoti D., Azimova N., 'The Communal and the Sacred: Women's World of Ritual in Uzbekistan', *Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2004, vol. 10, pp. 327–49.
- Khalid A., *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 360 pp.
- Khalid A., *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2007a, 253 pp.
- Khalid A., 'Introduction: Locating the (Post-) Colonial in Soviet History', *Central Asian Survey*, 2007b, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 465–73.
- Kudaibergenova D., 'Between the State and the Artists: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in the Formation of Ideas of the Nation in Central Asia', *Nationality Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 2016, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 225–246.
- Laruelle M. (ed.), *Migration and Social Upheaval as the Face of Globalization in Central Asia*. Leiden: Brill, 2013, 413 pp.
- Laszczkowski M., 'Building the Future: Construction, Temporality, and Politics in Astana', *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 2011, vol. 60, pp. 77–92.
- Laszczkowski M., 'State Building(s). Built Forms, Materiality and the State in Astana', Reeves M., Rasanayagam J., Beyer J. (eds.), *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 149–72.
- Liu M., 'Central Asia in the Post-Cold War World', *Annual Reviews in Anthropology*, 2011, vol. 40, pp. 115–31.
- Liu M., *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012, 328 pp.
- Louw E. M., *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. London; New York: Routledge, 2007, 224 pp.
- Mandel R., Humphrey C. (eds.), *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Post-Socialism*. Oxford: Berg, 2002, 240 pp.
- Marsden M., "'For Badakshan — the Country without Borders!": Village Cosmopolitans, Urban-Rural Networks and the Post-Cosmopolitan City in Tajikistan', Humphrey C., Skvirskaja V. (eds.), *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2012, pp. 217–38.
- Marsden M., *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*. London; New York: Hurst & Co; Oxford University Press, 2015, 480 pp.
- Marsden M., 'Crossing Eurasia: Trans-regional Afghan Trading Networks in China and Beyond', *Central Asian Survey*, 2016, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 1–15.
- Marsden M., Hopkins B., *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 256 pp.
- Marsden M., Ibañez-Tirado D., 'Repertoires of Family Life and the

- Anchoring of Afghan Trading Networks in Ukraine', *History and Anthropology*, 2015, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 145–64.
- Masterbekov O., *Leadership and Authority in Central Asia. The Ismaili Community in Tajikistan*. New York; London: Routledge, 2014, 202 pp.
- McBrien J., 'Listening to the Wedding Speaker: Discussing Religion and Culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 2006, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 341–57.
- McBrien J., 'Mukadas's Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2009, vol. 15, no. S1, pp. S127–S144.
- Megoran L., 'The Critical Geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley Boundary Dispute, 1999–2000', *Political Geography*, 2004, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 731–64.
- Mirsepasi A., Basu A., Weaver F., 'Introduction: Knowledge, Power and Culture', Mirsepasi A., Basu A., Weaver F. (eds.), *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World. Recasting the Area Studies Debate*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003, pp. 1–24.
- Mitchell T., 'Deterritorialization and the Crisis of Social Sciences', Mirsepasi A., Basu A., Weaver F. (eds.), *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World. Recasting the Area Studies Debate*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003, pp. 148–70.
- Morrison A., 'Applied Orientalism in British India and Tsarist Turkestan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2009, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 619–47.
- Mostowlansky T., 'Where Empires Meet: Orientalism and Marginality at the Former Russo-British Frontier', Bornet P., Gorshenina S. (eds.), *L'Orientalisme des marges: éclairages de l'Inde et de la Russie. Études des Lettres*, 2014a, no. 2–3, pp. 179–96.
- Mostowlansky T., 'The Road Not Taken: Enabling and Limiting Mobility in the Eastern Pamirs', *Internationales Asienforum / International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 2014b, vol. 45, no. 1–2, pp. 153–70.
- Myer W., *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia*. London: Routledge; Curzon, 2002, 263 pp.
- Naumkin V., *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle*. Lanham; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 336 pp.
- Rasanayagam J., *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 296 pp.
- Rashid A., *Jihad: the Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, 320 pp.
- Reeves M., 'Staying Put? Towards a Relational Politics of Mobility at a Time of Migration', *Central Asian Survey*, 2011, vol. 30, no. 3–4, pp. 555–75.
- Reeves M., 'Clean Fake: Authenticating Documents and Persons in Migrant Moscow', *American Ethnologist*, 2013, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 508–24.
- Reeves M., *Border Work. Culture and Society After Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014, 292 pp.

- Reeves M., Rasanayagam J., Beyer J. (eds.), *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, 332 pp.
- Rippa A., 'From Uyghurs to Kashgaris (and Back?). Migration and Cross-border Interactions between Xinjiang and Pakistan', *Crossroads Asia Working Papers Series*, 2014, vol. 3, pp. 1–30.
- Roche S., 'Gender in Narrative Memory. The Example of Civil War Narratives in Tajikistan', *Ab Imperio*, 2012, no. 3, pp. 279–307.
- Roche S., *Domesticating Youth. Youth Bulges and their Socio-political Implications in Tajikistan*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2014, 296 pp.
- Roy O., *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2000, 272 pp.
- Sahadeo J., Zanca R. (eds.), *Everyday Life in Central Asia. Past and Present*. Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009, 424 pp.
- Schatz E., *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of 'Blood' in Kazakhstan*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002, 280 pp.
- Sidaway J. D., 'Long Live Trans-area Studies!', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 2012, vol. 168, no. 4, pp. 506–8.
- Snajder E., 'Gender, Power, and the Performance of Justice: Muslim Women's Responses to Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan', *American Ethnologist*, 2005, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 294–311.
- Snajder E., 'Ethnicizing the Subject: Domestic Violence and the Politics of Primordialism in Kazakhstan', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2007, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 603–20.
- Stahl K., *British and Soviet Colonial Systems*. London: Faber & Faber, 1951, 114 pp.
- Tlostanova M., 'Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge. External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference', *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 2015, no. 1(2), p. 38–58.
- Werner C., 'Bride Abduction in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a Shift Towards Patriarchy through Local Discourses of Shame and Tradition', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2009, vol. 15, pp. 314–31.
- Werner C., Barcus H., Brede N., 'Discovering a Sense of Well-Being through the Revival of Islam: Profiles of Kazakh Imams in Western Mongolia', *Central Asian Survey*, 2013, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 527–41.
- Wheeler G., 'Race Relation in Soviet Muslim Asia', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 1960, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 93–105.

TOKHIR KALANDAROV

I would first like to thank *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* for inviting me to take part in the discussion. It seems to me that one can give a positive answer to the question whether regional studies are needed today. In the first place, the institutionalisation of regional research in the form of various centres and departments speaks for itself. Secondly, it is beyond doubt that the age of the encyclopédistes is long gone, and anthropologists understand better than anyone how important the separate elements of social life, culture, etc. are against the background of the global world order. A researcher cannot seriously study the same problem (for example, migration) by analysing it on the global scale or in different countries. In the same way, the theoretical results of research concerning one country or one region (say, again, on migration) will not necessarily 'work' for another region. For example, the conclusion that the hard and dangerous work done by miners in various African countries encourages them to sexual promiscuity and as a result leads to an increase in the number of people infected with HIV 'does not work' for other regions.

The recommendations of scientists concerning the prevention of HIV and AIDS usually include the use of contraceptives. Logic suggests that teaching schoolchildren how to use them would be a correct step in this direction. However, many Kyrgyzes, for example, have been witnesses to how, after the overthrow of the Akaev regime, Kyrgyz television broadcast footage of his daughter teaching schoolchildren and young people how to use condoms. This, of course, was shown for no other reason than to discredit the daughter of the first president of Kyrgyzstan.

Regional studies require of the researcher not only a good knowledge of the language or languages, but also an understanding of the regional context. Experience has shown that those academic institutes and universities that have special sections or departments devoted

Tokhir Kalandarov
 Institute of Ethnology
 and Anthropology,
 Russian Academy of Sciences,
 Moscow, Russia
 tohir_s70@mail.ru

to particular regions as a rule produce good regional specialists. Unfortunately, in many Russian universities and humanities institutes the tradition of preparing qualified specialists in the regions of Central Asia and Kazakhstan — historians, literary specialists, ethnologists, and so on — has already been consigned to oblivion. (I use the term ‘Central Asia’ deliberately; more of this anon.) For example, the Central Asia and Kazakhstan section of Russia’s primary anthropological and ethnological centre, the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, has been abolished. The optimisation of expenses by means of the closure or amalgamation of whole departments with a long history of successful operation is by no means the best solution to the problem.

The languages of the peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan are practically no longer studied in our universities. Unfortunately, the traditions of the outstanding Soviet ethnographical school have almost left the scene of Russian scholarship. And this school was equipped with decent grants for research students and salaries for scholars, with knowledge of the language of the people being studied, prolonged residence amongst that people, participant observation, comparative analysis of the data obtained by the methods of related disciplines such as linguistics, archaeology, religious studies, folklore studies, etc. For this reason contemporary students of the problems of migration, for example, often arrive at false conclusions. Thus one young Russian researcher observing immigrants visiting a café serving eastern food in Moscow shaking the hands of the waiters attributed this to the existence of firm connections going back to their homeland. If she had observed similar small cafés along the main roads of Central Asia, she could have seen just such scenes. In the course of a day waiters will shake hands with hundreds, if not thousands of customers, although they are not connected with them in any way, except by a shared culture (the common Asiatic rules of politeness). Shaking the hand of someone one hardly knows, or does not know at all, when he enters a café, tea house, etc., is a generally accepted norm of behaviour in the Central Asian republics. In this situation the waiter, doorman or other employee of the café plays the role of the host, and as a visitor you are obliged by behavioural etiquette to greet him. In such a way superficial observation may cause an incorrect interpretation.

Our present ‘grant-based scholarship’ restricts the time that a researcher can spend in the midst of the community that he is studying, opportunities for learning the language, for understanding the underlying foundations of another culture, and so on. In the study of the processes of migration limited time, superficial understanding of the culture and ignorance of the language of the region or people being studied make it difficult to establish confidential relations with informants, which is reinforced by the

active use of intermediaries and interpreters. As a result the voice of the migrants themselves is missing from contemporary studies of migration.

At the same time, of course, modern scholarship cannot function without extensive international collaboration. But this also has its complications. The exiguous financing of anthropology (and of all other subjects) by the Central Asian republics (with the possible exception of Kazakhstan) has placed 'local researchers' in a disadvantageous position in comparison with colleagues from Russia, Western Europe and the USA. Well-financed American and Western European researchers feel superior to their Central Asian colleagues. As a result, labour and money are unequally divided in the course of joint research projects. The Central Asian specialists for the most part do the donkey work (organising and conducting interviews, analysis of data using Atlas.ti, SPSS, etc.), but their names do not always even appear in the list of authors of publications in English. At best the foreign author of the article expresses his gratitude to them, but sometimes he 'forgets' even to do this. Very often the Central Asian researchers taking part in such joint projects do not know the size of the grant awarded for a project, and receive the money for the work they have done in an envelope at the discretion of their foreign colleague.

At the same time, without international collaboration regional specialists and their work end up 'stewing in their own juice'. Publications in the national languages of the Central Asian republics remain outside the wider academic community's field of vision. Not all the academic journals of the Central Asian republics have access to RINTs, Scopus, Web of Science, etc. And this in turn does not help to increase the citation index of researchers working in the Central Asian region. In other words, a Russian, European or American scholar working on Tajikistan, for example, is cited by his Tajik colleagues, but this is not counted in citation indexes, etc.

Speaking of the territorial boundaries of Central Asian studies, it is worth mentioning that the literal translation into Russian as 'Middle Asia' (*Tsentrálnaya Aziya*) does not entirely correspond to the geography of Kazakhstan and the four Central Asian republics. Geographically 'Middle Asia' has little to do with such republics as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, but rather with Mongolia and China. For us — ethnologists and cultural anthropologists — it is the historico-cultural definition of a region that is chiefly significant, and in this context Mongolia and China have least of all to do with the Central Asian republics. The Russian school of geography has two terms to denominate this extensive region of the earth: 'Central Asia' and 'Middle Asia'. When our English-speaking colleagues say 'Central Asia' they mean Central, rather than Middle Asia.

It seems to me that this problem cannot be solved by decree, since the academic elite of the Central Asian republics is not ready to give up the terms that have been traditionally used. In any case, both terms have a right to exist, all the more in that the progressive intensification of international links between regional specialists in Central Asia and their colleagues abroad is gradually wiping out disagreements about what these terms mean.

In answer to the third question, it must certainly be acknowledged that the Islamic factor plays an important role in the region. But it is not the only one. Nowadays anthropologists working on Islam in the region are finding that it is acquiring a more and more political character. Consequently Islam is withdrawing from the field of vision of anthropology and religious studies, and moving into the domain of political science. The present situation in Arab countries and elsewhere gives us to understand that consciously or unconsciously (when it is imposed from outside) Islam is perceived as the only method of political struggle in these countries. Anthropologists have always been interested in diversity in Muslim society, with its different rituals, cults, interrelations, etc. As for political Islam, as we have seen, it does not tolerate any form of pluralism. The more radical the group, the firmer the position it occupies in the political struggle. Radical groups, which are now prohibited in the Central Asian republics, openly stress their politicised character.

Islam in Central Asia takes the form of a struggle for the purity of religion. The *Salafiyyah* movement essentially calls for a return to the origins of Islam. To some extent the role of the Salafis is to set the fashion in the Islamic world in the region in question. There is a process of 'certification' of the Muslims of Central Asia on the part of the Salafi: they determine who is a 'proper' Muslim and who is not. The legitimisation of spirituality in the region is becoming more and more dependent on the visible aspect of rites and ceremonies. This side of Muslim life could be of interest to anthropologists, but the stand-off between Islamic 'traditionalists' and 'reformers', and their mutual enmity, are more likely to frighten my colleagues off than to excite their interest. It is very difficult for scholars studying these processes to distance themselves from what is happening and to avoid the displeasure of one or other of the warring parties.

One must not omit to mention that over the last decades some very good anthropological works analysing the problems of Islam in the region have come out. These are the works of S. Abashin, F. Bliss, E. Krivets, J. Nobel, O. Mastibekov, J. Rasanayagam, R. Rakhimov, M. Rezvan, M. Reeves, A. Khalid, M. Louw and others. At the same time Muslim theologians in the region are not paying proper attention to scholarly publications on Islamic studies. Here it is not a matter of the language barrier (though this is a significant obstacle, since the

latter write primarily in Russian and English, and the former in the local languages and Arabic) so much as of methodological approaches to the topic. The local *ulema* concentrate rather on the salvific character (at the Last Judgment) of one or another tendency in Islam. It is understandable that anthropologists cannot set themselves such aims. The result is that there is no discussion between academic specialists and Islamic authorities.

Besides Islam, there is a great deal in the region which, in the present conditions of globalisation and constantly changing social, political and cultural realia, is of great academic value to specialists in various disciplines. In particular, this includes the intensive migration processes and their effect on socio-cultural models; medical anthropology; the anthropology of the Central Asian village / town; the anthropology of humour, and much else. So the 'Central Asia field' awaits its research 'ploughmen'.

NATALYA KOSMARSKAYA

The topic proposed by the editorial committee for discussion is very important and at the same time in many respects very sensitive and painful (I mean not so much the subject of regional studies as such, as the geographical focus, Middle Asia, chosen as an example).

My academic fate has been constantly connected with this region. I am one of that generation of Soviet scholars who after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the aims, signposts, criteria and conditions of academic activity totally broke down, were forced either to abandon their profession or to reconstruct themselves radically and find a new sphere in which to apply their efforts (from the point of view of discipline and / or region). I shall briefly describe how and why this revolution took place in my own academic life: this is significant for what I shall have to say afterwards. In the Soviet period, when I studied the evolution of village communities in Tropical Africa at the micro level (gender relations, division of labour within the family, the effect of migration on the extended and nuclear family, and so on) I was in fact studying social anthropology, but, alas, through the secondary research of Western scholars (which, to be fair, was very accessible at that time, albeit sometimes

Natalya Kosmarskaya

Institute of Oriental Studies,
Russian Academy of Sciences,
Moscow, Russia
kosmarskis@gmail.com

through the libraries' notorious 'special collections'). Lacking any connections in the party or the *nomenklatura*, I had no possibility of doing fieldwork in Africa (especially when, during the directorship of Andrey Gromyko, the Africa Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences became a 'branch of the Foreign Ministry').

I first visited a Western university in 1991 (before the collapse of the USSR), and after I had delivered a few lectures there I understood that, whatever the quality of their research or the number of monographs they had written, anyone who had not worked in the field would never become a full member of the international academic community in the disciplines that interested me. Therefore I took the first opportunity I could to go out into the field, this time to study 'what had been my country', where there were interesting processes taking place connected with ethnicity and nationalism, and, at the lowest level, with the adaptation of a multitude of different people to completely new socio-cultural realities. In 1992 I went to Kirgizia, thereby choosing my field and area of work for years to come (later, the other country that I regularly visited for fieldwork was to be Uzbekistan).

