

# **Can Kurmanjan Datka unite Kyrgyzstan a second time?**

The film *Kurmanjan Datka* and nation building in Kyrgyzstan

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Image 1 Kurmanjan Datka

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# INTRODUCTION

## Research question & motivation

For this thesis, I will be answering the question how discourses of nationalism and nation building are propagated in the Kyrgyz film *Kurmanjan Datka* (2014). I have become interested in Central Asia since I started my MA in Modern Middle Eastern studies, where I participated in a course on the Silk Road and the connections between the Middle East and the Far East. This course focused on material culture, memory and commemoration in Central Asia. I found that Central Asia has an incredibly rich history which influenced Asia, the Middle East and Europe greatly. The historical importance of the region has been researched extensively. Some research on contemporary Kyrgyzstan is done – mainly focussed on its political development after the Soviet decades – but this is in no way comparable to the vast body of knowledge on pre-Soviet Central Asia.

When addressing Kyrgyzstan I have chosen to focus on nationalism, nation building and national identity because I find these incredibly interesting phenomena. I have encountered nationalism and nation building in different regions of the world throughout my academic education. For my MA in Modern Middle Eastern studies, I learned about nation building in the Middle East in the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the era of colonization and imperialism. In Turkey, Egypt and Iraq, nationalism emerged quickly, based on language or culture. Arab Nationalism was at its height in the 1950s, promoting the unity of the Arab people and their common history, literature and culture.

When it comes to Central Asia, nationalism and nation building have greatly affected the region's history. The Russian influence of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century has changed parts of Central Asia irreversibly. Just as Africa and the Middle East, Central Asia was divided into nations with arbitrary borders that crossed through cultures and communities. After Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan gained their independence in the early 1990s, the large

encompassing political Soviet system dissolved and left a political vacuum which was to be filled by the new nations themselves. The Soviet lifestyle still prevails today.

Kyrgyzstan has different national figures or heroes, including Kurmanjan Datka. In this thesis, I will focus on her as a historical heroine and figure of national pride. Kurmanjan (1811-1907) became a governor – *datka* – of several Kyrgyz tribes after her husband died in 1865. During her lifetime, the Tsarist regime expanded southwards into modern day Kyrgyzstan. Kurmanjan Datka united the Kyrgyz tribes against the Russian threat, a fight which she could not win eventually.

The film *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains* (2014) tells the story of her life. It was released on Kyrgyzstan's Independence Day, August 31<sup>st</sup>. It broke box office records and was played in cinemas for over six months. It was submitted for the Oscars in the category for Best Foreign Language Film in the same year and it was the most expensive film ever made in Kyrgyzstan, with a budget of \$1,5 million. The story of Kurmanjan gained immense popularity since the release of the film. It is a good example of a cultural expression of nationalism and how this is propagated through mass media to increase national cohesion around a popular historical figure. The heroine of the film unites the divided tribes and for this reason Kurmanjan Datka is remembered as *ulut enesi*, Mother of the Kyrgyz nation.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The remainder of the introduction continues with an explanation of the theoretical framework and the literature review. I clarify the choices I have made for the research and then clarify some of the important works in the studying of nationalism and nation building. This part is followed by a descriptive chapter on the history of Kyrgyzstan. This contains the early history of the Kyrgyz people, the development and influence of different empires, the Silk Roads trade, the Russian colonization and Soviet Era.

The body of the thesis contains three chapters. In the first chapter, I analyze the life and times of Kurmanjan Datka. It explains in what historical time she lived and the things she did that contributed to her role as a national Kyrgyz heroine.

The second chapter covers the political developments and nation building of Kyrgyzstan since the independence. Modern Kyrgyzstan is shaped by its history, yet also attempts are made to regain some of its lost identity and lost traditions. The state has launched multiple projects in an effort to unite the divided population. Several of these projects will be discussed.

In the third chapter, I bring together Kurmanjan Datka and the Kyrgyz attempts to build their nation. In this chapter, I assess how the figure of Kurmanjan Datka is presented in the film and how she contributed to the national story of Kyrgyzstan. I pay attention to the film made about her life. It is the aim of this thesis to connect Kyrgyzstan's nation building to the life and story of Kurmanjan Datka.

### **Methodology and Theoretical framework**

In order to study nationalism and nation building in Kyrgyzstan and the representation of Kurmanjan Datka, I focus on secondary sources in English and a few in French. Unfortunately, I do not speak or read Kyrgyz and Russian so I am unable to utilize those sources. I have read contemporary literature on nationalism and nation building, but also literature specific to the region. Besides that, I studied the history of Central Asia and of Kyrgyzstan. By doing this, I am able to discuss how history influenced the processes of nation building today. Throughout this process it is important to remember that one must always remain critical of sources. Central Asian scholars may know Central Asia and its culture through and through, but for scholars from outside the region it is for example easier to remain objective. This is closely related to the fact that I am unable to read several books in their original language and I depend in those cases on translations into English or French.

It is impossible to study a country without studying the relations with its neighbours and the rest of the world. As this analysis focuses on Kyrgyzstan, other regions or neighbouring states will be included only in so far as they are relevant to the Kyrgyz context. This will mostly concern Russia and the surrounding republics Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The whole region of Central Asia is important when speaking of broad history before Kyrgyzstan became a state. Locally speaking, the Alai Mountains will take a role as this is the region where most of Kurmanjan’s life took place. Other significant places are the Kokand khanate (1709-1883) and the city of Osh.



