Mothers-in-Law on the Doorstep

What sounds like an adventure is actually hard work: In order to form a clear picture of the Kyrgyz people uncluttered by romantic notions, Nathan Light collected the life stories of around 300 real men and women. As a scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, his interest centers on the changes in family relationships in the country’s post-communist society.

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For outsiders, Kyrgyzstan lies on the old Silk Road in the heart of Central Asia, bounded by China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This description conjures up images of endless caravans slowly winding their way from Asia to Europe. Laden with valuable goods and precious knowledge, their routes skirt places where the early religious and political history of Eurasia took shape. Notions of warlike nomads and armies that used advanced technology to conquer the surrounding regions and unite them under their dominion have captured people’s imaginations.

“Such images aren’t wrong, but they distort our view of the far more complex whole,” says Nathan Light of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. What passes for knowledge tends to be an amalgam of clichés pieced together from travel brochures and vague retellings of the more dramatic moments in the history of Central Asia. “Everyone’s heard of Genghis Khan, but only very few Europeans are interested in the realities of daily life, either in his day or the present,” continues Light, who first began his fieldwork in Central Asia in 1989.

Curiosity is mostly limited to either the exotic or the extreme – the same preoccupations that prevailed when ethnological interest in Europe first emerged in the early 16th century. Part of the fascination with exploring the unknown regions of Europe lay in weaving tales of the human and natural curiosities to be found in these newly discovered lands. Gradually, over time, ethnology has moved on from this approach. “My task is to move beyond such preoccupations and study the minutiae of daily life: how people are born and how they grow up, start a family and lead a normal life. These days, we are interested in much more than just exotic differences,” says Light.

With this in mind, a number of researchers from the Max Planck Institute are conducting fieldwork in different parts of Kyrgyzstan. Projects range from the country’s religious, legal and political practices and its history to the working lives of the rural population and the daily routines of the apartment block dwellers in the metropolis of Bishkek.

STUDYING FAMILY AFFAIRS IN THE FIELD

Like many of his colleagues in the “Socialist and Postsocialist Eurasia” department headed by Director Chris Hann, Nathan Light has a particular interest in regions where the balance of power is shifting and society is in upheaval. It is at pivotal moments like these that ethnologists can find some exciting structures revealed to them. In fact, US-born Light’s current project is headed in just this direction. Describing his primary interest, he explains: “I want to study the changes in family relationships in post-communist society.”

His research work balances British social anthropology’s focus on investigating concrete social relationships, and American cultural anthropology’s...
The bride and groom with their families after their civil wedding ceremony in Bishkek. This photo, like the majority in this article, is taken from the book by Judith Beyer and Roman Knee entitled *Kirgistan: A Photoethnography of Talas* (Munich, Hirmer Verlag, 2007).
more abstract culture and practices that center on meanings and discourse. “In the modern world, people have come to think of distinct bounded social units as each having its own unique culture and history. Everyone is taught to join a collective identity with a shared history and culture, and some kind of national or local territory,” Light explains.

In order to form a picture of the Kyrgyz people uncluttered by the romantic notions conveyed by tourist brochures, Nathan Light collected the life stories of about 300 men and women. Over the past four years, he has spent a total of 18 months in the country. Starting out from the capital city of Bishkek, he has traveled to the villages of Talas Province, as well as in the southern and eastern parts of Kyrgyzstan, including the Tianshan (“Mountains of Heaven”) around Lake Issyk Kul.

At first he attempted to strategically select his fieldwork destinations, but once on-site, he discovered that planning did not provide the expected outcomes. “I tried to choose villages that I considered to be typical, but in the end, it became obvious that every one of them has its own history and cultural peculiarities.” Finally, he settled on five villages and the city, Bishkek, for data to make his comparisons. In his interviews, his interests as an ethnologist led him to query the life histories of his subjects in general, and their familial relationships and interpersonal conventions in particular.

Despite being a stranger asking about personal family matters, he encountered few reservations: “In most cases, people took pride in being interviewed, and enjoyed the idea that someone was interested in their life story.” Especially older people were aware of their role as witnesses of times past and present: “Most of them regarded the story of their life as a personal account of the complexity of historic change.”

NO ONE MISSES MUD FLOORS AND STRAW BEDS

They told Nathan Light and his tape recorder just how they managed in the days of communism, and of the new living conditions that a market economy and liberalism have brought them. Describing his impressions, the Max Planck researcher explained that “society has changed enormously since the demise of socialism. Partly in terms of greater economic opportunities and freedoms, but also with regard to the greater willingness of the Kyrgyz people to accept a return to traditional forms of familial relationships, religion and social organization.” This newfound liberty also allows people to take a more differentiated view of the world and things in general: “As a rule, it is evident that the Kyrgyz are able to exercise much greater awareness in living their social options than in the past.”