If the topic itself is, overall, extremely relevant, the way it has been expressed by the editorial committee (particularly in the first two questions) seems to me somewhat artificial and (if it is the Middle Asian countries that have been chosen as an example for the discussion of regional research) divorced from Russian reality, both academic and social.

I shall begin by saying that I was highly surprised by the choice of this region as an example for the discussion in the journal of the state and prospects of regional studies in anthropology. This is, after all, a journal which, despite its 'dual citizenship', is published in Russia, a country where the number of people studying this region could be counted on the fingers of both hands, or perhaps even of one. I should explain that by this sort of scholar I mean people who regularly conduct sufficiently lengthy fieldwork in the region and present the results of their researches at conferences of various kinds, including international conferences, and are also active in publishing scholarly texts on the subject of the region both in Russia and in the West. The quite numerous 'experts' who give lively commentaries on current political events in the countries of Middle Asia on various websites should not, I suggest, be included amongst such scholars.

Anyone who has any sort of 'academic' relationship with the region knows how extremely underdeveloped Middle Asian studies are in Russia. By 'underdeveloped' I mean the state of many parameters: the system of educational and research institutions; the number of active scholars; the number of publications, completed projects, seminars and conferences; the existence of specialised journals, and so forth. The situation, which I have been observing over many years,

regrettably shows practically no improvement. The Central Asia Section which used to exist at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences was 'reduced' a few years ago to a 'group', and became part of the Centre for Asian and Pacific Research. At the Centre for the Study of Central Asia and the Caucasus at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (where I have the honour of working), one can barely find two or three people who belong to the category of scholars described above. In 2008 a Department of Central Asia and the Caucasus was set up inside the Institute for the Countries of Asia and Africa at Moscow University, but it is still too soon to talk of its contribution to increasing the number of researchers.

It is hard to find partners for any proposed project; it is very hard to find authors. Having been for a long time the deputy editor of the interdisciplinary journal *Diaspora* (published since 1999), I can bear witness: the many attempts to 'cover' a Middle Asian topic with the help of an author from Russia, let alone put together a special issue devoted to the region (for example, on migration and diasporas in Middle Asia) usually ended in failure, so that we either published articles by authors from the region, or translated the works of Western scholars into Russian.

Properly speaking, a discussion of the reasons why this situation has come about and the way out of it goes beyond the topic proposed by *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. I have touched upon this subject only in order to show that we are in a situation in which we must be thankful for what little we have. It would of course be wonderful if Middle Asian studies could have, and constantly extend, its own 'home' in Russia, 'in the form of separate institutes, centres, departments and academic societies, and in the form of separate degree programmes and research and publication projects'. But for now this is only a dream, so we shall be glad of any display of interest in the region on the part of young or established anthropologists, ethnographers or 'qualitative' sociologists. The question of 'What to call you?', that is, whether we should speak of 'Middle Asia' or 'Middle Eurasia', for example, whether we should accommodate this research within a precisely defined geographical framework or include it under the umbrella of 'Russian Studies', 'Slavonic Studies' or 'Asian Studies' is also, in the present situation, not one of vital importance.

Our Western colleagues may, on the basis of their experience in their own countries, possibly offer some weighty arguments in favour of one or other of these variants. But it seems to me that the problem of the formal bureaucratic classification of Middle Asian studies is not a particularly significant one in the West either; people have a reasonably flexible approach to such questions, and no 'confusion' arises. In France, for example, specialists in Middle Asia and in other

Asian countries as well as those, strange though it may seem at first sight, in Central and Eastern Europe and in Russia, traditionally study at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO). But as far as France is concerned, all these places really are in 'the East'! Also in France, people studying Central Asia may be found at the Centre d'Études Turques, Ottomanes, Balkaniques et Centrasiatiques (CETOBAC), and likewise at the Centre d'étude des mondes russe, caucasien et centre-européen (CERCEC). In Britain, students, research students and scholars with a professional interest in Middle Asia are traditionally accommodated in various universities' departments and centres for Russian and East European Studies.¹ The annual conference of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) usually has a section devoted to this subject area.

As for each individual scholar and his or her search for a professional identity, I suggest that we are free to choose independently the correlation of 'problem' or 'region' that best fits any particular element of our research. This may be expressed in terms of content (choice of topics, methods, 'fields' and conceptual approaches) or formally (choice of journals for publication of one's work, conferences to attend, and so on). There is a certain unacknowledged opinion that journals devoted to a particular set of problems have a higher rating than those devoted to a particular region. This is not entirely true: in particular, the *Russian Review* and *Slavic Review* are more highly valued than, for example, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, which is also a highly respectable journal. Moreover, ratings are dynamic, and the main thing is that publication in any journal which is highly placed (even if not the highest placed) in various international ratings is extremely prestigious.

It is appropriate here to address the question raised by the editors about 'the feeling of the marginality of their field experienced by many specialists in the region'. It is indeed an important problem, but in my opinion the reasons for feeling marginalised are such that it would be hard to overcome it by having 'the right signs' on the doors of departments, institutes, etc. In my own professional life I experienced a sense of alienation from what I had devoted so many years to precisely in the situation which I have described above. It became clear to me that it would hardly be possible to make any progress, or even remain in the profession, without access to the field. As far as I can judge, in post-Soviet Russia limited access to the field, or a complete lack of access, for financial reasons (travel to Middle Asia is extremely expensive) had become a heavy trial for many scholars who cannot imagine themselves working without contact with a field which is, besides, now on the other side of a state frontier.

¹ The exception is London, where it is part of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). [Eds.].

In this case, the 'sense of being marginalised' is due not to the underdeveloped state of regional (Middle Asian) studies as such (of which I have written above), but to the lamentable state of Russian scholarship overall. Besides the chronic lack of funding, it is worth pointing out that the extent to which Russian scholars working in the humanities are included within the international academic community still leaves a lot to be desired. In a paper on the difficulties and prospects of the development of anthropological research in our country delivered at the plenary session of the Eleventh Congress of Anthropologists and Ethnologists of Russia (Ekaterinburg, July 2015), D. A. Funk advised everyone in the hall to ask themselves the following questions (I quote from memory):

1. How often are you asked to review an article for a Western journal?
2. How often do you publish your own work there?
3. Do the lists of sources and publications in your work include (recent) publications in foreign languages?
4. How often do you speak at international conferences?

I think that for many Russian scholars these questions are purely rhetorical. Our academic communities' inward focus, which is hard to overcome and tends towards isolation, and the resulting subjective and objective marginalisation are much more harmful both to the conditions in which research (including regional research) is conducted and to its quality than any dissension over the name of the region or the lack of specialised departments and journals.

However, there are other aspects to the problem of regional (Middle Asian) studies, and these, perhaps, deserve our professional attention, although they are to some extent 'uncomfortable' for public discussion. I shall formulate a few such questions:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of looking at the region 'from inside' (when it is studied by scholars who live there) and 'from outside' (in our case, from Russia or Western countries)?
2. How true is it that studies of Middle Asia by Russian scholars willy-nilly reflect a 'metropolitan' view, and are therefore less 'objective' than results 'from outside' obtained by our Western colleagues?
3. Finally, to what extent is it a fact that access to certain 'fields' (regions, research topics, etc.) may be impeded by the presence of closely-knit communities of those people whom we call 'native anthropologists'?

In conclusion I shall try to answer the editors' third question. In my opinion the Islamic factor is very far from being the 'chief peculiarity' of the secular states of Middle Asia. If we were to follow that logic,

we should have to put forward Orthodoxy as the chief peculiarity of Russia and therefore an essential attribute of ‘Russian studies’. But if we are formulating ‘current topics’, then the Islamic factor will inevitably be a leading one, considering certain geopolitical problems (the revolutionary convulsions of the Middle East, the spread of ISIL, which is banned in Russia, and so on).

As for the ‘informative questions’ in the framework of Middle Asian studies, I should like to take the ‘general and particular’ nexus as my starting-point. Judging by my own observations over many years, researchers from the region itself are more orientated towards the ‘particular’ in their choice of topics and direction of work: ethnographic description and analysis of various manifestations of the ethno-cultural peculiarities of the peoples who inhabit the region, above all those after whom the various republics are named. This situation is easily explained if one takes into account the impulse of the imperial centre, manifested with varying degrees of intensity and in varying forms, to level out the ‘national element’ in the territories which now make up Middle Asia.

My own research preferences have always been for the ‘general’: what connects the region that interests us with the non-Asiatic part of the former USSR, above all Russia. They are connected in many senses: at various periods of history; physically and symbolically; at various levels of the social hierarchy; through the heritage of the past (not always a fortunate one, however) and through mutual need in the present; through higher geopolitical interests and the interwoven fates of ordinary people, historical memory and economic collaboration; through mentalities and language preferences which they have to a large extent in common... In my opinion, this approach to Middle Asian studies, if they are pursued from three directions — ‘from inside’ and ‘from outside’, through the efforts of scholars from the region, Russian and Western colleagues — will contribute a great deal to a profound and stereoscopic vision of our knowledge of post-Soviet societies and their regional specifics.

EMIL NASRITDINOV

Constructing Central Asia from Central Asia

Introduction: Voice from under the microscope

Organisers of this forum are asking interesting questions: Is there such thing as Central Asia? Does it exist as a region? Should it fall under the Russian / Slavic or Middle Eastern Studies or should it be studied separately? Being a Central

Emil Nasritdinov
American University
of Central Asia,
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
emilzn@gmail.com

Asian myself, I feel challenged listening to how my right for existence as a resident and as a scholar is questioned. It has been a quarter of a century since my country — Kyrgyzstan — became independent. Ethnic Russians today make up less than 7 % of its population, while the only group representing the Middle East in Kyrgyzstan is ethnic Turks and they make up about 0.7 %. On what grounds should we be considered a part of either of these two worlds? I am strongly tempted to label the questions of this forum as ethnocentric or even imperialist. Looking into the lens of the large microscope focusing on me from St Petersburg, I want to say: 'Yes, I exist! I am Central Asian, I am Kyrgyzstani and I have my own voice!'

Having said that, however, I understand that my voice and the voices of my Central Asian colleagues are not very loud... yet. Central Asian scholarship, particularly in such fields as anthropology, is still searching for its own identity and struggling to write and publish. Reasons are many. To understand them, we need to look at the discipline from a historical perspective.

State of anthropology in the region

Anthropology is a very new discipline just now making its way into the academic sphere in Central Asia. During Soviet times, the recognised disciplines were ethnography and archaeology and they were taught as subfields in the departments of history. Graduates of such programmes often became history teachers. These disciplines were significantly different from the classical schools of anthropology in the West. Research carried out by the Soviet ethnographers was very descriptive in nature and not very analytical or discursive. Its main focus was on ethnic traditions and customs, which were presented as elements of the past fading under the effect of Soviet modernism. Some topics, such as religion or ethnic identity, were not welcomed; they were not ideologically acceptable. Ethnographers were expected to play the role of state agents helping the central government to document traditions often with the purpose of eradicating those, which were inconsistent with the socialist perspective. Ethnology was a part of the ambivalent Soviet nationality politics, which emphasised *natsionalnost* (ethnicity) exclusively as a collective marker in the union that brought together and resolved differences, while in everyday life, use of national languages and preservation of national traditions were highly discouraged.

In Kyrgyzstan, the first ethnography programme was opened in 1978 at the Kyrgyz State University as a subfield in the department of history. It was closely related to archaeology and significantly dependent on research conducted by Russian ethnographers from Moscow and Leningrad. In the Kyrgyz Academy of Science ethno-

graphers defended their *kandidatskaya* and *doktorskaya*¹ under the title of history, which is still the case now.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, there was a growing interest to ethnology in the new nation-building project. Kyrgyzstan, like all other Central Asian republics started rediscovering its national identity as rooted in its history, traditions, religion, and national language. Ethnologists played a key role in monumentalising and nationalising such symbolic figures as Manas, and reviving elements of traditional material culture. Historical accounts such as those of Yenisey Kyrgyz served as evidence for the long history of great Kyrgyz statehood. However, most of this historical and folkloristic research perpetuated the Soviet traditions of primordial and ideological views of ethnic identity; it remained very descriptive and became even more politicised.

In spite of the new ideological demand, the state of academic ethnographic institutions has only declined after independence. Connections with and funding from the academic institutions in Moscow were lost. The prestige of history and ethnography as a career and study choice declined in comparison to more fashionable subjects, such as economics, business, law, etc. The salaries of lecturers remained dismally low and many ethnographers, just like representatives of many other professions, moved to more financially promising trades.

It is in this context that the new department of anthropology was established at the American University of Central Asia in 2003 on the basis of the Kyrgyz Ethnology Department. Later it was transformed to become the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology. In 2007, it began a new re-orientation along the lines of the 'four-field approach,' under the name of Department of Anthropology, with the ability to teach also Linguistic Anthropology and Physical Anthropology. In 2009, the department changed its curriculum again, moving away from the four-field to a three-track approach: socio-cultural anthropology, history and archaeology, and development anthropology. Today, this program is one of only two² programmes in post-Soviet Central Asia, offering anthropology as a discipline in the classical Western tradition, with strong focus on analysis, theoretical discourse, and extensive fieldwork.

Since its establishment, it has produced eight classes of graduates, some of whom have continued their academic careers and obtained graduate degrees, including four PhDs. However, these numbers are still very low, while the faculty members struggle between heavy

¹ The candidate's and doctor's degrees are roughly equivalent to the lower and higher doctorates of France, or the PhD and Habilitation of Germany. [Eds.].

² Another programme, at the Nazarbaev University, Kazakhstan, was opened in 2012.

teaching loads, the requirement for policy research, and the need to publish. Therefore, as of today, their publication record, particularly in the Western peer-reviewed journals, remains very insignificant.

However, what is not being written, is often spoken about. It has been three years since the Anthropology department established the Anthropology Club — a platform for sharing research results by local and foreign researchers, experts, and activists. It originally aimed to popularise anthropology in the city through regular presentations and talks, to bring together like-minded people who are interested in anthropological topics, to engage students, and to allow the organisers themselves to better understand what anthropology is.

The Anthropology Club has not had problems finding speakers. Everything and everybody seemed relevant. As more people came to know about it and became interested in presenting there, we had meetings scheduled for weeks ahead. The main question for the organisers was to reveal what was anthropological in what speakers presented. How can we talk about across a huge range of subjects and yet recognise, emphasise, and appropriate the material of interest to anthropology in it? It was important to grasp the method, content, and organisation of shared knowledge in order to bring it closer to the home base at the anthropology department, although in principle there was a cause to do this: some of the speakers were anthropologists by training and their topics were anthropological from the very beginning.

Interestingly, speakers themselves often attempted to make that connection from their own understanding of anthropology. For example, we once invited the very famous Kyrgyz film-maker Bolot Shamshiev to talk about the 'miracle of Kyrgyz cinema' in the 1960s. The audience was very eager to hear about his experience in filmmaking, but instead, he spent two hours talking about the sacral nature of the Manas Epic, about Kyrgyz philosophy and Kyrgyz etymology, trying to make his talk relevant to the theme of anthropology in his own understanding of it. Other speakers were less straightforward and more nuanced in their conceptualisation of Kyrgyz and Central Asian cultures. In the next section, I will give some examples of recent Anthropology Club talks, which can help us understand how local views of regional identity are constructed.

Exploring Kyrgyzness in the Anthropology Club talks

Jamilya Kulova and Mamasadyk Bagyshov from 'SmArt Media group' shared with the audience their experience in the field of media, marketing and show business, and discussed the role of Kyrgyz culture and local norms, traditions, worldviews and identities in their business. They ask themselves: 'What is Kyrgyzness and

Kyrgyz identity? Who defines it and who defines cultural norms?’ Mamasadyk and Jamilya try to avoid literal cultural interpretations and prefer to use a subtler and softer approach. They gave an example of how Kyrgyz language can be promoted. They said that we often expect the government and the parliament to take responsibility for the Kyrgyz language policy. But strict measures that come from above are hardly ever well accepted on the ground. Instead, all of us have this responsibility and it is better to use means that are better perceived by people. For example, their project with a famous contemporary Kyrgyz singer Kanykei is a ‘cool’ way to promote Kyrgyz language through Kanykei’s songs, which have a big audience among Kyrgyz urban youth, for most purposes largely Russian-speaking. The big question is: How can we make Kyrgyz language and Kyrgyz culture ‘cool’?

Meder Ahmetov, Studio Museum, shared with the audience his photographs and his short stories, in which he depicted ‘his’ city through the experience of his imaginary characters: dwarf, giant, nomad, cockroach, sparrow, squirrel, and the most authentic urbanite — rat. Trying all these different avatars, he gave the audience an opportunity to smell, touch, and look at Bishkek from a whole range of viewpoints: above, below, inside and outside. The difference in scales and ways of perceiving and apprehending the city helped viewers and listeners to deconstruct the traditional frames through which we view urban space. Meder tried to connect his ideas to the understanding of ‘ethno-architecture’, which became quite popular today and which uses many ethno-symbols all too literally, for example by constructing three-storey yurts from metal or copying Kyrgyz traditional ornaments in the landscape design. Meder’s approach to ‘ethno-’ is much subtler. For example, his idea of the ‘nomadic’ perception of the city disregards traditional focus on objects and spaces between them, but looks at the ‘texture’ of the city and its ‘skin’, such as all the different kinds of advertisement that we have in Bishkek today.