Map 1 Caucasus and Central Asia (2009)



Map 2 Kyrgyzstan (2011)

The timeframe of the thesis is quite broad. Kurmanjan Datka was born in 1811. Yet, to understand what Kurmanjan Datka means in contemporary Kyrgyzstan and what place she holds in Kyrgyz history, a short history of Kyrgyzstan needs to be told. Nation building began for most Central Asian states within the Soviet framework during their period as Soviet Socialist Republics. When these new nations became independent in the early 1990s, this nation building changed to building *national* identities.

Additionally, I have studied the life of Kurmanjan Datka. Her story is told in the film, but I have also used written sources. To analyze the film, I have made an overview containing a basic description of each scene. I have described vital scenes in more detail and copied significant dialogues and speeches.

Concluding, this thesis will be a case study analysis of the application of the theories of nation building on the film *Kurmanjan Datka* and aims to connect her as a figure to these theories.

## Literature review

Nationalism has been described and explained in many different ways by scholars throughout time. It is a concept difficult to define as it can be characterized as an ideology, a theory of political legitimacy, a mass sentiment and a political principle. 'Nations' are usually described as collectives of people who have certain things in common – such as a language or religion – and who connect through their identity, shared history or geographical place within a defined territory. Within the nation people consider themselves to be an actual unit, whether this is based on truth or imagination. The role of homogenization and universal education are influential as they make otherwise diverse groups or existing inequality increasingly indistinguishable. Nationalism supposedly overcomes religious, political and class differences, creating complete cohesion amongst all citizens in a unified national whole. It is presented as an empowering process of formation and maintenance of the nation where people consciously belong to.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key works on nationalism and nation building is *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson. In this book, anthropologist and political scientist Anderson explains how states were born out of modernization. Nations developed in Europe due to industrialization and modern means of communication which replaced religious culture. There are however three paradoxes around the concept 'nation' and nationalism in itself, that are discussed in Anderson's introduction of *Imagined Communities*. In the first place, nationalists think of the nation as ancient in a subjective way, while historians see the objective modernity of nations. Secondly, there seems to be the conviction amongst nationalists that nationalism is a universal phenomenon, which acts as a socio-cultural concept in the sense that *everybody* has a nationality. Anderson argues at the same time that each nationality is different. The third paradox of nationalism is the 'political' power it has versus its

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<sup>1</sup> P. Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation: Women, Families and Nationalism in twentieth-century Europe* (Toronto 2000) 10.

philosophical poverty. 'Nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers' in the way for example socialism or modernism have, according to Anderson.<sup>2</sup>

Anderson continues to explain that 'nationalism', 'nationality' and 'nation' are terms that are difficult to define, yet he does come up with a definition of 'nation' himself that states that a nation: 'is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.'<sup>3</sup> The reason Anderson considers nations to be imagined, is that even in small nations inhabitants will never know most of the other inhabitants, yet at the same time they sense a feeling of community in their minds. People *choose* to consider themselves a community and therefore form a nation.

Finally, Anderson considers the nation an imagined *community* because the nation is conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.<sup>4</sup> This essentially creates a feeling of fraternity despite actual existing inequalities and exploitation. Anderson briefly connects this feeling to the many wars and conflicts over the past two centuries that were inspired by nationalism and he wonders how it is possible that these imagined ideas generated these immense sacrifices.

A second work that is highly relevant to the discussion of my thesis is written by the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, titled *The Invention of Tradition*. In this book, the authors explain the invention of tradition as a concept that argues that many traditions which 'appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.'<sup>5</sup> Especially in the modern development of nations, this phenomenon contributes to fabricating a national identity, legitimacy and promotes a feeling of unity in a community or nation. Modern nations fabricate ancient stories – rooted in history – to establish continuity between the past and the present.

An example given by Hobsbawm and Ranger is the Highland tradition of Scotland. The idea of kilts, clans and a distinct Highland culture is a recent invention.<sup>6</sup> The 'kilt' as we know it today first appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, yet we think of this Highland culture as an ancient way of celebrating

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<sup>2</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London 2016) 5.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *Imagined communities* 6.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Imagined communities* 7.

<sup>5</sup> E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *Invented tradition* (Cambridge 2016) 1.

<sup>6</sup> Hobsbawm, *Invented tradition* 15.

distinct national identity. A second example is the rebuilding of the British parliament after World War II in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic style. This implies continuity with the past, although not necessarily an ancient past.

Hobsbawm and Ranger claim that this way of creating continuity with the past occurs mostly when societies go through rapid transformations in which old patterns are weakened or even destroyed. In this case, old traditions are no longer applicable or the institutions that promoted them are no longer adaptable or flexible. The authors note that 'such changes have been particularly significant in the past 200 years, and it is therefore reasonable to expect these instant formalizations of new traditions to cluster during this period.'<sup>7</sup> When old traditions cannot be used or adapted, new traditions are created.

Hobsbawm and Ranger conclude their introduction by dividing invented traditions in three categories. The first category of invented traditions is those traditions that should symbolize or establish social cohesion in a group. The second category consists of those traditions that establish or legitimize the institutions, status or relations of an authoritative body, such as a government. The third category incorporates invented traditions with the main purpose of socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

When studying invented traditions a wider study of a nation's history of society is necessary. Invented traditions show a society's relation to the past and how history can be a tool for creating legitimacy and group cohesion. Even revolutionary movements rely on their own past, their own culture and their own heroes and martyrs. This connection to the past – as Anderson also argued – is fabricated to contribute to the idea that a certain nation naturally formed out of ancient roots. In reality, modern nations are quite novel and fabricated, like the states of Central Asia. It is therefore necessary to examine the invention of tradition when studying nationalism and nation building.