But even during the socialist era, family relationships were an established part of soviet politics. Most Kyrgyz originally lived as nomadic herdsmen grouped together in clans. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, they were forced to abandon this lifestyle and take up agriculture, working on state-owned farms as collectives along with other ethnic groups. That was when the Kyrgyz learned to grow their own wheat, potatoes, tobacco and other things that they had previously been able to obtain only by bartering for Russian or Volga-German produce.

In the interviews, many of them showed little sign of regret for the passing of their old way of life. “They also tell of the dirt-floored houses that they lived in, sleeping on piles of straw. Rather than speak of the violence of collectivization, most Kyrgyz I have talked to prefer to describe their earlier practices as somewhat backward, and emphasize the benefits of improved housing and agricultural technologies,” says Light.

There were other aspects of Kyrgyz life that were also massively affected by the Soviet regime. In preparation for an entirely atheist society, all religious and spiritual practices were strictly controlled by the authorities. Family gatherings from weddings to funerals were required to conform to Soviet ideology, which forbade traditional practices such as arranged marriages and the payment of a bride price. Sons and daughters were to be entitled to equal treatment and have the right to choose their partner of their own free will. The prohibition of the old wedding traditions also put an end to the material transactions that, in the past, were customary when two families were joined in this way.

From this perspective, the restrictions cut right to the heart of Kyrgyz society. After all, family ties, the transfer of goods and social relationships are among the most important elements in life for these people – not to mention the accompanying festivities that are
celebrated at great expense. “The principal events also include birthdays, circumcisions, housewarmings and the handover of a dowry,” says Light, listing other notable highlights in Kyrgyz life.

To celebrate all of these events in a fitting manner, Kyrgyz custom demands the attendance of dozens, if not hundreds, of guests drawn from the extended family of the father, as well as friends and members of the new family to be joined in marriage. Countless gifts are presented. “The process often takes hours,” as Light knows from experience. The gifts are not exclusively for the host, but may also be intended for his relatives – garments for the grandparents, for example, or material contributions to the celebration itself.

A MASTER OF CEREMONIES KEEP THE GUESTS IN CHECK

It is the responsibility of the tamada, the master of ceremonies, to ensure that the celebration proceeds as it should. He notes who takes center stage at any given time and decides which games should be played or what else should be done to prevent boredom from setting in among the guests. The figure of the master of ceremonies also appears to the ethnologist to be an indicator of cultural change. “In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the tamada has become one of the most prestigious professional groups,” says Light. Everyone can name three or four famous masters of ceremonies. Depending on how far they have to travel, they can pocket up to 400 euros for each appearance. “The tamada with whom I spent the most time was also responsible for making sure that the guests behaved properly,” adds Light, recalling his experiences of Kyrgyz weddings.

The master of ceremonies is thus also concerned with keeping the guests’ alcohol consumption within bounds. “He might, for example, hold competitions that require the players to bring as many unopened bottles of vodka as possible up on stage from their tables – that in itself is interesting, because the original tamada in Georgia is responsible for keeping the wine flowing at such festivities.”

During the Soviet era, these celebrations were on a much smaller scale and more domestic. The principle, however, was the same: wedding celebrations meant a close bond between the participating families – a bond forged for life, not just between the bride and groom but between the two family lineages. “According to the Kyrgyz way of thinking, your child’s parents-in-law are the people you can depend on most,” Light says, explaining the special relationship between the parents of the bride and groom.

But such significant and costly events must be preceded by careful selection: marry in haste, repent at leisure. Marriages in Kyrgyzstan are among the most important methods with which to create strong social bonds between two groups. But allowing the parents to decide who will marry whom can also lead to complex problems, as our scientist discovered during his research: “Especially if, for example, the couple has already made their own – different – choice.”

THE RIGHT TO A FREE CHOICE OF PARTNER

In pre-Soviet times, some couples resolved the conflict with their parents by taking flight. If the couple could manage to spend time together against the will of their parents, the latter would ultimately give their consent. Also, it would be hard to marry the young woman off to some other man, since she had already been together with another.