Philipp Reichmuth of GIZ¹ asked: ‘Who is “expert” and what is “expert knowledge”?’ In his simple definition, an expert is a person with the knowledge that can have practical application. Philipp talked critically about such local grand concepts, like ‘Silk Road’, ‘Great Game’, and even ‘Manas Epic’. In his opinion, these are things of the past, they have very little common with the present, and when experts use them to apply to contemporary issues, he starts doubting their expert knowledge. He finds the familiarity with the structure of local social networks, with traditional irrigations system, with local everyday expressions, and ability to find common language

¹ Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit — a German development agency with extensive records of work in Kyrgyzstan.

with imam in a mosque, to be much more useful kinds of knowledge of the region, going beyond the traditional clichés of Central Asia.

Anthropologist Ruslan Rahimov in his talk titled 'Nomadism real, nomadism imagined', tried to answer why the violent and repressive processes of the collectivisation and sedentarisation of Kyrgyz nomads during the Soviet times were, and still are, characterised by Kyrgyz scholars and even by nomads themselves as positive progressive change. Ruslan suggests that post-colonial theories do not adequately explain this. Instead, he uses Lacan's chain: 'real — imagined — symbolical', which explains how a child looking at his own reflection starts to self-identify himself using words and images he can operate with. Similarly, collectivisation and sedentarisation, assiduously promoted by Soviet ideology, became the instruments through which Kyrgyz nomads constructed their new identities, replacing realities with symbolism.

Erica Feldman, a PhD student in anthropology from the United States, led a fascinating discussion about hipsters, multilingualism and multiple literacy among young people in Bishkek today. For an outsider, like Erica, it is amazing to see how easily we switch languages in our everyday life. People in Bishkek are multilingual and they use at least three, sometimes four alphabets: Kyrgyz, Russian, English, and Turkish. Erica, like many linguists, considers language to be a part of material culture, and that is why she is interested in how hipsters might use language as a resource that helps them to be Kyrgyz, yet remain different.

One particularly common theme in the Anthropology Club meetings was about Kyrgyz in other countries. Jamby Jusubalieva introduced her film about Kyrgyz in China made during a long journey from the Westernmost parts of Xinjiang right across the country to its Eastern corners in Manchuria, where Kyrgyz no longer speak Kyrgyz, but Chinese, and 80 % of them practice Lamaist Buddhism. In this journey they met legendary Kyrgyz *manaschi*, attended the celebration of the opening of the monument to Manas, and talked to Kyrgyz scholars in Beijing. Important issues were raised: Kyrgyz identity, language, religion, and the policy of the Chinese government towards Kyrgyz as an ethnic minority. Similarly, the issue of Kyrgyz identity was raised by Cholpon Turdalieva in her talk about Kyrgyz living in the Van province in Turkey, who migrated there from Afghanistan under the leadership of the famous Rahmankul-Khan in the 1930s. She described how in spite of their small numbers, Kyrgyz have a respectable and well-identified position in Turkish society. Nurzat Sultanalieva and I presented the results of our research with students on how Kyrgyz and other Central Asian labor migrants inhabit the urban spaces of Russia and how differences in urban contexts affect the way they engage in daily mediation of their Central Asian and transnational identities.

Conclusions

These few examples of Anthropology Club talks illustrate that the local discursive world is very far from simplistic, orientalist, and essentialist. On the contrary, it is multifaceted, nuanced, and analytically sophisticated. Local anthropologists and non-anthropologists are actively engaged in the construction of this knowledge, while the perspectives of foreign researchers and experts are tested and localised through active discussions with the Club's local audience. The analysis of talks and discussions show that while not so much might be published at the moment, there are local platforms, like the Anthropology Club, where the notion of Central Asian region and of regional culture and identity are currently being constructed and reconstructed. As time goes by and more and more Kyrgyz anthropology graduates arrive at the scene, having completed their graduate degrees abroad, the critical mass may be reached, and the percentage of academic work published from inside the region may increase significantly.

Interestingly, it is mostly local and Western (European and American) scholars and experts who are currently taking part in this process of constructing the knowledge of Central Asia. Russian scholarship is simply missing: there are very few Russian researchers (established academics or PhD students) who come to Kyrgyzstan to carry out fieldwork and their numbers simply cannot be compared to those of Western scholars. There are Russian researchers working on Central Asian migrants in Russia, and I believe this is where the interest in transnational Central Asia is emerging that you can see in the call for contributions to this discussion. However, if we go back to the original questions of this forum, I can only suggest that if Russian scholars do not come to the region, it does not mean that the region does not exist. New Central Asian scholarship is emerging. It has managed to break away from the traditional Soviet-style ethnography and it is only a matter of time before its new voice becomes stronger and heard, hopefully, in St Petersburg too.

BORIS PÉTRIC

I propose to begin with a broader discussion concerning the division of societies into 'cultural areas' before looking into the specific case of Central Asia. Some debates emerged in the United States at the end of the 1970s, with the well-known text 'Orientalism' written by Edward Saïd, coming not from the field of anthropology, but rather from literature [Saïd 1978]. Saïd highlights the role that scholars

Boris Pétric

CNRS / Centre Norbert Elias /
EHESS,
Marseille, France
borispetric@yahoo.fr

(geographers, linguists, Orientalists, anthropologists) have played to simplify the vision of social reality. Orient (East) has been created to promote the idea of the existence of a superior West. The work of Orientalists therefore constructs geographic separations that serve to legitimise colonial divisions and political domination. Saïd critiques this opposition between East / West, as well as that of 'Maghreb / Machrek' that make French and British colonial domination seem justified. This text received very different responses from different audiences according to disciplines and universities. It became nonetheless a key reference for the emerging discipline of post-colonial studies in the United States. It is also in the wave of a new anthropology that seeks to deconstruct and critically examine other classical notions. Notions of class, culture, ethnic group, or nation are challenged by the work of constructionists (like Barth, Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anderson), who have significantly altered how anthropologists envision the social reality.

This dynamic has gone on to ignite other important debates in the United States with critiques led by Clifford and Marcus [Clifford, Marcus 1986], Appadurai [Appadurai 1996], and Gupta and Ferguson [Gupta, Ferguson 1997], among others. All the previously mentioned scholars question how the research subject is defined: Can societies be divided into South / North, developed / undeveloped? Is anthropology required to limit its study to the rural, the tribal, the 'ethnic'? These debates also concern reflexivity and objectivity toward the construction of data and the spatial limits of study. All of these debates have had a very stimulating effect on the reconfiguration of the discipline and have led to a questioning of the divisions created by cultural areas. They have also had an impact on the organisation of disciplines and the training of researchers. Perhaps the most major consequence of these debates can be seen in ongoing struggles related to how we define our subjects of research: What are the boundaries of these subjects? Can a society, a culture, be studied as an isolate entity, corresponding with a list of objective common traits (language, customs); or should anthropology study social ties? With globalisation being characterised by an unprecedented intensification of transnational networks and flows, these discussions also concern our relationship with other disciplines, particularly sociology. What justifies the distinction today between these two disciplines?

In France, the ideas proposed by Edward Saïd received only marginal attention. At that time, French anthropology was organised according to three different logics: first, anthropologists might belong to a centre devoted to a specific cultural area, working alongside other specialists; second, they might be part of a laboratory comprised only of anthropologists, and comparing different societies in different cultural areas; and third, they might belong to a laboratory specialising in a specific topic (religion, politics and so on).

Very few French anthropologists worked in different cultural areas during their career on the pattern of Fredrik Barth, and the majority of them remained specialists in one society or one cultural area. Most of them were specialists in West Africa, which corresponded to the previous French colonial presence there. French anthropologists customarily contrasted West Africa with East Africa and suggest a kind of unity among the formerly French and British colonies. This type of opposition promoted an approach in terms of typologies analysing different social, political or kinship systems. The analysis of circulation of ideas, people or commodities was marginal. The result was a major lack of attention to many social phenomena that went beyond these divisions.

Other works have emerged over the past twenty years showing the necessity of going beyond cultural areas in order to comprehend major social transformations, such as transnational Islamic or Protestant evangelism networks, transnational trade relationships between China and Africa, as well as the phenomena of remittances within Africa and beyond.

The division of social reality into cultural areas has also tended to obscure an understanding of how the colonial presence was embedded within local social life. Research attempted to describe 'pure' traditional systems, and colonial relationships were considered as purely outside phenomena. Despite the work of George Balandier addressing the weight of colonialisation in the social sciences, and despite the emergence of anthropology of the contemporary supported by Marc Augé, major social phenomena did not receive attention.

The best example of such a social phenomenon is captured by the term *France / Afrique* (which to a native speaker of French, sounds like *France à fric*, the slang word for money). *France / Afrique* refers to a complex system of relations between some African and French elites (economic, military, and political) that created close social relationships and nourished different forms of networks of cooperation. These systems also constructed specific forms of power, influencing aspects of both French and African political life. French anthropology demonstrates a major blind spot when it comes to these issues.

The Manchester School, following the publication of Max Gluckman's article 'The Bridge', has significantly contributed to changes in the perception of social reality. The colonial power is described as a system embedded in Zulu reality. An anthropological approach aiming to describe 'traditional Zulu culture' no longer makes sense. However, this argument has been taken as far as it can go at this point, driving the study, for example, of different circulations of Africans in British society.

Seeking to construct a unified group, a bounded entity at any price, the analysis of circulation remained marginal, whether it was between colonies or between East and West Africa. Today these questions are becoming increasingly important in order to understand the social reality of contemporary Africa as well as to study nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. These debates are also relevant to other disciplines, and historians have also had their turn at questioning the established manner of dividing time and space.

The end of the Cold War and transnationalism

I used the previous example of France and Africa because it can serve as a useful comparison to understand the period of time when the Russian Federation began to question the pertinence of Central Asia studies and the place of anthropology within the human sciences. This comparison is not intended to be a historical analogy between French colonisation and the Soviet experience, but instead to highlight how frameworks of power influence the organisation of scientific and cultural areas.

All these previous debates in the US and in Europe are directly relevant to Central Asia. The end of the Cold War is a major event that requires an analysis of circulation: that of people (and no longer simply in the context of migration); that of the imaginary (cf. the importance of television, cinema and internet); and that of goods (commodities, money, etc.). In this context, anthropology keeps its relevance by its approach to constructing its corpus. The discipline works from an intellectual conception that immerses itself into a social reality, in order to understand the language, the culture, the history, and then goes on to observe and listen. These 'participant observations', these micro-social and qualitative studies, reveal themselves to be original and useful in understanding social reality from the moment that anthropology becomes capable of constructing multi-sited research sites following the flows that are at the heart of the social change of a society. In this respect, micro-level study should not be confused with the study of the local. Anthropologists construct their data in the field through long-term observation of social practices. This micro-social approach distinguishes itself from other scientific approaches based on norms, discourse and text analysis. Anthropology does not focus on a culture as a closed and isolated entity, but rather on how social ties are organised in specific locations. These empirical studies therefore must take into consideration the emergence of new transnational social links in order to understand the transformation of social reality and to take into account the question of scale.

Concerning Central Asian studies, there is first a clear marginality of empirical approaches. The literature is still largely dominated

by speculative, quantitative and macro-approaches produced by the political sciences and transitology. The prevalence of transitology can be explained by several reasons. First, Central Asia was a kind of *Terra Incognita* for anthropology and sociology with the exception of Soviet School of Ethnography. The opening of post-Soviet space arose at a time when anthropology had finished exploring the globe and had almost finished creating a complete record of cultural diversity. This conception of anthropology as a discipline studying ‘cultures nearing extinction’ is also dated, and anthropology is presently considered as a discipline, that studies contemporary reality and social change. These debates occurred when social anthropologists finally gained access to the ‘Soviet field’.

The work of the first western anthropologists [Humphrey 1983] in the Soviet Union was conducted in the late 1980s, during the time when debates on Soviet society were led by scholars obligated to engage a macro-social approach based on accessible secondary data such as statistics, published texts, ideology, and institutions. They focused their attention on the norms. A very few scholars, such as Bennigsen, used original data from sources such as the local press to understand social reality. Bennigsen took into account the works of Soviet ethnographers. He explained, for instance, how Soviet ethnographers described continuing social forms by using the notion of ‘survivals’ (*perezhitki*). This key concept was a scientific approach borrowed from Soviet ethnographers to describe the predominance of certain social practices in Soviet Central Asia.

After the collapse of the USSR, transitologists, Orientalists and Soviet studies scholars continued to privilege the study of social norms. They focus their attention on new institutions, the new official discourses, in order to understand post-Soviet Central Asia. Micro-approaches and the study of social practices remained marginal. All the same, since the cotton scandal in Uzbekistan, we have become aware that it is necessary to distinguish between the normative discourse produced by official institutions and the reality of social practices. Non-institutionalised practices such as *blat*,¹ ‘parallel Islam’, and clientelism (*mestnichestvo*) based on complex networks, were described by novelists or journalists, and not by anthropologists. These social networks were not a cultural pattern specific to Central Asia, but a clear social logic pervading the Soviet system generally. Like the case of ‘France / Afrique’, these practices were not occurring on the ‘margins’ but were central phenomena in social reality.

Both post-Sovietology and transitology continue to insist on the weight of institutions, the importance of ideology, the state, and

¹ The Russian term for ‘graft’ or ‘string-pulling’. [Eds.].

the nation; they insist on macro-structures in order to understand 'the evolution of societies', as pointed out by Burawoy and Verdery [Burawoy, Verdery 1999]. Most scholars focusing on this cultural area first present themselves as specialists in this area, rather than identifying with a discipline, therefore legitimising macro-analyses with broad chronological and spatial frames. Their competencies generally extend to the five Republics of Central Asia, to various fields of social life, and to broad historical periods. They often position themselves as capable of analysing very different social phenomena in diverse time periods.

In a somewhat different manner, numerous political scientists, non-specialists of Central Asia, have monopolised the study of the region and have 'imported' quantitative methods used in other geographic areas. They aim to identify, for example, forms of conflict by focusing on ethnic identity and Islam. Other political scientists favour a discursive approach, and study the nature of political systems in Central Asia through the analysis of ideological discourse and the personalities of presidents. The focus on conflict and Islam has led to the invention of myths, including, for instance, that the Ferghana Valley is the 'time bomb' of the region. These approaches share the common feature of speculative analysis. Such analyses often stigmatised the non-democratic and authoritarian character of political systems without trying to shed light on the complexity of social mechanisms that produce these forms of political power. The same type of speculative analyses misuse categories such as 'civil society', described as something natural, virtuous but oppressed, and opposed by a bad and corrupted state [Waugh 1999].

The aim of anthropology is different. If we follow Max Weber's consideration, sociologist and anthropologist should describe the society 'as it is' and not suggest 'what the society should be'. Various anthropological studies of the state, like those of Abélès, Herzfeld, Gupta or Ferguson, show that the state is not an abstract and separate institution, but primarily a social and human production. The idea that civil society exists in opposition to the state is an aberration [Hann, Dunn 1996] and does not help us to understand these societies as being crossed by networks embedded in state institutions. This is not a feature specific to Central Asian societies, and anthropologists and sociologists working in other cultural areas have observed the same phenomena.

It is also necessary to highlight that post-Soviet Central Asia faced a paradoxical situation, which I call an opening / closing process. The earlier links that organised flows inside the Soviet space suddenly disappeared. For instance, cotton production in Uzbekistan, or the merinos / sheep production in Kyrgyzstan are no longer linked with the Soviet economy. On the one hand, this was a kind of 'nightmare', a

closing and limiting force. On the other hand, it was the beginning of new flows and social relationships at the global scale. The dawn of these new opportunities can be seen through the integration of Uzbekistan into the global textile industry, Kyrgyzstan's development of regional trade with China, or the role of Kazakhstan in the global petrol industry. In the economic sphere, the majority of analyses focused on the transition from a planned economy to a market economy. According to a pre-established pattern of transition, these analyses have often overestimated public policies and underestimated the importance of the strategies of actors that had existed since Soviet times and developed during the post-Soviet period. Macro-economic approaches focus on state discourses. Social strategies at the origin of major social phenomena were often reduced to illegal practices such as corruption and trafficking. The forms of 'appropriation' of public resources or the 'catching' of external resources are largely attested in Central Asia. The study of flows and circulations then are a key issue to describe the emergence of new social ties and new social groups between Central Asia and other parts of the world.

The 'Orientalist' discourse is equally powerful in debates on post-Soviet Central Asia. It is often based on naturalised and essentialised categories such as 'tradition', 'culture', 'Islam', 'ethnic group', 'nation'. These approaches have a preference for the analysis of norms, discourse and texts and give little or no importance to the observation of social practices.