Besides traditions, new symbols and devices are introduced as part of national states, such as a standard national language, a national anthem, a flag or the personification of the nation in a

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<sup>7</sup> Hobsbawm, *Invented tradition* 5.

<sup>8</sup> Hobsbawm, *Invented tradition* 9.

symbol or image. This personification can be either official, such as Germania and Marianne, but also in stereotype cartoons, such as Uncle Sam or John Bull.<sup>9</sup> When associated with these elements and various symbols, people become conscious of their citizenship.

A figure that represents the nation requires certain character traits. Franco Zeno and Kathy Blau made an analysis of what makes a good hero. In their article *Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation between Heroic Action and Altruism*, they describe heroism as ‘the apex of human behaviour’. One becomes a hero when one acts in ‘a pro-social manner despite personal risk.’<sup>10</sup> Zeno and Blue argue that heroes are associated with courageous or brave actions and the willingness to act in dangerous situation. Besides this, heroism always involves a level of physical peril or personal sacrifice. Saving others, putting ones live at stake to fight injustice or a call of martial duty can all contribute to this.

In the article, Zeno and Blue identify different subtypes of heroes, that help to identify what sort of heroic subtype is needed in a certain situation. For example, Kyrgyz national hero Manas fits in several categories as an individual that exposes himself to high military risks. We can place Kurmanjan Datka also in multiple hero subtype categories which will be discussed later on.<sup>11</sup>

### **Nationalistic Symbols**

Nationalism and nation building are partially expressed through symbols. As explained, these symbols represent the national community and intend to create a unifying feeling through visual representation of national values, history or people. The most well known symbols feature national anthems, flags and languages, but can also include a national colour, myth, sport, flower, animal or

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<sup>9</sup> Germania is the personification of the German nation, Marianne is France’s national symbol of liberty and reason, Uncle Sam is an American national figure and John Bull is a British figure of freedom and loyalty.

<sup>10</sup> E. Zeno and K. Blau, ‘Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism’, *Review of General Psychology* 15 (2011) 99.

<sup>11</sup> Zeno and Blau, ‘Heroism’ 102.

the connection to a certain territory. Other ways of nation building become visible through 'new' or less conventional analytical tools, like elections, personality cults or – in my case – cinema.<sup>12</sup> They all in their own way contribute to national identity formation. Besides these symbols, other elements can be part of national identity, such as religion and ethnicity.

History also cannot be overlooked. Each nation searches for – or creates – its own historical roots and possibly a prominent place in history. History provides answers to the questions 'who are we?' and 'where do we come from?' which are essentially the bedrock of a people's or nation's identity. These unifying elements, historical narratives and symbols can be expressed by the state in various ways, such as mandatory conscription, museums, mass education, mass celebrations and propaganda.

### **Nationalism and women**

Many of the above mentioned hegemonic theorizations on nationalism and nations ignore gender and gender relations. When studying a female figure like Kurmanjan Datka and her role in nation building, it is essential to analyze connections between nationalism and gender. Nira Yuval-Davis has written extensively on nationalism, but also studied racism, citizenship and identity. In her work *Gender and Nation*, she systematically examines the contribution of gender 'into several major dimensions of nationalist projects: national reproduction, national culture and national citizenship'.<sup>13</sup> She argues that constructions of nationalism and nations have specific notions of both 'manhood' and 'womanhood', which means that within the nation men and women have 'natural' roles to fulfil. Men are associated with civilization, culture and the public sphere. Women are more identified with nature and exclusion from the civilized public political domain because they are considered part of

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<sup>12</sup> R. Isaacs and A. Polese, 'Between "Imagined" and "Real" nation building: identities and nationhood in post-Soviet Central Asia', *Nationalities Papers* 43 (2015) 376.

<sup>13</sup> N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London 1997) 3.

the private sphere of the family. The family is like the micro-cosmos of the state and captivates ideal moral order and social solidarity.<sup>14</sup>

Within the family, women are viewed as wives and mothers and symbolize continuity and purity. Women are in charge of keeping the family honour intact, with a particular focus on sexual honour. Reproduction is not purely a biological notion – that of bearing children – but also a cultural notion as mothers are viewed to be responsible also for transmitting values and moral. Women’s reproductive roles are fundamental in nationalist discourses when one considers how origin and background are pivotal in the construction of ethnic or national collectives.<sup>15</sup> According to Patrizia Albanese reproduction and child-bearing are of strategic importance for nationalists and mothers – in their role of preserving traditions – need to be controlled as a way of protecting the nation. Albanese concludes that women participate in five ways in ethnic and national processes. They are first of all the biological reproducers of the community. Secondly, they are the reproducers of boundaries of these groups and thirdly women are the transmitters of culture and tradition. Fourthly, women are considered the signifiers of ethnic differences and fifthly they participate in national, economic, political and military struggles.<sup>16</sup>

In traditional nationalist gender roles, women are linked to origin and therefore the basis of national identity. In her article *Muslim Women and Nationalism*, Christiane Timmerman gives the example of how the symbolism of ‘mother and father’ is used to represent the nation, as ‘women may symbolize the nation, but men represent it.’<sup>17</sup> It is also for this reason that in Central Asian countries the personification of the nation is feminine; the nation is referred to as ‘the Motherland’ instead of ‘the Fatherland’ or the more neutral ‘Homeland’. The word ‘father’ is related to strength and power, whereas ‘mother’ is naturally associated with nurturing, birth and fertility.