With arranged marriages banned under Soviet rule, many young Kyrgyz exercised their right to a free choice of partner. Another wedding ritual also became widespread: ala kachuu – the abduction of the bride, in which the potential groom, supported by his friends, seizes the young woman and carries her off to his parent’s home. There she finds her future mother-in-law and the other women of the family waiting for her. They try to persuade the girl to stay by telling her that she will be treated well, and by telling her that only picky girls would reject this new family. They play on the girl’s desire to avoid insulting her potential in-laws, and they also rely on the belief...
in the force of elder women’s curses. Other popular ways to exert pressure include placing loaves of bread on the threshold. Sometimes the mother-in-law herself will lie down at the doorstep – respect for the staples of life and the honor due to age mean that stepping over either would lead to misfortune.

A RUNAWAY BRIDE BRINGS SHAME

Once the victim has spent the night in the house where she was taken after being kidnapped, she is generally considered to be no longer a virgin. This puts a lot of pressure on her to leave quickly or not at all. By running away, she would bring shame on her family, and the mother will often tell the girl to stay. “Even today, the authority of the parents is very strong,” says Light. “If the mother of the abducted girl says she should stay, she will not run away.”

Even in pre-Soviet times, women were abducted for marriage – for example, if the bride price was too high or the cost of the wedding celebration was beyond the parents’ means, or because social differences prevented the union from taking place. But generally there was an understanding between the young woman and her abductors who, through this act, were able to circumvent social constraints.

This is more easily understood against the background of the complex roles allotted to the two sexes in this culture. For most unmarried women, the subject of relationships with men was, and still is, a rather difficult one: their parents may be too keen to see them married off, and they themselves might like to marry soon – yet they may not, under any circumstances, let it show. Public opinion interprets an overly conspicuous interest in a forthcoming marriage as a lack of modesty and self-control. Many women have saved themselves from this dilemma by staging a kidnapping. A timely abduction prior to the wedding has also enabled more than one young woman to avoid a marriage arranged by her parents. This was at least one way for a girl to make her own choice. “But there have also been cases in which young men have used abduction as a means to compel their own parents to accept their choice of bride,” adds Nathan Light.

In his interviews inquiring into people’s life stories, our researcher also discovered that, in the early years of Soviet domination, arranged marriages were still widespread despite the ban – though the matter was treated with much discretion. “If the girl did not agree, her parents would permit their daughter to be abducted by the young man’s family,” says Light, describing a common practice at the time. One of his interviewees, a 65-year-old woman, told him how she was escorted on foot by two sisters-in-law of the young man to the house of her future parents-in-law; another woman described how she was carried away on a donkey cart.

For an ethnologist, these Kyrgyz versions of bridal abductions offer fascinating insights into the structures of social behavior: “Four or five different groups of actors are following an identical cultural convention here.” The entire procedure begins with the abduction of the young woman by a young man aided by his friends. Then the boy’s older male relatives must go to the house of the bride to apologize to her parents and deliver gifts. Next, the sisters-in-law of the bride are permitted to go to her – and may either help to secure her release or persuade her not to flee.
“Each of these actions is replete with cultural conventions that dictate how the participants may achieve what they set out to do. The whole process is governed by strict rules of correct conduct,” says the Max Planck scientist. Without knowledge of the local social background, the procedure is hard to understand: “From an outside perspective, it is impossible to understand how this practice could, over time, become an entirely normal nuptial strategy.” It has been banned, it is arduous and dangerous – but it is also accepted. “And ultimately it overcomes some of the problems associated with other marriage traditions.”

The issue has since been taken up by some international human rights organizations and national women’s rights groups, but in Kyrgyzstan, their criticisms of violent bridal abductions are often not understood. “Many Kyrgyz do not see the woman as being abducted against her will,” says Nathan Light, summarizing the many opinions he has frequently heard expressed by the inhabitants of the towns and villages between Bishkek and Talas. The general obstacle to change is that many rural Kyrgyz consider abduction of a bride to be perfectly natural – interesting to talk about because full of surprising outcomes, but a normal way to find a bride for the household. “For them, that is the way things are.”

**WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN THE END**

In his 300 interviews and the many hours he has spent participating in and observing the most varied day-to-day events and festivities, Nathan Light has, however, noticed signs of change. “There are many efforts being made to combat bridal abductions, and some of them are very successful.” This is a multi-layered phenomenon that seemingly has complex roots in society. The concept of a romantic love match with free choice of a partner may be accepted by broad sections of the Kyrgyz population. In fact, for more than a few, it is a romantic ideal.

But there are so many obstacles to the implementation of this concept in practice that many see abduction as the better alternative. And ultimately, time is an important factor, as the Kyrgyz would prefer to build their relationships over an extended period of time and develop strong bonds. “And in a good relationship, a difficult start is easily forgotten,” says Light.