After *Perestroika*, the production of empirical data came about primarily thanks to painstaking journalistic inquiries revealing social practices not yet explored by sociology or anthropology. Consider, for example, Vaksberg [Vaksberg 1991], which masterfully shows the expansion of a clientelist society and the importance of social networks, called 'ZIS' and '*blat*' by the author. The contribution of novelists and filmmakers should also be taken into account. During the last fifteen years the situation has nevertheless changed, and pertinent work is starting to emerge from the discipline of anthropology.

The issue of the relevance of 'Central Asia' as an organising concept to the collaboration among scholars poses many problems. This geographical category influences the way in which some scholars continue to construct their analytical objects of inquiry. Social relationships (kinship, friendship, religious belonging, etc.) are reshaped according to spatial scales. It is therefore inevitable that there is a drive to reconsider the relationships of Central Asia to the 'post-Soviet' space and, more generally to different part of the world during this time of globalisation. The current increase of flows of people, imaginaries, and goods on a global scale is a social reality.

These flows can either generate new forms of domination and inequality, or they can create unexpected forms of empowerment, opportunity and re-appropriation. It is possible to engage in new comparisons with historians of the region in order to understand the singularity of the current historical period that we call globalisation.

Moreover, Central Asia is not only a receiver of transnational networks. Central Asia also produces these phenomena, and is a major actor in their execution. Kazakhstan may be seen as primarily having importance related to oil, but is also home to a quickly developing steel industry (with the presence of global corporations like Mittal). One can also mention the importance of Uzbek cotton production for the world's textile economy. One could likewise emphasise the importance of Afghanistan for its 'poppy' (opium) production, and for the global heroin market. All of these local economic activities are embedded within global networks, which must be taken into account if we want to correctly grasp the local realities.

The concept of transnationalism is a key invitation to expand our focus beyond the role of the state in the regulation of social life. During the Soviet period, the state had the ambition to produce and to regulate flows of people, information and images by organising propaganda and censorship, flows of goods by closing its economic space and planning its economy. Current Central Asian states have done away with this ambition, even in more radical situations like Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. Regardless of government ambitions, the social reality is completely transformed by circulations beyond the states' control.

Sometimes, 'transnational' is reduced to pejorative phenomena associated with crime, trafficking, underground or illegal activities. In the same way, the current intense circulations are sometimes misinterpreted as a form of de-territorialisation of social organisations. But the state is not dissolved; rather, the state is reshaped. This means, above all, that we need to propose a new paradigm to understand the articulation and the embeddedness of social spaces and ties at different scales.

For instance, recent development of regional organisations, international organisations, proliferation of NGOs or foundations have modified the role of the state. This process forces us to question how power is currently exercised, as well as the construction of legitimacy and sovereignty in contemporary Central Asian societies. We should reconsider the diversity of political spaces [Pétric 2005] and new forms of governmentality [Pétric 2015] at the time of globalisation.

This is particularly visible in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where the great powers (USA, Russia, EU, China) are present, and

where international institutions, networks of NGOs, and foundations involved in the regulation of flows completely redesign social boundaries. From another perspective, the recent work of Madeleine Reeves [Reeves 2014] and Magnus Marsden [Marsden 2005] show that 'borders' do not serve as boundaries to divide social relationships, but rather act as places where different flows interact.

The mobilisation of new concepts questions the validity of a conceptual legacy that has been criticised in recent years. The post-modern posture coming mainly from the United States has certainly been beneficial for increasing the reflexivity of our approach. This does not mean that we intend to renounce the classical paradigms, such as the key notion of exchange and gift, found in the classic works of Marshall Sahlins. Sahlins shows particularly that the world-system produces unexpected combinations [Sahlins 1988]. Local people can engage global flows in particular cultural patterns and completely modify the significance of the spread of capitalism. Kinship, marriage and friendship also remain central categories for the understanding of social change. But we also have to pay attention to new forms of social links.

The notion of flows and networks are not limited to an economic aspect. It can be applied to the movement of people, but also to the presence of actors such as development experts, religious missionaries, NGO members, who contribute to the reshaping of local social life. This implies the need to describe these flows 'thickly', to recontextualise them historically, and to seek the ways in which these flows are generated and not reduced as a simple question of import or export.

We could certainly apply a similar analytical frame to other flows, to the emergence of religious movements or to the local perceptions of foreign TV programs [McBrien, Pelkmans 2007], or to the production of so called traditional music [Zevaco 2012]. From this point of view, an excessive distinction between local / global, insider / outsider, citizen / foreigner, rural / urban does not allow us to understand the social exchanges that are taking place now.

A focus on circulation can also help us to address changes in societies that experienced increasing urbanisation and rural exodus. Moreover, the establishment of diasporas and complex migration processes reshape local realities through the formation of 'circulatory territories' [Tarrus 2002] between Russia and Central Asia, and other regions in the world. Migration can no longer be analysed anymore through the image of migrants who cut definitely the links with their country of origin [Monsutti 2005]. The emergence of the notion of remittances expresses a more complex relation within various social spaces. What we are observing today challenges the conviction that was widely spread in the early years of independence:

links between Central Asia and Russia were held to be 'artificial' and would supposedly disappear in the near future. The analysis of circulation and flows also draws attention to new forms of barriers, borders (physical or social) and highlights the idea that there are people, ideas and goods that do not move, or have no opportunity or ability to move.

These considerations have important impacts for future reconfigurations of the borders between disciplines (sociology / anthropology) and the organisation of scholarly research. Reflections on the pertinence of the division between cultural areas are rooted in a more general epistemological reflection about the construction of our subject of inquiry. In these reflections, training of researchers remains a key determinant, but should not be limited to the knowledge of languages and history. It should also take into consideration major epistemological reflections that have occurred over the past decades on the use of certain concepts and methodological reflections. In this way, the reflexivity of the anthropologist in relation to his or her subject of inquiry is essential, and has an ethical dimension. This reflection implies an understanding of how our work can be situated within power relationships in order to avoid drifting away from confronting a danger of instrumentalisation.

To return to my comparison with the French context, if French 'Africanist' anthropologists did not describe *France / Afrique*, it is because they were often positioned at the heart of these power relations. Certain scholars served as consultants / experts for the French government, others were advisors of African presidents. In the current context, how is it possible to be the director of the Ethnology Institute at the Academy of Sciences and become the Minister of Minorities for a Russian president? How can an American anthropologist analysing the social reality of Central Asia at the same time advise the government in Washington D.C. or be engaged as an expert for an international agency or NGO seeking to change social reality?

Anthropologists should accept a form of marginalisation and place the position far from these issues of power. These reflections extend to the division of cultural areas that, if perpetuated, can create blind spots or unintended effects.

Research does not need to definitively renounce the existence of cultural areas. However, it is no longer acceptable to engage divisions of societies as developed / undeveloped, North / South, East / West, and to use these divisions to make comparisons between all contemporary societies. The masterful work of the historian Kenneth Pomeranz *The Great Divergence* [Pomeranz 2001] shows how the great classics of political economists (Smith, Marx) and sociologists (Weber) applied problematic concepts created by an erroneous

vision of the East. This book is an exhortation not to reproduce the same errors today. Our vision of society has been transformed and must take into consideration circulation and transnational networks in order to put the social change of contemporary societies at the heart of the reflection. This is also an invitation to reflect upon our manner of organising comparative studies that are not limited to discussions between specialists in a certain cultural area, but extended to include links between societies, and to comparing similar phenomena across different cultural areas. To compare migrations, transnational religious movements, transnational economic logics, can also be fertile paths of inquiry. Comparison reveals the heart of our reflection: to understand what is unique in each society without forgetting to reflect upon the universal dimension of social activities. This is an invitation, as Marcel Detienne describes, to 'compare the incomparable' in order to bring creativity and imagination into the foreground of scientific activity.

References

- Appadurai A., *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1996, 229 pp.
- Augé M., *Pour une anthropologie des mondes contemporains*. Paris: Aubier, 1994, 195 pp.
- Balandier G., *Le dédale. Pour en finir avec le XXème siècle*. Paris: Fayard, 1994, 236 pp.
- Barth F., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, the Social Organization of Culture Difference*. London; Bergen; Oslo: University of Sfrolaget Press, 1969, 153 pp.
- Burawoy M. (ed.), *Global Ethnography*. Berkeley: University Press of California, 2000, 408 pp.
- Burawoy M., Verdery K. (eds.), *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Post-Socialist World*. New York; Oxford: Boulder, 1999, 322 pp.
- Clifford J., Marcus G. (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1986, 305 pp.
- Detienne M., *Comparer l'incomparable*. Paris: Le Seuil, 2000, 144 pp.
- Gellner E., *Nations and Nationalism*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1983, 150 pp.
- Gluckman M., 'Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand', *Bantu-Studies*, 1940, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1–30.
- Gupta A., Ferguson J., *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 275 pp.
- Hann C., Dunn E. (eds.), *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. London: Routledge, 1996, 248 pp.
- Hobsbawn E., Ranger T., *The Invention of Tradition*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 320 pp.

- Humphrey C., *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 522 pp.
- Liu M., 'Detours from Utopia on the Silk Road, Ethical Dilemmas of Neoliberal Triumphalism', *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, 2003, no. 2, pp. 2–10.
- Marsden M., *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 314 pp.
- McBrien J., Pelkmans M., 'Turning Marx on His Head: Missionaries, "Extremists" and Archaic Secularists in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan', *Critique of Anthropology*, 2007, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 87–103.
- Monsutti A., *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan*. New York; London: Routledge, 2005, 252 pp.
- Pétric B., 'Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan or the Birth of a Globalized Protectorate', *Central Asian Survey*, 2005, Sept., vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 319–32.
- Pétric B., *Where Are All Our Sheep: Kyrgyzstan a Global Political Arena*. New York: Berghahn Press, 2015, 185 pp.
- Pomeranz K., *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 392 pp.
- Portes A., *Globalization from below: The Rise of Transnational Communities. Working Paper Series (University of Oxford Transnational Communities)*, 1997, vol. 98, no. 8, 52 pp.
- Reeves M., *Border Work. Culture and Society After Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014, 292 pp.
- Sahlins M., 'Cosmologies of Capitalism: the Trans-Pacific Sector of the World System', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1988, vol. 74, pp. 1–51.
- Saïd E., *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978, 368 pp.
- Tarriss A., *La mondialisation par le bas: les nouveaux nomades de l'économie souterraine*. Paris: Balland, 2002, 220 pp.
- Vaksberg A., *The Soviet Mafia*. London: Wedenfield and Nicolson, 1991.
- Waugh R. M. (ed.), *Civil Society in Central Asia*. Washington: Washington University Press, 1999, 320 pp.
- Zevaco A., 'Réseaux, espaces et représentations: le musicien Tadjik, persan et soviétique', Ducloux A., Gorshenina S., Jarry-Omarova A. (eds.), *Anthropologie des réseaux en Asie centrale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2012, pp. 201–31.

MADELEINE REEVES

**Trace, trajectory, pressure point:
re-imagining 'area studies'
in an age of migration¹**

Last summer, while conducting some library research in Moscow, I was woken early one morning in the dormitory apartment of the Kyrgyz acquaintance, Albina, whom I had been visiting. Albina, glued to her phone, was discussing an 'Amerikanka' — 'an American' with her husband. Albina had been living in Moscow for most of the previous 9 years, where she worked three jobs and a 60-hour working week as a gynaecologist in private medical clinics. Her husband, meanwhile, was in Bishkek, where he was overseeing the decoration of a new apartment in one of the city's recently-constructed so-called 'elite' high-rise buildings, paid for with the couple's earnings in Russia. I wondered who the 'Amerikanka' they were discussing might be. Perhaps another researcher? Perhaps someone whom Albina had found to help teach her English. But this Amerikanka, according to Albina's comments, at least, had 'too much gold' and was 'too lumpy'. She was an inanimate thing.

As I pulled myself out of bed and peered over to where Albina was glued to her smartphone, I realised that Albina and Kairat weren't discussing a new American acquaintance, but a brand of wallpaper, one of several possibilities for decorating their new apartment. Using Viber, one of several mobile phone apps that has become an integral part of the infrastructure of transnationalism between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, Kairat and Albina were discussing one part of their home decoration. Kairat, in Bishkek, was at the market, where he photographed and uploaded images of the different wallpapers that he was considering. Albina would comment by text message, adding in short, tele-

Madeleine Reeves

University of Manchester, UK
madeleinereeves@gmail.com

¹ This text was originally presented as a keynote address at the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, 16 October 2015.

graphic spoken comments where necessary. The whole of their new Bishkek apartment — down to plumbing fixtures, floor tiles, paint, kitchen appliances — had been discussed this way with photos, instant messaging and free phone calls. This morning conversation continued in this way for about 40 minutes, while the details of paper and light fittings were determined.

Since Kairat had moved to Bishkek several months earlier, Viber served as a constant rolling backdrop to their respective days. Albina reflected on how the nature of her own connection with home had shifted during the decade that she had been working in Russia. In the early days there had been no mobile phone connection with her or Kairat's parents; staying in touch consisted in a fortnightly conversation with a relative in Osh, who in turn phoned through to the families in Batken district. Now, if Kairat didn't hear from Albina for a few hours, he began to get nervous. Her distance from him didn't make him any less curious as to her whereabouts, any less *revnivyy*, 'jealous'. Indeed, one of the reasons they used Viber, she confided, was that it had a GPS function: each could tell exactly where the other was physically located.

For two decades now, scholars of transnationalism have been reflecting on the density of connections that sustain trans-local intimacies in contexts of protracted out-migration [Basch, Glick Schiller, Szanton Blanc 1994]. Kairat and Albina's experiences are unexceptional in this regard, their everyday lives involving the habitual and unreflexive movement between languages (here, Russian and Kyrgyz), currencies, time-zones, administrative regulations, passports and gendered modes of behaviour. But if transnationalism implies an affective connection to two places simultaneously, for Kairat and Albina Batken remained home, morally and imaginatively: as Kairat had commented in one of his extensive conversations with me when I had first met him four years earlier: 'All the same, even with a Russian passport here, we are *chernyy*.' Moscow, for Kairat at least, never felt entirely like home. And he had other ambitions for the future than staying 'in town'. In the summer of 2015 Kairat's picture was on billboards around Batken town, running on the party list for one of Kyrgyzstan's smaller political parties. Albina, in a headscarf now and a long skirt, figured on this campaign material alongside Kairat: her demeanour revealing little of the decade of Moscow life that had enabled her husband's campaign to materialise.

I begin with this vignette to open a little the question that I want to explore further here, concerning the ways that we might reimagine Area Studies in an age of mass migration and mediated transnationalism. Migration has not unmoored Kairat and Albina from place. Indeed, it is striking the degree to which their earnings have been invested in articulating connections to multiple Kyrgyz places:

to the village of Kairat's parents; to Batken town, where they eventually wanted their daughter to attend school; to Bishkek, where the rental income from a newly-refurbished apartment would act as a safety net if the rouble crisis continued. But their hopes, their imaginations, their economic strategies, their livelihoods, even their modes of communicating intimacy, cannot be separated from the fact that their lives are lived simultaneously in two social fields 3 000 kilometres apart: a world in which Albina presents herself to her Moscow clientele as Svetlana Kim: as a Russian of Korean heritage; where the minutiae of how to do up their 'Kyrgyz room' in an apartment that is marketed as 'European' can be decided before breakfast; where a husband can check whether his wife has come home on time using the GPS function on her mobile phone. What has Area Studies to say about this, or about the millions of lives and livelihoods that would challenge our methodological regionalism?

The challenge, I think, for Area Studies, is not just that lives such as these are lived across the boundaries of conventional regional demarcations of the world (though that, for sure, is still an issue: Scott Levi has eloquently described how he was discouraged from studying Indian traders in Central Asia because the project just 'didn't fit' conventional AS frameworks [Levi 2004]). Area Studies, after all, has paid plenty of attention to migration from the perspective of 'sending' or 'receiving' communities (a binary that still posits singular place as the site of origin or destination).

My concern, more fundamentally, is to do with how Area Studies has tended to conceive of space itself and the implications of this for scholarship and for the kinds of questions that we ask. My claim is that area studies has tended to operate with a rather theoretical account of space — as flat, inert, isomorphic, bounded, as a two-dimensional platform upon which social life is conducted — and that this has implications for the kinds of questions we have asked, and for our ability to speak to scholars outside of our field. I want to ask here, what might follow if we adopt an approach to space that treats it, in Doreen Massey's terms, as lively; that is to say, not as a static plane upon which action takes place, but as itself that 'sphere of a dynamic simultaneity, constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly awaiting to be determined by the construction of new relations' [Massey 2005: 107].

Can we, in other words, imagine 'Area Studies' without being tied to the category of 'Area' in the sense of a 2-dimensional Euclidian version of space-as-surface? And can we do so — for this is the bit that really interests me — while nonetheless retaining a defense of Area Studies as such: that is to say, while defending the value of a scholarship attentive to context, to history, to language, to complex institutional legacies, to alternative registers of value, and to the

specificity of place? I'll put my cards on the table and suggest that we can; moreover, that such a project is critically important in the face of two strands of social science mainstream — one, in its more predictive and quantifying variant that would reduce 'culture' or 'ethnicity' or 'religious identity' to independent variables in a formal model — and the other, in those self-proclaimed critical variants (varieties of poststructuralism and globalisation theory) that, in assuming that the whole planet has fallen under totalising discursive practices originating from the west fail to recognise their own eurocentrism.