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<sup>14</sup> C. Timmerman, ‘Muslim Women and Nationalism: The Power of the Image’, *Current Sociology* 48 (October 2000) 17.

<sup>15</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* 26.

<sup>16</sup> Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation* 17.

<sup>17</sup> Timmerman, ‘Muslim Women and Nationalism’ 17.

Then follows the question how exceptional women – such as Kurmanjan Datka – fit in these views on gender and nationalism. In an interview with the president of the Kyrgyz History Society Tyntchtykbek Tchoroev about Kurmanjan Datka, Tchoroev admits there were a few other female datka's in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but none who compared to Kurmanjan. The reason is that Kurmanjan's authority as a female leader in an all-male environment was recognized by Kokand, Bukhara and Russia. Tchoroev even compares her to contemporary women in Asian politics, such as Indira Ghandi and Benazir Bhutto.<sup>18</sup>

Even in contemporary Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is so far the only country to have had a female president. Roza Otunbayeva has been ambassador to the US, foreign minister of Kyrgyzstan and took on the role of interim president after violent protests had broken out in April 2010 that ousted the government of President Kurmanbek Bakiev. However, she herself was also a part of the entire governmental system, which is generally branded as corrupt.

After looking at the theories behind nationalism and nation building, it becomes clear that there is a lot to consider when we use them. Nationalism and nation building promote and create a feeling of unity within a nation and this is expressed for example through symbols, national figures, traditions and institutions. However, whether nation building can succeed is a second question. In Kyrgyzstan, it is a difficult case. People identify themselves in terms of their religion or their local clan or tribe and not in terms of their civic identity. It is therefore challenging to create *one* identity where *all* people relate to. The past of the Kyrgyz people and the Kyrgyz state have greatly contributed to the present situation. The next chapter will give an overview of this history.

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<sup>18</sup> Indira Ghandi was prime minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984. Benazir Bhutto was prime minister of Pakistan from 1988 to 1990 and from 1993 to 1996. | Qishloq Ovozi, 'Who was Kurmanjan Datka and What Does She Mean to the Kyrgyz People?' (version 31 December 2014) <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-who-was-kurmanjan-datka/26770979.html> (27 February 2018).

## Religion

Central Asia is predominately Muslim, but this does not mean the region is homogenous. Islam came to Central Asia between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century through traders and warriors from Persia, Arabia and the Turkic regions. The conversion to Islam took several centuries as it was a slow process that started in the south and gradually made its way north. This slow course was partially caused by the fact that in Central Asia other religions had already long existed, such as Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Manichaeism and Judaism. Besides these, the region had also beliefs of shamanism and animism which had been introduced by Mongol and Turkic tribes. Animism is a broad view of the world that connects ‘innumerable spiritual beings concerned with human affairs’ that are capable of harming or helping human interests. Animals, plants, objects and even locations are considered alive and contain spiritual essence.<sup>19</sup> The fact that elements of animism are visible in the film proves that these beliefs remain important in Kyrgyzstan till the present day.<sup>20</sup> This is possible because the majority of Muslims in Central Asia follow the Sunni Hanafi school, a school that is generally described as tolerant and adaptable.<sup>21</sup> Central Asian Islam also has a considerable tradition of the practice of Sufism and Central Asia was the birthplace of several Sufi orders, including the well-known Naqshbandiya.<sup>22</sup> The visiting and worshipping of shrines is still an important element of Central Asian Islam.

However, according to Devin DeWeese it remains difficult to identify and interpret Central Asian religion before and during the introduction of Islam. The relative scarcity of indigenous sources prior to the recordings of oral tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century is the most obvious reason.<sup>23</sup> The available sources we rely on are mostly accounts left by missionaries, travellers and geographers

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<sup>19</sup> None of the major world religions are animistic, however some of them contain animistic characteristics. Most other religions are animistic and this counts specifically for religions of tribal peoples all over the world and also in Central Asia. | E. Pauls, ‘Animism’ (version 2 February 2007), <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/animism/109469> (31 July 2018).

<sup>20</sup> S. Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations* (New York 2012) 24.

<sup>21</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 100.

<sup>22</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 101.

<sup>23</sup> D. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (Pennsylvania 1994) 29.

from other civilizations who are inevitable influenced by their own environment and are often characterized by misunderstanding or idealization. In this way, we see the religion of Central Asia only through the vision of outsiders.