In other words, area studies has something to say to versions of social science mainstream that often think of themselves as opposed, both of which nonetheless erase context and specificity. In the second half of my talk, I want to explore some ways that we might reimagine 'Area Studies' that takes 'Area' itself as a critical object of attention, and not merely as a framing device (analogously say, to how 'queer theory' has playfully reworked the very category of queer); to suggest some alternative spatial and temporal idioms that might engage such a process of imagination.

But before that I want to try and tackle head-on the question of Area Studies' relevance. For it will be news to few in this audience that the fate of Area Studies, and Central Eurasian Studies in particular, tends to follow the winds of geopolitics and these winds are not blowing kindly right now. It was not always thus. Twelve years ago, in a series of invited articles on the fate of Caucasus and Central Asian studies for the Social Science Research Council, a number of eminent scholars wrote with cautious hope that the tide of Central Asia's marginalisation might be turning.

Stephen Hanson noted in his contribution that 'the shock of the events of 9/11 has obviously refocused government and academic attention back to the Caucasus and Central Asia, making their hard-won specialist knowledge of these regions relevant again to the social science mainstream' [Hanson 2004]. I remember CESS conferences in the early 2000s when prospective scholars of Afghanistan were courted by government folk in sleek suits with abundant supplies of business cards. Central Asianists, it seemed, were in demand; though less from a social science mainstream than from government and military agencies engaged in a war on terror.

A decade on, that moment of optimism about our potential to shape a social science mainstream perhaps looks more like a temporary blip; the subsequent decade a poignant reminder of the way that opportunities for meaningful international scholarly dialogue can be sacrificed on the altar of securitisation. In 2013 the US government's Title VIII Research and Training funding, which supported a whole raft of language and area studies programs, failed to receive any

allocation from the State Department. When the program was reinstated in 2015, its budget, of 1.5 million dollars, was less than half that of 2012.

It is not difficult in such a context to find bleak prognoses for the field: Kenneth Yalowitz and Matthew Rojansky wrote in the *National Interest* last year of the ‘Slow Death of Russian and Eurasian Studies’ [Yalowitz, Rojansky 2014]. Sarah Kendzior pitched her keynote to students of the Central Eurasian Studies Program in Indiana last year as a Eulogy to Central Eurasian Studies [Kendzior 2015]. And Stephen Hanson, whom I quoted a moment ago, argued in his 2014 presidential address to ASEEES, the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, that ‘area studies’ is dead and that we should, instead find a new moniker to describe what it is we do and how we work [Hanson 2015: 3]. (Hanson’s suggestion, to which I return later, is for us to redefine Area Studies as global and regional studies).

Certainly, there are plenty of reasons to be concerned about the prospects for our field, of which the fortunes of US State Department allocations are only one, not insignificant, aspect. Central Eurasia remains on the margins of better established and better resourced Area Studies regions. Acquiring the languages needed for research can demand time, tenacity, improvisation and a lot of luck as Universities cut back on their language provision. At the same time, the number of jobs in which the search is specifically for a scholar of Central Eurasia in, say, political science, anthropology, history, sociology — can pretty much be counted on the fingers of one hand. I know of one sociologist conducting doctoral research in an Ivy league university who was told outright that ‘Kyrgyzstan doesn’t sell’ and that if she was looking for a job at the end of her doctorate, she would better undertake a comparative study with China.

It is often said in response that we shouldn’t care; that marginalisation is no bad thing. Intellectual creativity emerges from the edges we are told; those places where the grand theories, conventional periodisations and established orthodoxies don’t fit. Well yes, and there have been some brilliant examples of that when it comes to, say, histories of twentieth-century collectivisation or the so-called era of stagnation under Brezhnev (which in large parts of Central Asia, was anything but). But such heterodoxy only works if there is an audience. If a tree falls in the forest of Central Asian studies, does it make a sound? More urgently, if scholars of and from the region are arrested, denied visas, deported, or — as is more and more the case, it seems — denied permission to attend international conferences or co-publish with western scholars — quite how is that intellectual creativity to trump self-censorship?

Such issues, and the impact that they are having on our field have been an object of considerable discussion at this conference and in its

margins, and in the work, say, of the CESS task force on Fieldwork Safety. But there is another, related issue, for diagnosing the health of Area Studies, and this has to do with the label itself. As Diane Koenker well put it, area studies has become a dirty word in American (indeed broader Anglophone) academia, 'labelled a relic of the Cold war that serves no epistemological purpose in our globalized world' [Koenker 2014: 2]. If the challenges that we now face are trans-regional or global: challenges of climate change, of environmental degradation, of mass migration, of health and educational inequalities, of religious and secular fundamentalisms in their various guises, of digital militarism and online surveillance, then what value is Area Studies — an approach to the global that would seem, by definition, to be tied to arbitrary, or geopolitically determinist framings of the 'world region'? Is Area Studies necessarily destined to be parochial and particularistic? In my own discipline of Anthropology, the answer to that question often seems to be an implicit 'yes'. I have often heard graduate students being encouraged to place their more ambitious scholarly articles in the high-hitting disciplinary journals that are likely to land them jobs, while treating area studies publications as a repository for their 'merely' empirical contributions. Indeed, I have sometimes heard it used as a term of distancing or a way of damning with faint praise — 'he is more of an Area Studies person' being used to imply that he, or she, doesn't 'do theory', is somehow unable of moving beyond the specific to the general.

Is 'reimagining Area Studies', then, akin to resuscitating a dead dog: unpleasant, sad, and destined to fail? I'm not sure, but I think we need to try, precisely because the need for nuanced, informed voices about the region could not be greater. But if we are to make that case for the value of what we do, we need, I think, to critically interrogate the category of 'Area' itself. That is to say: we need to find a way of uncoupling Area Studies from static, geographically determinist, territorially bounded readings of culture and political process.

There are three aspects of the 'area' in Area Studies that I want to interrogate. First, as a way of thinking space, 'area' is intrinsically two-dimensional (the dictionary definition has 'the extent or measurement of a surface or piece of land'). It treats space as surface; as isomorphic; as static, and as neutral plane of action; area here as the stage on which something takes place.

While we might not consciously invoke 'Area' in this literal sense every time that we invoke 'Area Studies', I think that there is, implicit in a structuring of the globe into discrete cartographic spaces, a kind of flattening that goes on. It is striking, for instance, how many visual representations of the Central Eurasian region take the outline political map of the five post-Soviet states as the visual form for representing where we work; or how, in each of the Central Asian

states, the internally undifferentiated political map, usually floating as though dismembered from any regional context, becomes an icon for the state as such, alongside the flag, or the coat of arms, or the visage of the president.

Those maps would look really different, if, for instance, our default mental map of Central Eurasia was a map of population densities or topography, or river and canal networks, or twitter users. By starting with 'area' — rather, than, say, with density (of population or of air connections), or with volume (of mountainous terrain), or with time taken to reach two points, we operate with an implicit reading of 'Area' that privileges certain imaginations of space over others (and as several scholars have pointed out — a reading of 'space' that would see that place as uniquely dangerous, fragmented or conflict-generating, *konfliktogennyy*). Consider, for instance, how the region gets advertised to prospective students in the US — come to Central Asia to live in a yurt and learn about geopolitics and military positioning!

I want to dwell, for a moment, with the question of depth and terrain in particular. Other than those professionally trained to look below the ground's surface or into the air, we rarely think about the material, three-dimensional aspects of space. As geographer Stuart Elden has argued in a recent article, 'we all too often think the spaces of geography as areas, not volumes. Territories are bordered, divided and demarcated, but not understood in terms of height and depth' [Elden 2013]. In his own work in the West Bank, Elden has shown how the dynamics of unequal power can only be understood by looking three-dimensionally, at the way that competing sovereignties cross-cut in networks of roads (which privilege some and block others) and underground tunnels. Geopolitics, he argues, following architect Eyal Weizman, is a 'discourse' which ignores the vertical dimensions of power, by 'look[ing] across rather than to cut through the landscape. This was the cartographic imagination inherited from the military and political spatialities of the modern state' [ibid.: 7].

In the Central Eurasian region, one way that we might re-imagine area studies three-dimensionally would consist in attending in a more detailed and consistent way with the social and political implications of this varied material configuration: not just the obvious differences between mountains and lowlands and the kinds of material politics that these enable; but also the way that politics is configured by the possibilities, the imaginations, the potentiality of what might just lie below the surface, or in the movement of things or in the atmosphere: the anticipation of oil, or gold, or heavy metals, for instance; the prospect of becoming energy self-sufficient through the harnessing of hydraulic power; the anxieties that come from living in a seismic

region; or the forms of mobilisation that occur about the invisible harms of air and water pollution. Detailed attention to how such materialities configure the social can shed new light, for instance, on how we think about the times and spaces of marginality, on the way that 'nature' becomes central to the imagination of pristine nationhood, or the relationship between online and offline violence, or to the mobilising dynamics of protest.

Let me bring in a couple of examples to elaborate what I mean. In his illuminating studies of highland Tibet, anthropologist Martin Saxer has shown how villages often characterised as marginal because of their geographical remoteness from centres of power and their closeness to imperial borders, have in fact often played crucial roles as sites of trade and exchange. What this requires is a shift of focus, from the border-as-barrier to the terrain that enables certain high-mountain villages to prosper as passing points. 'Focusing on pathways instead of borders', Saxer argues, 'amounts to a rotation of gaze by 90 degrees. This rotation (rather than inversion) of perspective brings into view new questions: 1) the relation between a pathway and its "hinterland" and 2) the interdependence and competition between pathways along a borderline' [Saxer n. d.].

Saxer draws our attention to the importance of terrain for thinking about marginality — a category remarkably missing in many considerations of 'borders' focused upon the 'borderland' as site of social mixing. In a very different context, that of environmental protest in Kyrgyzstan, Amanda Wooden has demonstrated the importance of attending to material properties of terrain for thinking about the potentialities and politics of prospective environmental disaster: the fact, for instance, that Kumtor is a gold-mine built upon a glacier (the only one in the world, to date) — a glacier that is shrinking at alarming speed, accelerated by the deposit of tailings from the mining operations.

Wooden's research is relevant for our reimagining of Area Studies in a second respect, too. For it not only challenges us to bring the material and the social into the same analytic frame, attentive to the movement of rocks and glaciers, and ideas and images, and laws and finance, as much as those of people. It also requires us to question the boundedness of our 'area studies' framings (or methodological regionalism) and the tendency to think the 'local' and the 'international' as at opposite ends of a scale of analysis (small to big; specific to general). Wooden's research demonstrates how we cannot understand the Kumtor mining operation itself, the protests that surround it, and the implications for mining operations elsewhere (including other prospective glacial mining exploits in Greenland) without bringing multiple other 'internationals' into our frame of analysis from the start. 'Area', in other words, can never be reduced

to bounded space: the spaces of local politics are always already mediated by life beyond [Wooden 2015].

But there's a further twist here, which has to do with specificity and context. Understanding the meanings of 'marginality' for yak-herders and traders in highland Tibet or the way that a melting glacier in rural Kyrgyzstan inserts into local cosmologies of space and time (or indeed, the meanings of nationhood, or democracy, of protest itself), or, say, the meanings of 'opposition' to an Uzbek opposition in exile, *also* depend on having the kind of long-term engagement in a region, the kind of language training, the kind of deep sensitivity to context that comes from having an 'area studies' training. Wooden's research, for instance, has shown how the dynamics of local protest in Kyrgyzstan are inflected by enduring understandings of glaciers as sustaining social life, as having a spiritual as well as a material or economic value, just as they are by knowledge of global environmental protest movements and the power of social media.

In my understanding, then, to phrase the question in terms of a training that is 'either' immersive and locally focused 'or' international and comparative in scope is to pose the wrong question. We need a kind of Area Studies that resists the kind of reductive scalar thinking in which the 'international' is seen as standing over and above the 'local' — or put differently, we need a perspective that recognises the connections that link a multiplicity of 'locals', whether that is the headquarters of the World Bank or a Kyrgyz village. Moreover, we need to remind those folks who work on North America or Western Europe and who feel no need to justify the specificity of their research site that they *also* do research that is 'local'; in this sense, they also do Area Studies; it is just that *their* local tends not to be recognised as such.

So Area Studies can be critiqued for treating space as two-dimensional (area rather than volume), for fostering methodological regionalism, and for operating with a scalar view of the world, in which the 'local' is seen as being below the 'national' or the 'regional' or the 'international'. There's a more profound kind of critique that I think can be levelled at Area Studies, however, which is the tendency to treat stasis as prior to movement, analytically and empirically, or what Liisa Malkki refers to as a sedentarist metaphysic [Malkki 1992]. Let me try to explain what I mean: if we carve the world into geographically finite areas and treat this as our point of orientation, we are starting from an ontology of stasis. We might then ask, who or what is on the move; but being 'in place' is our point of conceptual orientation. This kind of perspective is implicit in much of our language around migration: we talk of sending and receiving communities; of those 'on the move' and those 'left behind'; of departure and return. If we start with a perspective, however,

in which we recognise people and things — including rocks and glaciers and tectonic plates — are *always* on the move, just at different paces and in different orientations, some extremely slow and barely discernable, some extremely rapid, some oriented towards repetition, others towards innovation, then our optic shifts. Doreen Massey talks about these movements as heterogeneous trajectories [Massey 2005]; place, in such a reading, is nothing more than the provisional stabilisation of such trajectories, a coming-together of 'stories so far'. 'The vast differences in the temporalities of these heterogeneous trajectories which come together in place are crucial in the dynamics and the appreciation of places,' Massey argues, 'but in the end there is no ground, in the sense of a stable position <...> If we can't go "back" home, in the sense that it will have moved on from where we left it, then no more, and in the same sense, can we, on a weekend in the country, go back to nature. It too is moving on' [Massey 2005: 137].

Lest this perspective sound overly abstract, or counter-intuitive, then it is worth for a moment pausing with the way that movement is integral to social life. We might consider, for instance, how an absolute majority of families in some parts of Central Asia are materially tied to the possibility of one or more family member working seasonally in Russia; the way that the memory of past movements, forced and voluntary, is integral to national imagination in large parts of the region; or the way that ideas of 'authenticity' — cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, are themselves shaped by the movements of images, movies, fashions, religious texts, missionaries, academic literature, and so on. But movement is also there in the more mundane practices that sustain life and kinship: in the movement of women in marriage; of children to school and city; of water between fields for irrigation; of new families moving 'out' to new land plots; of crops to market; of oil through transnational pipelines, and so on. Our very capacity to conceive of a stable point that is 'in place' (having a home, having a point of return; having the predictability of things staying the same — water will flow when I turn on a tap; electricity will come on when I press a switch) is enabled by the possibility and fact of movement — as well, of course, by a complex infrastructural assemblage of pipes and wires and regulatory systems.

This is significant, I think, because a sedentarist metaphysic abounds — whether in attempts by parliamentarians to limit the international mobility of unmarried women in Kyrgyzstan; in nationalist rhetorics that would assume that one ethnic group has a more authentic attachment to place than another; or, closer to my own home, in alarmist public discourses around 'floods of migrants' on the move. I think it has implications, more specifically, for Area Studies and the kinds of ways that we might pose our questions. Let me again try to illustrate with two examples. Anthropologist Magnus

Marsden has spent the last few years following Afghan traders as they move between commodity markets in China, and retail centres in Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, Dubai, and a variety of sites in post-Soviet Central Asia. Many of these men (and it is mostly men) have lived for many years as refugees in Pakistan. Although we might speak of these men as ‘from Afghanistan’, their linguistic fluency, their trade networks, their habitus, their ability to move on when things don’t work out in one place, need to be situated both within historical legacies of trans-regional trading networks and in more immediate histories of war and displacement. Moreover, attentiveness to such networks allows us to reconfigure sites of seeming marginality (and Afghanistan is often treated as multiply marginal in Area Studies frameworks — not quite South Asia, not quite Central Asia and not quite the Middle East) as in fact nodes of connectivity constituted by communities of circulation. As Marsden puts it, ‘Work on such trans-regional circulations has shown that scholarship that treats regions as fixed geographical categories tends to reduce the status of intermediary locales (such as Afghanistan) to that of marginal “borderlands” [Green 2014]. As a result, there has been insufficient recognition of the ways in which such trans-regional contexts and their inhabitants have acted both historically and in the present as “corridors of connectivity” that forge links between apparently disconnected spaces’ [Marsden 2016: 1].