Moreover, DeWeese argues that our knowledge is limited due to the fact that – in comparison to other “aboriginal peoples” (*tuzemtsy*) – the Central Asian peoples ‘have not enjoyed the same level or quality of scholarly attention.’<sup>24</sup> The academic study of religion was stunted for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because the region was incorporated into the Soviet Union. And even though the Soviets worked on a large number of ethnographic studies, these studies showed general hostility towards religion which was characterized as ‘superstition’ and signs of backwardness and primitiveness which was ‘to be abandoned by progressive thinkers.’<sup>25</sup>

Today, 94% of Kyrgyzstan’s population identifies as Muslim.<sup>26</sup> In the chapter *The Social Significance of Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, in a recent book on Central Asian Islam, Rouslan Jalil argues that most studies about Islam in the region are focused on ‘every day’ Islam.<sup>27</sup> The local element is crucial to understand the role of religion in the region. Jalil explains how folk Islam is regarded as a true Islam, even though it only faintly resembles the normative scriptural Islam. The reason is that this folk Islam gets its legitimacy from various sources, such as traditions, popular beliefs, legends and the veneration of saints. ‘Being a good Muslim’ has a different meaning in Central Asia than it has in other parts of the world. Adeeb Khalid states that ‘being Muslim came to mean adherence to certain local cultural norms and traditions rather than adherence to structures that were directly validated by the learned religion.’<sup>28</sup> There is less emphasis on the Five Pillars of Islam and more emphasis on the fluidity of Islam. In Kyrgyzstan, it is assumed that religious beliefs are therefore relatively shallow.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* 30.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, ‘Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan’ (version 3 January 2018), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html> (11 April 2018).

<sup>27</sup> P. Jones, (ed.), *Islam, Society and Politics in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh 2017) 7.

<sup>28</sup> A. Khalid, *Islam After Communism* (Berkeley 2014) 83.

<sup>29</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 100.

An explanation for this comes from Julie McBrien in her book *From Belonging to Belief*. With her anthropology background, she has done many years of fieldwork in Central Asia and explores how Islam is lived and debated. In her book, McBrien demonstrates that Soviet atheism and post-Soviet secularism have influenced people's lives as Muslims and their interpretation of Islam. She studied the rituals and the ideas people articulate and argues that religion in Central Asia is sometimes essentially a matter of belonging and not only a matter of belief.<sup>30</sup>

After the fall of communism, some scholars detected an Islamic revival. This revival stresses a continuation or re-emergence of certain practises of Islam, such as Sufism, the visiting of shrines and a revival of the importance of scripture. Though, argued by Khalid, 'the Islamic revival remains largely a phenomenon of cultural rediscovery.'<sup>31</sup> Because of Soviet policies in the past, Muslim identity had fused with notions of national identity. National expressions of identity, such as national dress, dishes or holidays, had also become *Muslim* expressions.<sup>32</sup> Islam came to be viewed as a bridge to national identity. Muslims were now able to re-establish formerly banned values and expressions. Religious belief definitely contributes to a sense of national identity and a common cultural heritage.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> J. McBrien, *From Belonging to Belief: Modern Secularisms and the Construction of Religion in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh 2017).

<sup>31</sup> A. Khalid, 'A secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2003) 586.

<sup>32</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 102.

<sup>33</sup> A. Amanbayeva, 'The Collision of Islam and Terrorism in Central Asia', *Asian Journal of Criminology* 4 (2009) 172.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF KYRGYZSTAN

### Early history

History and background play an important role in relation to identity and nationalism as it is presented as the origin of a people or a nation. The Kyrgyz are considered one of the ancient peoples of Central Asia, according to Tabyldy Akerov who wrote *Ancient Kyrgyz and the Great Steppe*. Based on archaeological research, inscriptions and several Chinese sources, the history of the ancient Kyrgyz is connected to different nomadic tribes from all over Central Asia, such as the Yenisei, the Tien Shan, Saks, but also the Mongols and the Eastern Turks. Throughout history, the Kyrgyz have been able to form several independent khanates.<sup>34</sup> It was in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century that Yenisei Kyrgyz established an independent state which existed until the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The centre of this khanate was in southern Siberia. This state was supported by mining, metallurgy and handicraft. It was in this state that the first written Kyrgyz language was formed.<sup>35</sup>

John Anderson argues that the early history of the Kyrgyz people remains a subject of controversy. He disagrees with Akerov and states that some of the forerunners of the Kyrgyz were indeed from the Yenisei river region but notes that these groups had originally emigrated from Central Asia. They were forced to migrate again to the south as the Mongol armies were advancing in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century an identifiable 'Kyrgyz' people were unable to escape the Mongol domination and found itself located in the territory of Chingiz Khan's son Chagatai.<sup>36</sup> An independent khanate emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as the power of the Mongols declined. This was however not a

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<sup>34</sup> A khanate is a political entity ruled by a Khan, which means something like 'chief' or 'king'.

<sup>35</sup> T. Akerov, *Ancient Kyrgyz and the Great Steppe: Following in the Tracks of Ancient Kyrgyz Civilizations* (Bishkek 2007) 85.

<sup>36</sup> J. Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (Amsterdam 1999) 1.

state with a national consciousness as we know it today. Tribal and kinship ties were the basis of social organization.<sup>37</sup>

Kyrgyz history is partially undocumented due to the fact that the ancient Kyrgyz were nomadic people for centuries and consisted of a mix of different tribes and clans. The nomadic people of Central Asia have no tradition of building homes or other monumental buildings and tend to keep landscapes untouched. There were only few cities in the region – such as Samarkand and Bukhara – but more cities did not really sprout until the Silk Road trade began.

Uncertainty about the early history of Kyrgyzstan has a second reason, namely the fact that the early Kyrgyz people based their history on oral traditions and not on written material, with the exception of some runic inscriptions. Most of our knowledge of the Kyrgyz came from sources from other peoples, mainly Chinese sources. They tell us for example that the ancient Kyrgyz empire was situated, ‘from Khami to the West, from Khorashara to the North, at the White Mountains.’<sup>38</sup> According to Akerov, the runic inscriptions mostly contain legendary stories that testify how the Kyrgyz ‘bore all burdens of wartime and always aspired to independence.’<sup>39</sup> These would later be used to support Kyrgyz nationalism.

Each tribe or clan developed its own narratives about mythical ancestors, origin and memorable events of the past. Epic poetry was – and is still today – a very important part of Kyrgyz culture. It reflects an ideological basis and represents the tribe’s way of living, genealogy, customs and traditions. Often such legends – whether Asian, European or American – contain tragic elements or collective traumas. In most cases, a hero, prince or a successor of a dynasty rises up and saves the people for a new beginning. According to Akerov, ‘the propaganda of the history of forming national statehood with the elements of the general tragedy touched feelings of the common people.’<sup>40</sup> We can say that these genealogical legendary stories propagandize the unification of a people, led by a

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<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan 2*.

<sup>38</sup> Akerov, *Ancient Kyrgyz and the Great Steppe* 10.

<sup>39</sup> Akerov, *Ancient Kyrgyz and the Great Steppe* 88.

<sup>40</sup> Akerov, *Ancient Kyrgyz and the Great Steppe* 63.

heroic leader who guides them to independence. This structure works as a blueprint for legends all over the world and therefore also in Central Asia.

The Manas epic is the best known example of epic poetry that reveals the history of the Kyrgyz people. The epic is over 1000 years old and was transmitted orally from generation to generation before it was written down in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Manas epic was then elevated to the national epic of Kyrgyzstan. It tells the story of Manas, who fought with his 40 tribes against the enemies of his people. The poem is longer than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined and the idea of the powerful avenger has sustained the tribes over the centuries in their fights against the Mongols, Russians and others.<sup>41</sup>

The 1000 year old epic is often used to claim the presence of the Kyrgyz people in the region.<sup>42</sup> Many of the events in the epic are believed to have taken place close to the territory of modern day Kyrgyzstan. It confirms the presence of Kyrgyz tribes in the establishing of the Karakhanid khanate (840-1212).<sup>43</sup> In 1995, Kyrgyzstan celebrated the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the epic poem.

### **Part of the greater entities**

Apart from the khanates in the first millennium, during most of their history, the Kyrgyz people have been part of greater empires, such as the Persian Samanid Empire (819-999), the Mongol Empire (1206-1368) and the Timurid Empire (1370-1507) that dominated Central Asia.

The Silk Routes haphazardly connected the ancient Mediterranean and Han-China, but remained a vital element of Central Asia throughout history. Local traders along the route acquired great wealth and the cities of Central Asia such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Kokand became centres

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<sup>41</sup> A. Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia* (London 1994) 138.

<sup>42</sup> R. Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* (Oxford 2004) 8.

<sup>43</sup> Akerov, *Ancient Kyrgyz and the Great Steppe* 190.

of local trade.<sup>44</sup> The Kyrgyz controlled several roads and mountain passages and therefore benefitted from this trade. It was also in this time that Islam began to spread in Central Asia by Persian, Arab and Turkic warriors and traders who travelled the Silk Routes. The Kyrgyz began to convert to Islam, but it would eventually be a long and slow process which would take several centuries.

It wasn't until between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century that the Kyrgyz tribes began to consolidate their culture and grew into a proto-nation. This process 'reached an advanced state by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.'<sup>45</sup> However, there was no sense of a strong *national* identity or political unity. People continued to live in tribes and were geographically divided due to mountain ranges. These mountain ranges of Central Asia – the Tien Shan and the Pamiro-Alai mountains – stretch from the east to the west and southwest – between Kyrgyzstan and China. These mountain ranges have been the home of the Kyrgyz for centuries, and they formed the basis of their pastoral nomadism. There were only a few mountain passes and therefore communication was limited among the different Kyrgyz tribes which were spread over 5 valleys: Chui, Ferghana, Issyk Kul, Naryn and Talas.<sup>46</sup>

A very significant period in Kyrgyz history is the Tsarist colonization of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kyrgyz tribes were looking for an ally in their fight against the Uzbek communities from the Kokand Khanate in the 1800s. It would not be until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Russians would become more involved in Central Asia. Their expansion was part of the Great Game, a race for influence in Asia against the British – who had already established their control over northern India and had begun to push into Afghanistan. The region of Central Asia that incorporated Kyrgyz territory – known as Turkestan – was in the middle of the two great powers and both were aware of the Silk Road cities' wealth.

The Russians increased their grip on Turkestan when the clash of two cultures – imperial Russia and nomadic Central Asia – made it difficult for the Russians to conquer the area. The Kyrgyz had a nomadic tradition and viewed the land as property of all people. Russian and Ukrainian settlers

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<sup>44</sup> V. Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford 2015) 8.

<sup>45</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 9.

<sup>46</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 10.

however were given land by the Tsarist government to own privately and by this they obstructed the old pattern of cattle herding.<sup>47</sup> From the 1860s to the 1880s, an estimated 3.500 families were forcefully transported to and settled in modern day Kyrgyzstan and their numbers continued to grow. Partially, their job was to encourage 'civilized' ways of farming and to become the dominant group in the new urban centres.<sup>48</sup> Russian colonies sprouted along the new railways that transported large quantities of raw resources.<sup>49</sup> Central Asian agriculture became a monoculture which harmed the native population and their way of life. Agriculture remained the most important occupation for the indigenous Kyrgyz.