Moreover, following such movements close up, again, drawing on long-term local-language fieldwork, enables us to unsettle our conventional understandings of scale, of connectivity, of which places we imagine to be ‘local’ to which others. My second example comes from the work of Emil Nasritdinov and his team of Anthropology undergraduates at the American University of Central Asia [Nasritdinov 2016]. Emil and his colleague conducted research among migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan in Kazan and St Petersburg. Among other things, they were interested in understanding migrants’ own lived geographies, and how these differed between the two cities. What emerged from their remarkable research is both the centrality of the market to lives and imaginaries of migrant traders in the city, and the way that migrants’ habitual geographies intersected (or not) with those of local residents, feeding in, in Kazan and St Petersburg, to very contrasting perceptions of ‘risk’ among non-migrant populations in both cities. This, I think, is a vivid empirical illustration of Doreen Massey’s call to think of space as ‘lively’ — not as an intrinsic, given, not as a stage for social action, but as the fragile, provisional outcome of ‘stories so far’.

So where does all this leave Area Studies? If, as I have suggested, area studies tends to rest upon a reductive and flattening account of space; one that treats space as surface, the ‘international’ as above the ‘local’, and stasis as prior to movement, should we abandon it

altogether? Should we, as Stephen Hanson argues, find a less Cold-War-ish term — not to mention one that perhaps has more traction among prospective students attentive to what will land them a job? Maybe, but shifting name without interrogating how we think about space, and scale, and the ways that we might adequately do justice to lives lived *between* doesn't necessarily solve the problem. In particular, the suggestion that we replace 'area studies' with 'global and regional studies' to me risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater — or perhaps not even getting rid of the bathwater itself. For it still implies that there is the regional and then there is the global; two scales, one little, one big, the former impacting upon the latter. Whereas what I have been trying to argue is for an optic attentive to the way that *every* local, those that mark Central Asian landscapes as much as the corridors of the World Bank, is always-already global too; just as the seeming sites of 'global' power are also local, also specific, also constituted by particular historical, geopolitical and economic configurations. In this sense, even the celebrated 'non-spaces' of airports, shopping malls and so on are saturated with particular configurations of economic and political power. We perhaps don't notice them as such because most of these 'non-places' [Augé 1998] are spaces of capitalist consumption par excellence.

What we need, then, I think, is not so much a rejection of area studies, but a repurposing of 'area', starting with a critical interrogation of the spatial metaphors that organise our field and perhaps some playful experimentation with more 'lively' readings of space. We need to do for 'area' what queer studies has done for 'queer' by illuminating heteronormativity, or whiteness studies has done to expose white privilege by calling out its centrality and exposing its invisibility. We need to illuminate how the production of space is itself linked to the articulation of power and how our spatial metaphors (of silk roads, pivots, great games, giant chessboards, imperial 'back yards', near abroads and so on) are implicated in this uneven structuring.

I want to suggest three examples (and these are three among many possible) of approaches through which such an interrogation of 'area' might occur. These are not intended to be exhaustive, and are approaches that emerge from the specificity of my own empirical research on the remaking of borders and transnational labour migration between Central Asia and Russia. There are other such metaphors — the attention to off-shoring for instance with which Heathershaw and Cooley have prompted us to think about the spaces of Central Asian power would be another [Heathershaw, Cooley 2015], or the category of 'territorial imaginary', through which Nathalie Koch has explored the remaking of urban space in Kazakhstan [Koch 2013: 139].

First, I suggest we need an attentiveness to *traces*. Trace is both a spatial metaphor and a temporal one; it alludes, on the one hand, to a movement through a landscape ('we traced a path') and, at the same time, it references the way that past continues to inhabit, inflect, or haunt the present; traces attest to something never quite erased; but not entirely present either. We might think of the traces of past modernist or imperial projects that can be found in Central Eurasian landscapes, the 'junkyards of futures past' as De Genova calls them [De Genova 1997]; or we might think of the traces of past histories of trade, past practices of honouring the dead, past ways of sacralising landscape, that are present, for instance, in the names given to food, in the material forms of burial grounds, or in the names given to villages and sacred sites. In a very different context, anthropologist Michael Taussig has studied the colonial history of indigo, the colour used to make jeans blue. The history of indigo is inseparable from a history of colonial trade, the traces of which are present in the very word that we use in English [Taussig 2005: 4].

So what does such an approach allow? It is a focus attentive to the way that the present never entirely erases the past; what Alice Street has called the 'unplanned historicity of place' [Street 2012: 46]. Rather than treating space and sovereignty as bounded and tied to the state, a focus on traces allows us to think about overlapping geographies and hybrid sovereignties and about the land less as surface, than as palimpsest. Let me try to illustrate with a concrete example, this time from my own research. Contemporary border disputes in the Isfara valley, between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, hang in large part on disputes about the recent past: specifically, about the authority that is to be granted to past parity commissions, the maps they produced, and the decrees that ratified the decisions of such committees in one Soviet Union republic but not the other. Currently, disputes over delimitation and demarcation in the Isfara valley hinges precisely on the authority to be accorded to different past moments: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan refer to different maps and different normative acts as authoritative. Yet what is striking when you dig into the history of contemporary border conflicts is the way that the present here is haunted by the past. This is reflected, for instance, in the way that local understandings of 'border' are inflected by the memory of past land exchanges during the post war era that are recalled as illegal, unfair and corrupt. It is reflected, too, in the curious repetition that is found in the wording of parity commissions in the post-war period right up to the 1980s, emphasising the need to overcome past mistakes and the danger of conflict if such disputes are not resolved [Reeves 2014: 82–6]. In short, we need to attend to the way that geography itself has a history: that 'border' and 'delimitation' here are haunted by a multiplicity of attempts at reordering space, and by the memory that borders here haven't

tended to stay stable for long. We can't understand the passion and anxiety that attaches to road construction in this region, for instance, or other infrastructure projects, without taking this history into account.

A second idiom that I think we can productively explore to reimagine space is that of 'trajectory'. If 'area' focuses our attention on space-as-bounded, 'trajectory' precisely alludes to the 'stories so far' of which Doreen Massey writes [Massey 2005: 9]. Trajectories direct our attention to movement, and to limits upon movement. In the Central Eurasian region there is, I think, some fantastic work looking, for instance, at the trajectories and itineraries of migrant workers, commodity traders, international development workers, religious missionaries, students, craftsmen and women and pilgrims. There is also some great work-in-progress looking, for instance, at the movement of religious and other knowledge, of sacred objects, of forms of certification, of new building styles, of laws (including some of the more draconian laws against religious freedom or so-called gay propaganda) and of religious apparel. This work, I think, has the potential to interrogate our area studies framings of the world 'from below', by pointing to the forms of connectivity, between East, Central and West Asia, in particular, that cannot be contained within a traditional area studies frame. But this also precisely the kind of literature that has the potential to unsettle some of the categories that have been developed within the context of that area studies literature by exploring, for instance, new forms of Muslim sociality that emerge in transnational trading contexts; new forms of hostility and hospitality that accompany, say, the growing presence of Chinese traders or construction workers in the cities of Central Asia; emergent modes of consumption grounded in aesthetics of Islamic piety coming from Turkey and the Middle East; or new forms of online organising that cross national and regional boundaries (e.g.: [Saxer n. d.; McBrien 2012; Botoeva, Spector 2013; Schröder, Stephan-Emmrich 2014]).

Finally, I think we need a more variegated and temporally differentiated account of the state and sovereignty. That is, we need a more differentiated account of how and when certain ways of making or transforming space come to dominate and exclude others; how and when we become aware of whose rules rule and how we might account, empirically and theoretically, for spaces where the state is experienced as absent, or failing, or non-sovereign. Rather than a geography structured by spatial contiguity and isomorphism — the border, the line demarcating the limits of state sovereignty; we need, I think, a spatial imaginary attentive to points of emergence and intensity, to points of conflict and contestation, or what I have called in my title 'pressure points'. In her study of botulism in Georgia, for instance, geographer Elizabeth Dunn has shown how understanding the presence of this fatal condition is

inseparable from an account of state retreat: botulism, she argues, ‘indexes places where the state has failed and where the disciplinary practices of neoliberalism seem unable to take hold. ‘The Georgian state allows a way of interrogating the ‘twin claims that states are both mythic and omnipresent’ [Dunn 2008: 245]. Again, what this requires is slow, steady, grounded empirical work: to unpack those sites of intensification, of differentiation, of competing sovereignty claims, or of state failure (why border crossings occur here; why shoot-outs occur there; why this place has become central to national imaginaries, why this city fell to the Taliban or why NATO bombed *this* hospital). The political stakes of such a variegated account of space are not insignificant.

This work is already occurring: indeed, the examples that I have referenced here, from geographers, anthropologists, political scientists and others show that there is plenty of critical and thoughtful interrogation of ethno-territorial essentialisms in our field. What is striking to me, though, is that most of these critiques have occurred *not* on the pages of area studies journals, but in disciplinary publications; these conversations are not yet occurring across and between disciplines. More importantly, I think, they haven’t yet produced the kind of reclaiming, or repurposing of area studies that I think is needed if we are to be able to demonstrate our relevance to a social science mainstream that would cast ‘area studies’ as defunct. In the past we have tended to stress the importance of Central Eurasian studies by referring to some intrinsic importance of the region (‘look, we are Central!’) or worse, to highlight the importance of this region to strategic or military concerns (‘you need our expertise for your war on terror!’). To me, these approaches risk reproducing a binary in which area studies can only stake the grounds of its significance on considerations of localism and particularity; and we will stay trapped in the winds of geopolitical forces such that our scholarly fortunes are hinged to whether the US state department thinks our region is ‘strategic’ or not. I think we need something more ambitious: a reclaiming of ‘area’ that would illuminate the provincialisms that structure so much scholarship, including that of the social science ‘mainstream’. On this, though, I am hopeful. For our field is small enough, experimental enough, and collegiate enough for us to have these kinds of conversations and articulate a defence.

References

- Augé M., *Non-Places*. London: Verso, 1998, 98 pp.
- Basch L., Glick Schiller N., Szanton Blanc C., *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994, 344 pp.

- Botoeva A., Spector R., 'Sewing to Satisfaction: Craft-Based Entrepreneurs in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, 2013, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 487–500.
- De Genova N., 'The Junkyard of Futures Past', *Anthropology and Humanism*, 1997, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 171–9.
- Dunn E., 'Postsocialist Spores: Disease, Bodies, and the State in the Republic of Georgia', *American Ethnologist*, 2008, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 43–258.
- Elden S., 'Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power', *Political Geography*, 2013, vol. 34, pp. 35–51.
- Green N., 'Re-Thinking the "Middle East" After the Oceanic Turn', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 2014, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 556–64.
- Hanson S., 'Central Asia and the Caucasus in the Contemporary Social Sciences', *Social Science Research Council Items and Issues*, 2004, vol. 5, no. 1–2, pp. 20–1.
- Hanson S., 'In Defense of Regional Studies in a Globalized World', *Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies Newsnet*, 2015, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 1–5.
- Heathershaw J., Cooley A., 'Offshore Central Asia: An Introduction', *Central Asian Survey*, 2015, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 1–10.
- Kendzior S., *The Future of Central Eurasian Studies: A Eulogy*. Keynote at the 22nd Conference of the Association of Central Eurasian Students, Indiana University, March 22, 2015. <<http://sarahkendzior.com/2015/03/08/the-future-of-central-asian-studies-a-eulogy/>>.
- Koch N., 'The "Heart" of Eurasia? Kazakhstan's Centrally Located Capital City', *Central Asian Survey*, 2013, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 134–47.
- Koenker D., 'Revolutions: A Guided Tour', *Association of Slavic, East-European and Eurasian Studies Newsnet*, 2014, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 1–5.
- Levi S., 'A Transregional Approach to Central Asia', *Social Science Research Council Items and Issues*, 2004, vol. 5, no. 1–2, pp. 27–8.
- Malkki L., 'National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees', *Cultural Anthropology*, 1992, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 24–44.
- Marsden M., 'Crossing Eurasia: Trans-regional Afghan Trading Networks in China and Beyond', *Central Asian Survey*, 2016, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 1–15.
- Massey D., *For Space*. London: Sage, 2005, 232 pp.
- McBrien J., 'Watching *Clone*: Brazilian Soap Operas and Muslimness in Kyrgyzstan', *Material Religion*, 2012, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 374–96.
- Nasritdinov E., 'Only by Learning to Live Together Differently Can We Live Together at All. Readability and Legibility of Central Asian Migrants' Presence in Urban Russia', Schröder P. (ed.), *Central Asian Survey. Special issue on Urban Spaces and Lifestyles in Central Asia and Beyond*, 2016, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 257–75.
- Reeves M., *Border Work. Culture and Society After Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014, 292 pp.

- Saxer M., *Remote Pathways: The Non-Peripheries at the Edge of Nation States*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Schröder P., Stephan-Emmrich M., 'The Institutionalization of Mobility: Well-Being and Social Hierarchies in Central Asian Translocal Livelihoods', *Mobilities* [Online first], 2014, pp. 1–24.
- Street A., 'Affective Infrastructure: Hospital Landscapes of Hope and Failure', *Space and Culture*, 2012, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 44–56.
- Taussig M., 'Redeeming Indigo', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2005, vol. 25, pp. 1–18.
- Wooden A., *Moving Rocks and Glaciers, Shifting Resistance and Identities. Mining Developments and Discourses in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan (1998–2015)*. Paper presented to the Workshop on Development and Modernization in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Periphery, University of Leiden, September 25–26, 2015.
- Yalowitz K., Rojansky M., 'The Slow Death of Russian and Eurasian Studies', *The National Interest*, 2014, May 23. <<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-slow-death-russian-eurasianstudies-10516>>.

IGOR SAVIN

1

It would seem that the regional division of research focus and all the institutional structures that follow from that ought to be retained, otherwise all the global generalisations will become overgrown with excessively voluminous references to publications or institutes where the reader can 'get hold of' material. It goes without saying that besides 'regional' there must also be 'problem-oriented' research, which will start by acknowledging the possibility of certain regional tendencies which will be the object of analysis by 'comparativists'.

2

Any boundaries are always contingent, conventional and dependent on the situation in which the said conventions and the necessity of establishing these boundaries arose. The boundaries of Middle Asia are no exception. I do not mean the geographical dimension (the relationship between Middle and Central Asia, where these regions are drawn 'on the map', etc.). The intellectual content of these boundaries is no less interesting. It seems that the specifics of Middle Asian studies remain, despite the existence of powerful research areas (indicated in the question itself) and the constant appearance of new ones, such as colonial, post-colonial and

Igor Savin

Institute of Oriental Studies,
Russian Academy of Sciences,
Moscow, Russia
savigsa@inbox.ru

3

migration studies, the study of models of integrational interaction and the formation of transcultural societies, etc. In these cases it will be necessary in specific research situations to take account of the results of earlier 'Middle Asian studies'. It does not matter whether it is a question of the influence of regional research paradigms on a more profound understanding of the life strategies of Middle Asian immigrants in Moscow or the ways in which communities of people from outside the locality were formed in Soviet Uzbekistan.

This could have to do with a very wide range of questions, provided that the particular features of people's behaviour, thought or social strategies in each specific case were conditioned by their Middle Asian origin or influence. It is only possible to speak of Islamism as a subject of study in the context of regional research into Middle Asia when there is evidence of the existence of concepts and practices considered by their authors and practitioners to be Islamist, and at the same time these concepts and practices are not encountered outside the region. Even my own somewhat limited experience of conversation with people who regard themselves as fighters for true Islam has allowed me to note the following. Even when discussing general Islamic topics on a global scale (the lack of unity in the *ummah*, oppression by *kaffir* regimes in the majority of Muslim countries, the exclusion of Muslims from control over the world and its natural resources), they let it be known that they were Central Asian elements within the world community. This could be seen not from their declarations, but from their answers to questions connected with their personal histories, and their explanations of their motives for their personal involvement in this activity. It would seem that these circumstances are different in the case of Islamists from other countries. This means that it is still important to understand the regional context.

JESKO SCHMOLLER

Love for detail: The value of regional studies

In this discussion, I set out to defend the discipline of regional studies and in particular Central Asian studies. Since this background certainly influenced the formation of this position, let me briefly take a look at the course of my higher education. After initially earning a degree in social anthropology at Hamburg University and having gained an insight into theories and methodologies, I decided to expand my regional expertise by engaging in PhD

Jesko Schmoller

Perm State University,
Russia
j.schmoller@gmx.net

research at the Central Asian Seminar of Humboldt University Berlin. Researchers at this institution come from a variety of disciplines, such as history, the social sciences (including anthropology), Islamic studies and linguistics. They are concerned with the cultures, histories and languages of the former Soviet South (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), Afghanistan, Western China and Mongolia. Particular emphasis is placed on language training, which — from my point of view — is essential when planning to conduct any research in the region at all. There is simply no other way to understand a people than through their language. Having conducted my own research in Uzbekistan, I can assure the reader that a *mahalla* is not the same as a neighbourly community, but an entity with complex social — and lately even administrative — functions, among them social cohesion, control and the preservation of peace and order.¹ Similarly, it would not be sufficient to translate a term like *obro'* with status and to assume that it operates more or less the same. A man's *obro'* is a precious resource, connected to his standing within the *mahalla* and unfavourably affected by wrong decisions or the misconduct of a family member.² By regarding these two terms in their relationship to one another, I have moved beyond an exclusive discussion of language matters and entered the field of social and cultural context. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz [Geertz 1973: 3–30] thinks that people's actions can only be interpreted by considering their context. And few disciplines take context as seriously as regional studies do.³ How much better can we understand any phenomenon if we observe it in its environment and ideally also trace its development through Soviet (and pre-Soviet) history.