It was in this age that Kurmanjan Datka comes to the stage and united the southern Kyrgyz tribes against the Tsarist expansions. Her story will be described more elaborately in chapter 1.

As Russia's influence over Central Asia was growing, so did rebellion by the locals. Especially in the years before and during the Great War, the Kyrgyz rebelled against forced conscription and against Russian settlers taking their land and livestock. A revolt in 1916 resulted in many casualties as a Cossack army killed tens of thousands of Kyrgyz and burned down their villages. Many Kyrgyz fled to the Tien Shan mountains, in Chinese Turkestan, as a last place of refuge.<sup>50</sup> It is estimated that this collective trauma may have cost the Kyrgyz people almost a quarter of their population.

### **Soviet Russia and the National Delimitations**

Probably the most decisive moment in modern Russian history – the 1917 revolutions – affected Central Asia greatly. In the late 1910s Russia went through a series of revolutions that resulted in the fall of the Tsarist regime and the creation of the world's first communist state led by the Soviets. It is

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<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan* 5.

<sup>48</sup> R. Lowe, 'Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic' in: T. Evertt-Heath (ed.), *Central Asia: Aspects of Transition* (London 2003) 109.

<sup>49</sup> A. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand, 1868-1910* (New York 2008) 20.

<sup>50</sup> Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia* 142.

still considered one of the most decisive moments of modern Russian history and had major consequences domestically and internationally, also for Central Asia. Tsar Nicholas II (r. 1894-1917) had lost his charm with the people as a result of corruption, shortages and continuous dissolution of the *Duma*, the Russian parliament.<sup>51</sup>

The Soviets came to power after a coup d'état on the Provisional Government in November 1917 and to consolidate their claim to power, they withdrew from World War I. This allowed them to establish a military presence in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan became part of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian federation and Bishkek – renamed Frunze – became the capital in 1925.<sup>52</sup> Yet, the creation of these artificial borders did not stop there, because only a year later, Kyrgyzstan was reorganized into the Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. This process of creating clear defined boundaries in Central Asia was called the 'National-Territorial Delimitation' and lasted from the early 1920s till 1936.<sup>53</sup> It was finally in 1936 that the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic was formed.

The creation of these new republics was accompanied by the creation of the respective nations themselves. Up until this moment, the modern idea of a 'nation' had been completely alien to Central Asia.<sup>54</sup> There had been different forms of statehood, such as the Emirate of Bukhara and Khanate of Khiva, but they were not modern sovereign states as understood in the Westphalian sense until the national delimitation established them as distinct national territorial units. The sovereignty of the new states was however profoundly circumscribed.<sup>55</sup> The delimitation process is a product of the paradoxical nature of the Soviet Union, according to Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese. Their article *Between "imagined" and "real" nation-building' on identities and nationhood in post-Soviet*

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<sup>51</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Russian Revolution of 1917' (version 10 July 2003), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Revolution-of-1917> (12 March 2018).

<sup>52</sup> The city Bishkek was renamed several times: Bishkek (1825-62); Pishpek (1862-1926); Frunze (1926-91); renamed Bishkek in 1991. | Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia* 142.

<sup>53</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 38.

<sup>54</sup> For a complete overview and explanation of all the different stages of the National Delimitation and the consequences for language: Y. Bregel, *A Historical Atlas of Central Asia* (Leiden 2003) 94.

<sup>55</sup> Isaacs and Polese, 'Between "Imagined" and "Real" nation building' 372.

*Central Asia* argues that on the one hand, Moscow promoted rights to national groups in their new nations. On the other hand, all these peoples had to integrate in the overarching Soviet identity.

Ethnographic and statistical surveys had been done in all regions of Central Asia, to establish a basis for the expected redrawing of boundaries. The new states were to be based on the largest ethnic group in that area which gave its name the given republic. It was an attempt to host national cultures in national boundaries and in order to achieve this, language was taken as the prime marker of identity. Robert Lowe argues in his article that – despite certain irregularities like the Ferghana Valley – these national unities were fairly accurate as 86% of all ethnic Kyrgyz lived in the new Kyrgyz territory.<sup>56</sup> Sally Cummings states in her work *Understanding Central Asia* that these delimitations were part of a large divide-and-rule policy to avoid that any of the republics would become too independent or too powerful.<sup>57</sup> This is also pointed out by Yuri Bregel, who wrote and drew *A Historical Atlas of Central Asia*, and notes that the national delimitation had to take in account ‘not only languages, but also economic factors and (sometimes above all) the often conflicting interests of influential groups of Communist leaders in the republics.’<sup>58</sup>

Under the control of Moscow, the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan (CPK) was established and it was dominated by Russian migrants. Kyrgyz communists could not even enter the party and any other form of union was prohibited. Purges targeted nationalist groups and the Kyrgyz Poor Peasants Union. Their members were either exiled or imprisoned. Within only two decades, the Soviets had established their power over Kyrgyz politics and society through the CPK. In the later decades of the Soviet rule, the first party representative was allowed to be someone from the ‘titular nationality’, of the republic. However, the second secretary was always a Russian who would make sure the local party was compliant and followed the Soviet principles.<sup>59</sup> Any serious challenge to Soviet power would not arise till the 1980s.

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<sup>56</sup> Lowe, ‘Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic’ 109.

<sup>57</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 40.