The argument that globalisation and transnationalism cause regional studies to become redundant seems unconvincing. Central Asia is linked to Russia, Turkey, China, the Middle East, Western Europe, South Asia and Southeast Asia in multiple ways. The exchange of goods and ideas transforms Central Asian societies, though without creating a globally interchangeable culture of merchandise and consumption. Uzbek popular music may serve as an example here: pop music is a thriving industry in Uzbekistan, with many contracts being signed and records produced, new stars rising to the top, the stars of yesterday sinking into oblivion and fortunes being made by those singers in demand at life cycle celebrations (*to'y*). When watching some newer videos by Asilbek Negmatov or Bojalar, the

¹ See [Massicard, Trevisani 2003] for more information on the Uzbek *mahalla*.

² See [Schmoller 2014: 98–130] for the concept's particular meaning and its significance in everyday life.

³ Following Geertz, the social scientists Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz stress the importance of context also for comparative approaches [Chabal, Daloz 2006].

influence of Western pop music is evident in the use of certain sounds and effects, but the singers nonetheless remain true to the Uzbek language and tunes that have an 'oriental' feel to them. The outcome is a hybrid product, not easily comparable to anything else and thus something new and distinct. Historian Fernand Braudel [Braudel 1995] famously demonstrated the degree of interaction and exchange between the societies around the Mediterranean Sea in the second part of the sixteenth century, but almost half a millennium later life in Tripoli, Haifa, Naples and Barcelona is still not the same. Regional studies knows a diversity of approaches and its practitioners usually do not insist on constructing a region by isolating it in their analysis. The academics involved in the activities of the German research network Crossroads Asia locate themselves in a regional studies tradition and, at the same time, look at constellations of people in their relation to the spatial dimension. They may, for instance, try to explain movements and transactions within and beyond (!) a region that extends from Eastern Iran to Western China, from the Aral Sea to North India. Whether the researcher's gaze remains focused on this loosely defined region or strays from it depends upon the phenomenon in question.

When having to subsume Central Asian studies, I see a definite problem in making it a subfield of Russian or Slavic Studies. Such a decision would mean interpreting Central Asian cultures through their most recent history only. Soviet social engineering was — in my opinion — never so successful that we could speak of cultures that were national in form but socialist in content. In many regards, the opposite was true and people only adopted certain Soviet conventions, while they continued doing what their ancestors had been doing all along. Nowadays, we may find that some cultural phenomena appear very much Soviet at the surface, but the closer we look the more indicators we come upon that refer to a remote past. The Uzbek gift economy would be a phenomenon of that kind.¹ In the worst case, a Russianist or Slavacist perspective on Central Asian history or culture could be accused of showing orientalist tendencies or justifying the colonial policies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union towards their Muslim subjects in the south. But several more recent works of scholarship take a critical yet nuanced position in regard to the colonial experience.² I also see some merit in the more radical position of those academics involved in the postcoloniality / decoloniality project. They argue that postcolonial scholars are not going far enough in rewriting histories and giving a voice to the

¹ See [Pétric 2002] for more detail in this matter.

² For historical titles, see, for instance, [Edgar 2006; Stronski 2010; Iğmen 2012]. Anthropologist Serguei Oushakine is currently working on a book in which he takes a comparative view of postcolonial sentiments in Kyrgyzstan and Belarus.

victims of colonial policies, as these efforts remain embedded in an academic tradition of Western origin that is not adequately equipped with a language whereby one could express native ideas and concepts. It is thus imperative to invent a new language, based on local traditions of learning and respectful towards a culture's genuine spirit.¹ One attempt in this direction has been undertaken by cultural theorist Madina Tlostanova [Tlostanova 2012], who examines Central Asia and the Caucasus from a decolonial perspective. Although some research by scholars from regional studies can be criticised for considering theory too little, the work of Tlostanova demonstrates that the opposite can be even more problematic. Tlostanova hardly bothers to substantiate her claims with empirical data and her Uzbek and Circassian descent does unfortunately not compensate for this shortcoming. We can hope to expect more convincing decolonial analysis in the future or at least an influence from it on discourses in anthropology or regional studies.

Research that pays attention to detail and takes seriously its subjects, their culture and history — as usually the case in regional studies — is in fact not an enemy to comparative approaches. In the humanities and social sciences, it is, on the contrary, the *conditio sine qua non* of well-informed research of any type.

References

- Braudel F., *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philipp II*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, vol. 2, 1375 pp.
- Chabal P., Daloz J.-P., *Culture Troubles. Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 395 pp.
- Edgar A., *Tribal Nation. The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, 320 pp.
- Geertz C., *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 470 pp.
- Iğmen A., *Speaking Soviet with an Accent. Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012, 240 pp.
- Massicard E., Trevisani T., 'The Uzbek Mahalla: Between State and Society', Everett-Heath T. (ed.), *Central Asia. Aspects of Transition*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2003, pp. 205–18.
- Pétrie B., *Pouvoir, don et réseaux en Ouzbékistan post-soviétique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002, 320 pp. (Collection 'Partage du savoir').
- Schmoller J., *Achieving a Career, Becoming a Master. Aspirations in the Lives of Young Uzbek Men*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2014, 240 pp.

¹ The postcoloniality / decoloniality project runs contrary to the universalist ideal of creating a knowledge repository embracing each and every aspect within the spheres of nature and culture.

- Stronski P., *Tashkent. Forging a Soviet City 1930–1966*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010, 320 pp.
- Tlostanova M., 'Transcultural Tricksters in between Empires: "Suspended" Indigenous Agency in the Non-European Russian / Soviet (Ex-)Colonies and the Decolonial Option', Tlostanova M., Mignolo W. (eds.), *Learning to Unlearn. Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012, (Transoceanic Studies), pp. 83–121.

TOMMASO TREVISANI

On thin ice: The role and future of the anthropology of Central Asia

Is a regional studies approach to anthropology still timely? And if so, what are the boundaries of 'our' region? To the anthropologist of Central Asia these questions bear a somewhat worrisome undertone. The worry stems from the intellectual preoccupation that a regional perspective might constrain or narrow down the horizon of anthropological knowledge production, but also, more prosaically, from an anxiety about the negative sway that a regional stigma may have on careers in a discipline in which the 'global' is each day written larger. And yet these fears contrast with the fact that the anthropological scholarship on the area of the former Soviet Central Asian republics and their surroundings is a thriving field, expanding ever since the end of the Soviet Union [Liu 2011; Reeves 2014]. One must wonder how many among the anthropologists (and their related scholarly kinsfolk — ethnologists, ethnographers, etc.) working on Central Asia, Central Eurasia, Inner Asia or Middle Asia feel compelled by the urgency to put into question their own adopted 'regionalism'. My guess would be that although attitudes, definitions and disciplinary traditions differ widely, the general undertaking, the anthropological engagement with 'our' region, is rarely put into question as such.

My mild concern for this issue is informed by a strong sense of déjà vu. Past polemics, dating back to the 'writing culture debate' [Clifford, Marcus 1986] and its aftermath, reverberate in

Tommaso Trevisani
University of Tübingen,
Germany
tommaso.trevisani@
uni-tuebingen.de

it. Area studies approaches might project arbitrary demarcations on places, peoples and concepts, and they might lead to an essentialised image of the other. Thus, established canons and narratives must be critically challenged and own positionalities critically reflected. A merit of the criticism, at the time mainly directed at monographs of earlier generations of anthropologists and orientalists, was to add needed sophistication to anthropological (self-)reflection. However, it also brought an inhibiting climate of academic auto-da-fé that diverted from the merits and soundness of earlier ethnographic work. Text-based criticism also led to a rebalancing of interest from society and its structure to semiotics and meaning, as the post-modern shift towards immaterial ('Foucauldian') power relations somewhat obfuscated the concern for concrete relations in concrete societies. Criticism also tended to oversee that regional analysis and cross-cultural comparison were implicitly or explicitly in-built in classic ethnographic accounts. Therefore, an early answer was that anthropologists, as ethnographers, cannot but engage in 'localizing strategies' [Fardon 1990] aimed at fully taking into consideration regional conditions and specialism.

Similar arguments have recently resurfaced both within area studies, where regionalism as a concept has been anew put under scrutiny [van Schendel 2002; Mielke, Hornidge 2014], and within discussions on anthropology's crisis in neoliberal times [Jebens, Kohl 2011; Carrier 2012]. The object of ethnographic investigation and the forms of its situatedness continue to be debated and deconstructed. While this certifies an undiminished interest for knowledge production, power and representation as central themes for our discipline's identity, when it comes to defining the role of regional analysis some of the past and present lessons have become by now accepted widely. For anthropologists it has become commonsensical to avoid falling into essentialist traps, understanding boundaries as fluid and porous rather than impermeable and static, and taking regional contextualisation seriously. Anthropologists study 'large issues' in 'small places' [Eriksen 1995]. However diverse or dis-embedded these places might be, however blurred or fragmented their boundaries, our ability to contextualise them will remain crucial as long as fieldwork (and participant observation) stays at the centre of our discipline. This need for contextualisation calls for an engagement with a scalar perspective that is not only local, national or global, but also regional, whereby the different ways of conceptualising a region have an influence on the very way in which a regional context becomes framed, and thus is understood, in anthropological studies [Marsden 2012: 342]. Even if today's world is becoming more mobile, flexible and connected, regionalism, in its double meaning of social patterns and 'cultural phenomena that are constant across a region', and of regional traditions of ethnography

brought about by anthropologists as creators of regional 'texts', will continue to be an essential component of the ethnographically minded anthropological project [Barnard 2002 (1996): 714–5].

From all this it follows, at least in my view, that the debate about how to restructure regional studies is somehow already solved and surpassed in a practical sense: in anthropology, area studies are conceptualised as a dynamic and interconnected field that allows for in-depth engagement with the (moving) objects of anthropological investigation. Although the anthropology of Central Asia still suffers the sense of insecurity and marginality of the latecomer to global anthropological debates, and despite its struggles for full institutional and intellectual recognition, it is keeping pace with a critical understanding of regional studies. This is testified by a growing literature able to reconcile regional expertise with broad trans-regional perspectives, topics of investigation and comparisons (see a review in: [Reeves 2014]).

Recent years have seen our field of study undergoing growing thematic complexity and pluralisation. In general terms, the field has been leaving behind the more general and descriptive 'catch-up ethnography' [Liu 2011: 115], which characterised the fieldwork of the first post-Soviet generation of social and cultural anthropologists trained in western universities, and it has been much more concerned with broader anthropological debates by directing itself towards more engagement with thematic reflection and specialisation. The increasingly divergent national development paths of the former Soviet Central Asian republics have also played an important role in this differentiation, as the conditions and circumstances of anthropological work now differ greatly between countries. The very same effervescence and growth in complexity seen in the 'anthropologies from the west', which started to deal with Central Asia since the end of the Soviet Union, can be now also observed among the segment of anthropologists, ethnographers and ethnographically-minded archeologists linked to the historically antecedent Soviet scholarly tradition [Mühlfried, Sokolovskiy 2011]. After a difficult and more quiet first post-Soviet decade this 'local' scholarship is now more visible, although not always well-connected internationally and regionally. Its recent re-evaluation is being complicated by the fact that in the former Soviet Central Asian republics the national academic establishments tend to refuse regional (i.e. supra-national) labels, follow nationally distinct paths and agendas, and suffer from economic and political constraints [Dagyeli 2015]. Further evidence for the expansion and consolidation of a regional anthropology of Central Asia comes from the appearance of an internationally oriented (and publishing) 'anthropology at home', as well as of a cohort of new anthropologists from the region that now study Central Asia from universities abroad but without focusing on the area they actually come from.

Against the background of these trends and developments, the questions of our debate can be answered in a straightforward way:

1

A concept of regional studies is needed, legitimate and has, so far, proven to be productive. Its institutionalisation (in study programs, research departments, area journals, etc.) is functional to the maintaining of high standards of scholarship. This is true in general, but even truer for Central Asia, a region that, by languishing in a precarious institutionalisation, pays a higher price than other areas for falling 'in-between' the more established neighbouring regional fields of scholarship. Central Asia has nuanced, historically sedimented characteristics that make it unique and justify a regional approach. Delegating its study to neighbouring areas comes at a loss of scholarship. Moreover, as all ethnography is contingent and contextual, and therefore 'regional', there is nothing dismal about writing anthropology through a Central Asian lens.

2

The boundaries of Central Asia cannot (and should not) be defined in a clear-cut but in an inclusive way. The different ways of tracing the boundaries of Central Asia reflect different scholarly traditions that carry rich legacies, hermeneutical wealth and a welcomed diversity of views. Although admittedly this is easier said than done, these differing legacies and perspectives should be seen as complementary and beneficial, and not as competing or detrimental, for the progress of the study of Central Asia's past, present and future. Furthermore, migratory patterns, geopolitical issues and the economic integration into the global flows of twenty-first-century capitalism are causing shifts in the region's cultural, economic, and political boundaries. As these changes appear and intensify, we are led to ask ourselves how (and which) boundaries matter, what they mean and how they are made.

3

Although certain thematic fields more than others have been developed within certain institutions and by now figure prominent in anthropological accounts about our region (for instance, the anthropology of the state, of migration, of post-socialist livelihoods, of religion) neither Islamism, nor any other dominant theme should be seen as Central Asia's defining feature. On the short term, pushing forward regional 'gatekeeping concepts' [Appadurai 1986] might promote a marginal area and help it into the limelight, but this might prove ephemeral and result in a drop back on the longer-term perspective. Therefore, the anthropology of Central Asia should beware of short-lived fashions and should seek to reach out for the broader questions of the discipline, addressing social and cultural change broadly, and be open to cross-comparisons and discussions with the neighbouring areas and disciplines. In this perspective, the anthropology of Central Asia should be concerned about and deal with whatever is good for the progressing of the field

and it should keep its eyes firmly on whatever comes up from future ethnographies.

The direction towards which the community of anthropologists working on Central Asia should head to seems intuitively clear — we need to deepen our regional scholarship and cooperation, engage regionally in transdisciplinary dialogues, produce ethnographies that connect with broader debates and perspectives, and de-provincialise our local debates. However, the challenges on the way to it are huge and growing. Some originate in our own field of study. Others, such as political and economic constraints, do not. Joining forces with all the actors in the arena of the anthropology of Central Asia would help, but today our disciplinary field is heterogeneous and fragmented and is proving difficult to reconcile in practice. Besides language barriers (old and new ones), differences between scholarly approaches and traditions are still wide. A scholarly tradition with roots in Soviet science, new national academic schools reflecting the positions of the new establishment and intelligentsia, and the galaxy of 'western' anthropologies with their own heterogeneous national scholarly traditions, biases and priorities, have little ground to share except their area of investigation and perhaps a natural self-centeredness. These disciplinary segments are unequally equipped for the unpredictable political and economic waters in which Central Asia is currently navigating. Anthropologists in the West suffer from working in austere budgeted universities, but they are doing incomparably better than the majority of their colleagues in Central Asia. The imbalance in funds, resources and power is not favouring debate on equal terms, nor is it helping dialogue in a sustainable and fruitful way. These obstacles to bringing closer together Central Asia's 'anthropologies' cannot be overcome simply or quickly.

For the anthropology of Central Asia the changing economic and political environment poses an even greater challenge than that of achieving 'the friendship of scholars' — of harmonising 'western' and 'eastern' scholarly approaches. Across the whole region, repressive regimes have become more hostile to critical anthropological research and prefer sponsoring technocratic discourses when it comes to scientific cooperation. Anthropologists must struggle or fear for their access to their field, they must be aware that their work and publications might be followed closely and thus must take great care in order not to jeopardise their own well-being and that of those with whom they are working. Although every country is different, among security officials and administrators suspicion is more or less equally strong everywhere. There is by now more understanding of what anthropologists do when they do fieldwork, but still little comprehension for what anthropologists are after and what their produced knowledge is good for. As compared with the previous post-socialist decade, even in the less restrictive, more

liberal countries anthropologists walk on thinner ice and are confronted with more diffidence when they direct their interest toward non-conventional topics or adopt critical views. This happens at a time when our discipline is becoming more visible (since our affiliates grow in number and the scholarly output increases its quality and quantity) and more vulnerable. We are working on a region in a protracted suspension, always on the edge of a major shift in leadership, which might inevitably have an impact on our increasingly surveillance-bedevelled discipline. The conditions for fieldwork today appear more difficult than a decade ago and the outlook is uncertain. It remains unclear how far political relationships between 'east' and 'west' will cool down or recover, and how this will impact upon scholarly and ordinary life. Ultimately, when it comes to the future of our discipline in the region, much will depend on whether the best days for fieldwork are definitely over, or if even better days will come.

According to Kohl [Kohl 2011: 3] anthropology's crisis 'has little to do with its object of study, which has always been engaged in processes of change, but rather with the discipline itself.' While this statement seems also valid for our corner of the world, an important clarification is that in Central Asia the threat to our discipline today has less to do with the epistemology and legitimacy of our approaches than with the conditions constraining our work. We should not allow these circumstances to diminish anthropology's protagonism in our region. I share Maurice Godelier's (and many others') view that in today's globalised world our discipline is best equipped to address and to understand otherness, complexity and diversity [Godelier 2011]. This is certainly also true for Central Asia, but also ethically and epistemologically, anthropology can do much for our region in a deeper sense (and vice versa): the anthropological perspective and the anthropological encounter transform the way of seeing the world, and by so doing, they also transform the world. The diffusion of anthropological knowledge cannot but rise awareness and connectedness, which is the opposite of disempowerment and subalternity. There is, implicitly, an emancipatory stance in anthropology, one that could acknowledge, appreciate, and valorise most aptly the rich cultural legacies and diversity of our region. In this respect, paraphrasing Godelier's words, we could say that 'in today's Central Asia anthropology is more important than ever.'

There is another 'lesson' to be taken, one that goes in the opposite direction, namely from our region to anthropology's contemporary condition of crisis and introspection. After the excesses of 'globalism', and a hysteric search for theoretical innovation and originality, a regional approach to anthropology can prospect a refreshingly decelerated zone in which to sharpen acumen anew by getting back to our disciplinary origins. After all, even the classics of our discipline stem from particular regions (which were as marginal as ours is now,

until they captivated more attention). Good sense suggests that a return to regional expertise and to plain and principled ethnographic craftsmanship could prospect, if no panacea to the insecurities and disorientations caused by anthropology's disciplinary 'overheating' [Eriksen 2009] at least some remedy to its malaises by proposing a model of anthropological engagement that is perhaps old-fashioned, but intellectually valid, viable and needed. In this way, what the anthropology of Central Asia needs to do more is to forge alliances with other disciplines and reflexivity in our regional undertaking. The open question is if this will be enough to counter the challenges of our field or if in Central Asia our anthropological investigation, engagement and reflection might need more radical reshaping in order to survive or prosper.

References

- Appadurai A., 'Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1986, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 356–61.
- Barnard A., 'Regional Analysis and Regional Comparison', Barnard A., Spencer R. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Routledge, 2002 (1996), pp. 714–18.
- Carrier J., 'Anthropology after the Crisis', *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 2012, no. 64, pp. 115–28.
- Clifford J., Marcus G. (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1986, 305 pp.
- Dagyeli J., *Fluid or Perpetual? Conceptions of the Central Asian Region and Its Study in Local Textbooks*. Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin. Unpublished paper, 2015.
- Eriksen T. H., 'Living in an Overheated World: Otherness as a Universal Condition', Čiubrinskas V., Sliužinskas R. (eds.), *Identity Politics: Histories, Regions and Borderlands*. Klaipėda: Klaipėda University, 2009 (Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis, vol. 19; Studia Anthropologica, 3), pp. 9–24.
- Eriksen T. H., *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press, 1995, 323 pp.
- Fardon R. (ed.), *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press; Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990, 360 pp.
- Godelier M., 'In Today's World, Anthropology Is More Important Than Ever', Jebens H., Kohl K.-H. (eds.), *The End of Anthropology?* Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2011, pp. 203–18.
- Jebens H., Kohl K.-H. (eds.), *The End of Anthropology?* Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2011, 254 pp.
- Kohl K.-H., 'Introduction', Jebens H., Kohl K.-H. (eds.), *The End of Anthropology?* Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2011, pp. 1–12.
- Liu M., 'Central Asia in the Post-Cold War World', *Annual Reviews in Anthropology*, 2011, vol. 40, pp. 115–31.

- Marsden M., 'Southwest and Central Asia: Comparison, Integration or Beyond?', Fardon R. et al. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Social Anthropology*. London: Sage, 2012, pp. 340–65.
- Mielke K., Hornidge A.-K., *Crossroads Studies: From Spatial Containers to Social Interactions in Differentiated Spatialities*, (Crossroads Asia Working Paper no. 15). Bonn: ZEF, 2014, 60 pp.
- Mühlfried F., Sokolovskiy S., *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia*. Munster: LIT, 2011, 337 pp.
- Reeves M., 'Antropologia Srednei Azii cherez desiat let posle "sostoianie polia": stakan napolovinu polon ili napolovinu pust?' [The Anthropology of Central Asia Ten Years after 'The State of the Field': A Cup Half Full or Half Empty?], *Antropologicheskij Forum*, 2014, no. 20, pp. 60–79. (In Russian).
- van Schendel W., 'Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2002, no. 20, pp. 647–68.

ZULAIKHO USMANOVA

On ethnography in Tajikistan

Ethnographic research in Tajikistan (that is, on the territory of modern Tajikistan) began in the nineteenth century, and evolved dynamically during the twentieth. Towards the end of the 1980s ethnographic expeditions were gradually reduced to nothing, and since the 1990s have not been organised at all. Not a single dissertation on an ethnographic topic has been defended in Tajikistan for the last fifteen years. On the one hand, the works of Russian and Soviet ethnographers are actively used and popularised: the collections of the Soviet ethnographers housed in the Ethnographical Museum are a matter of national pride. On the other hand, a school of ethnography is practically non-existent: there are only a few colleagues at the ethnographical department of the A. Donish Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Tajik Academy of Sciences. The head of the department is the well-known art historian Professor L. N. Dodkhudoeva. The situation of academic ethnographic research in the provinces is far worse.

This is all a sign of the critical state of ethnography in Tajikistan. It would have been

Zulaikho Usmanova

Institute of Philosophy,
Political Science,
and Jurisprudence,
Academy of Sciences
of Republic of Tajikistan,
Dushanbe, Tajikistan
zusmonova@gmail.com

impossible to imagine in Soviet times. The everyday life of the people and their rituals and traditions have long ceased to be the object of academic analysis by Tajik or Russian scholars. The state uses its own tools for deciding important social problems, not always in favour of scholarship (for example, the Law for Regulating Traditions, Rites and Festivals). If we want to preserve and expand ethnography in Tajikistan, then in my opinion it is essential to organise collaboration with Russian academic and teaching institutions interested in studying Tajik culture. 'Central Asian' studies, which traditionally began in Russia, must be brought back to life: such a necessity is dictated not only by political considerations. There is still a particular attitude, respect and deference to everything connected with Russia among Tajiks. It will be far easier for a Russian-speaking researcher to carry out fieldwork, thanks to the cultural and historical proximity and commonality of our peoples. There is a much higher chance of local informants speaking frankly to a Russian-speaking researcher than to a foreigner. Russian scholarship must regain its pre-eminence in the study of the region. Many members of the academic community in Tajikistan look to Russia as the guarantor of Tajik scholarship, as the fount and preserver of knowledge and academic experience. This is confirmed by the fact that dissertation committees in Tajikistan work under the jurisdiction of the Higher Attestation Commission of the Russian Federation.

As for the name by which Middle Asian studies are known, I do not think that this has any particular importance. What is important is that scholars should be involved in the process of studying the region as such, and not the particular name of this form of research. As a little recommendation, I should like to advise Russian institutions to collaborate more actively with the academic structures in the countries of the region, to involve local scholars in their fieldwork, and also to undertake intensive study of the languages of the region, since Russian is gradually disappearing from its cultural space.

Certain questions about the position of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Western anthropology has the concept of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', relating to the point of view of the researcher. This concept is important for solving the problem of the reliability of the results of research. The outsider is usually a researcher into a culture / group / event who has grown up in a different cultural milieu and who has studied the language and mores of the group in question and observes them, as it were, from outside. In this connection Western researchers have given great importance to the knowledge of aboriginal languages in order to be capable of direct communication with representatives of the people being studied, without using interpreters. Although he would spend a long time living among the people in question, the scholar would never abandon his position as a researcher and would never try to identify with the group.

The insider is someone who studies a culture from the inside and is often a member of that culture. It is the insider who has the hardest time of it, because he or she has to cultivate the view from outside and interpret phenomena while at the same time remaining within the cultural space, belonging to it and being a part of the culture that he or she is studying. Local researchers find themselves in the difficult position of insiders. In my own case, in 2005 and 2009, when studying everyday Islam and female religious specialists, I was ‘saved’ by the fact that I had an outsider, a Western researcher, alongside me and I could turn to him for help and support at any point. Before the start of the project in 2009 I had not had occasion to have anything to do with representatives of popular Islam, and this gave me confidence that it would be a new and unknown experience, in which the view from outside would prevail. My upbringing, which had been in a cosmopolitan family strongly aligned with official Islam (since my father was a *qāri*, a reciter of the Koran), had excluded any close interaction with representatives of popular Islam, since all spiritual ‘services’ had been ‘included’, and interaction of this sort had been far from welcome to my parents. Life, upbringing and education in a cosmopolitan setting likewise did not give the author a ‘Leninabad’ identity, even though my father was a prominent member of the indigenous population of the city of Khujand.¹ Therefore I had to study the culture, language, customs and peculiarities of my native and non-native city as if for the first time.

All this is written with a single purpose: in any research there must be both an insider and an outsider. They complement each other, and permit both a fresh outlook and an interpretation of situations which are beyond the comprehension of an individual researcher. In this context the presence of foreign or Russian researchers in the academic space appears an essential condition for in-depth research into the culture of the region.

The spectrum of Middle Asian studies. Middle Asian studies must continue to embrace a wide range of questions, from diet and clothing to geopolitical interests and ideologies. As an anthropologist I can say that for the last twenty years or so questions of the modern ethnography of the Tajik people have not been a subject of academic interest. This research needs to be revived: highly significant aspects of cultural development are fading into the mists of history without having been studied. We also need to study gender-related aspects of culture: it is the sphere of gender relations that has perhaps undergone the greatest changes since the collapse of the USSR. For example, the very idea or stereotype of ‘the good Tajik woman’ had changed, and continues constantly to change in accordance with social,

¹ Khujand was known as Leninabad during the Soviet period. [Transl.].

cultural, ideological and other transformations. As for the culture of the Tajik diet, it too has changed greatly as a result of the civil war of 1992–1997 and the ensuing processes of reconstruction: certain dishes have been replaced by others, the sacred and profane dietary codes have changed, the roles of men and women have changed, there has been a cultural interchange, the attitude to alcohol had changed, and so on. These processes, and many others, have remained out of sight to researchers.

As for Islam, it is hard not to agree that Islam is becoming an ever more important, at times central topic in the region. The study of political Islam is receiving huge attention, and hundreds of books and articles have been written on it. Islam will remain an important topic in the study of the region, but it would be desirable for academic work not to limit itself to markedly political and / or geopolitical research. There are numerous questions and topics connected with Islam that await their resolution — Islam in the context of culture, the influence of Islam on people's everyday life, women in Islam, etc.

FROM THE EDITORS

The questions that *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* proposed have produced an interesting discussion and have indicated a number of topics which are evidently exciting anthropologists studying Middle Asia at present. One could hardly call the list exhaustive, because by no means every point of view or perspective was represented here. We nevertheless succeeded in attracting participants who represent different countries and academic schools, which seems to have allowed quite a wide spectrum of opinions and approaches to have been reflected. I would not, moreover, say that this discussion has been limited to any particular sore points of a closed 'Central Asian / Middle Asian / Eurasian' conversation. The topics raised and the ways in which they were ventilated most likely have analogies in other regional research communities, echo them and coincide with them, since they are concerned with anthropology as a whole, despite their narrow focus and the almost 'domestic' conversation between specialists in the same region, who often know each other well.

Sergei Abashin

European University
at St Petersburg, Russia /
Institute of Ethnology
and Anthropology,
Russian Academy of Sciences,
Moscow, Russia
s-abashin@mail.ru

The discussion has shown that there are no insurmountable disagreements about the need and usefulness of retaining a regional focus in anthropology. Everyone is agreed that modern anthropology needs a strong critical impulse, including a reassessment of ‘methodological regionalism’, that is, the boundaries and concepts which were established as if set in stone but which imply an unacknowledged essentialist description, which is convenient for the (geo) political interest of different countries and forces (Boris Pétric). Everyone is agreed that people and societies have been and will remain mobile, that frontiers are movable, and that cultural practices and notions that have arisen in various places may expand, interact and commingle in the most diverse combinations (Madeleine Reeves, Diana Ibañez-Tirado and Magnus Marsden). This means that any understanding and any theory must take account of the processes and results of global and transnational influences, displacements and exchanges, and in addition have a comparative perspective to make the multitude of points of contact or departure visible. A consensus has come, or is coming into being that the concept of the ‘region’ is blurring, losing its precision and singularity of meaning and becoming rather the object or result of imagination, negotiation and competition, while the focus of research is inevitable shifting from the study of territorial communities to the development of the social game in the course of which they are constructed.

But what has been said above by no means abrogates the need for close attention to place, locality, or context and its specifics (Tokhir Kalandarov, Igor Savin, Tommaso Trevisani). Fieldwork (participant observation) remains the trademark of the discipline, and requires the accumulation of knowledge about each specific place and its peculiarities, language study (mentioned by many participants in the discussion) and even an emotional attachment, which helps to establish a long-term confidential relationship with a particular place. The region, as one way of measuring place, is, as both an analytical and a practical category used by anthropologists, a means of achieving the important aim of bringing together numerous cultural, political, economic and other tendencies at a single territorial point, which then becomes the vantage point or point of reference. What we understand as ethnographic competence (being a specialist in a particular region) remains in this sense not only an important means of structuring the discipline, but also a significant position for an analysis intended to grasp distinctiveness and specificity, and to discern the sorts of disjunction and trajectory of which global directions and movement along them consist.

It is instructive that the participants in the discussion were not much exercised by the question of how to define the borders of ‘their’ region or what to call the region that they study — Central or Middle Asia or Eurasia — nor by what the main topic around which regional

anthropological thought should revolve should be. It is perhaps universally acknowledged that these borders and names have a complex history and political history and that they should not be endowed with any sort of essential, eternally prescribed characteristics (Svetlana Gorshenina). It is noted that regional frameworks may expand and contract, and change their names, depending on the particular aims of the research or scholarly dialogue (Gulnara Aytpaeva, Igor Savin, Jesko Schmoller). No one denies the importance of studying Muslim practices and identities (Anna Cieślewska), but no one seems to intend to limit themselves to them, which, of course, goes counter to the political demand for expertise, which is becoming more and more preoccupied with religious subjects. The existing wide repertoire of concepts, geographical configurations and sets of problems allows for a multitude of contexts to be taken into account, for a flexible reaction to the research tasks that are set, and for integration into various disciplinary and institutional requirements (Gulnara Aytpaeva, Natalya Kosmarskaya). What seems logically contradictory provides scholars by its very ambiguity with an instrument for their own academic mobility and hybridity.

It is symptomatic that the questions of who has the overriding right to define the problems and configuration of the region, how the hierarchies of authority within the academic community are constructed and what asymmetries there are within it proved painful to one degree or another. Some participants in the discussion placed their critique within the colonial framework, noting the inequality between local and external researchers and the imposition of their own interests, paradigms or pre-eminence by the latter on the former. In some cases the critique was directed at Russia or the Soviet tradition (Emil Nasritdinov), in others at 'the West' (Zulaikho Usmanova) and in yet others at the Soviet tradition and 'the West' as a single whole or as different versions of colonialism (Alima Bissenova and Kulshat Medeuova, Jesko Schmoller). Other participants in the discussion, on the contrary, noted that there are different centres and directions within 'the West' which may stand in complex relations to one another (Diana Ibañez-Tirado and Magnus Marsden), and that certain countries in Central / Middle Asia / Eurasia have recently begun to restrict access for foreign scholars, which influences the formation of academic possibilities and priorities (Tommaso Trevisani, Anna Cieślewska). In this discussion it remains for Russian researchers either to position themselves as an independent authoritative centre, for which it seems the no longer have either the will or the power, or to join the West as historically part of it (Natalya Kosmarskaya), or to consider themselves the victims of 'the West' and their former 'younger brethren' on whom they once lavished so much love. This last point of view was not heard in the responses, but it is widely represented in Russian political debates.

The discussion that arose, albeit unexpectedly, about authorities and hierarchies, speaks of the existence of sharp competition for the right to define the borders and content of Central / Middle Asian / Eurasian anthropology, and of the fact that the image of the region is being formed today at the meeting-point of different academic traditions, observing roles and preferences. Moreover, many scholars, who pursue their career and migrate from one country, academic position and topic to another, themselves reproduce this multiplicity and indeterminacy, mixing different languages, roles and hierarchies (Aksana Ismailbekova and Aida Alymbaeva). The Soviet past, often mentioned in the discussion, has evidently also survived as yet another research framework and as part of the life-story of many people, and continues to unite and divide them.

It is hard to say whether this agreement, or to be more accurate this shared direction of thought, on many questions means that Middle Asian studies have coalesced as a separate 'regional' field of knowledge with its own profile, or whether on the contrary they merely adapt themselves to various expectations and do not have any common agenda. The discussion in this Forum, needless to say, was only an attempt to indicate the possible range of opinions and identify the points of agreement and tension that exist.

Sergei Abashin

*The answers originally in Russian
were translated by Ralph Cleminson*