<sup>58</sup> Bregel, *A Historical Atlas of Central Asia* 94.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem.

## Soviet culture and identity

As mentioned before, the Soviets attempted to create a mass identity to incorporate the 'backward people of the east.'<sup>60</sup> The immense scheme involved far-reaching and often irreversible changes in political, economic and social life as well as in identity. According to the article *Nation Building in the Kyrgyz Republic* by Robert Lowe, the Soviets had a straightforward theory to deal with the different nationalities in Central Asia. There was to be made a distinction between 'nationality' – defined by ethnicity and genetic inheritance – and the more important issue of 'citizenship'.<sup>61</sup> People's national identity should be encouraged, but only 'as a component of the greater affiliation to the Union of Soviet Social Republics.'<sup>62</sup> In the words of Kyrgyz author Chinghiz Aimatov (1928-2008) 'the first priority at the time was to define oneself as a Soviet individual. Only after that came the question who one was by nationality.'<sup>63</sup> The reason the Soviets championed the national identities was because in their own communist ideology, they fought for the rights of oppressed peoples, promoted national rights and considered themselves to be the first 'post-imperial state'.<sup>64</sup> The core provinces of the Soviet Union had countless minorities and ethnicities which all had to become part of one great Soviet identity in the greater communist ideology and at the same time remain part of their national identities.

Yet, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, Lowe argues it is unlikely that many Kyrgyz people had ever given any thought to the notion of 'national identity' before 1917. Identity was loose and based on tribes and clans, not comparable to any European like categories and definitions. In Cummings' words: 'Central Asians, at the broadest level of self-consciousness, considered themselves "Muslims", rather than "Kyrgyz" or "Uzbek".'<sup>65</sup> People also made distinctions along the lines of 'nomadic' and

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<sup>60</sup> Lowe, 'Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic' 108.

<sup>61</sup> Lowe, 'Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic' 109.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>63</sup> A. Murzakulova and J. Schoeberlein, 'The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggling in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology', *Europe Asia Studies* 61 (2009) 1234.

<sup>64</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 38.

<sup>65</sup> Lowe, 'Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic' 109.

'settled'. Ethnicity was not a main compartment of identity, as the Kyrgyz themselves were a people with a mix of various backgrounds and had throughout history coexisted in multi-ethnic empires and khanates. It were local affiliations and tribal ties that were the foremost elements of Kyrgyz identity.

The Soviets, however, attempted to assimilate all Central Asians into the Soviet identity therefore required a structural change of society. Any form of *traditional* expression of identity and culture were stamped out. National languages were allowed to some extent, but Russian had become the *lingua franca*. In 1940, the Arab script was converted to a new Kyrgyz alphabet with Cyrillic letters. The Arab script had up till then been 'the sole means of communication across Central Asia' deriving from the common Turkic heritage.<sup>66</sup> After the Second World War, an increasing number of Russian publications were produced in Kyrgyzstan.

Cultural changes also affected Islam in Central Asia. Traditional Kyrgyz intelligentsia were eliminated in the 1920s and early 1930s by the regime of Stalin. Religious, political and tribal elite was also disposed of and together with the intelligentsia sent into exile to Siberia or sent to labour camps and prisons. The Soviet government also implemented their policy of atheism and targeted thousands of ulama – Islamic clergy. Religious practice was prohibited and simultaneously mosques and madrassas were closed or destroyed. Holy sites in the nomadic periphery were desecrated. The ways in which Islam had functioned in Central Asia for centuries was damaged beyond repair. The Soviets had no need for faith as they considered religion to be merely another cloak of repression. It was another ideology of exploitation, according to them.<sup>67</sup> Anti-religious propaganda was spread which aimed to teach people that religion was the opposite of reason and science.<sup>68</sup>

In his book *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism*, Ahmed Rashid argues however that 'communism initially did little to change the lifestyle of the Kyrgyz nomads.'<sup>69</sup> According to Rashid, people's lifestyle had remained quite the same over centuries, because the

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<sup>66</sup> A. Philips and P. James, 'National Identity between Tradition and Reflexive Modernization: The Contradictions of Central Asia', *National Identities* 3 (2001) 29.

<sup>67</sup> A. Khalid, *Islam After Communism* (Berkeley 2014) 69.

<sup>68</sup> Khalid, *Islam After Communism* 70.

<sup>69</sup> Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia* 143.

harsh conditions of life affect lifestyle far more than ideological or economic conditions do. People's lives were – and are to some extent today – profoundly based on their produce of wool, milk and meat of their yaks and sheep. Justice was dispensed by elders on tribal courts and the main entertainment for people was storytelling and poetry. The Kyrgyz were able to preserve their religion, patriarchal society as well as their kinship and tribal traditions.

Over time, it thus became clear that Sovietisation, Russification and nationality policies were not entirely successful. A gap between reality and propaganda created unrest amongst Kyrgyz intelligentsia. The state was not able to improve living standards and – in the industrialized cities in northern Kyrgyzstan – unemployment was increasing.<sup>70</sup> It would not be until the late 1980s that some liberalization would be allowed under the Gorbachev regime. The demand for Kyrgyz schools, Kyrgyz publications and broadcasting was increasing. People also demanded that the Kyrgyz language would become the official state language.

### **Later Soviet years**

Economic stagnation fuelled ethnic resentment. The demand to change the state's language from Russian to Kyrgyz contributed to anti-Russian sentiments and Russians living in Kyrgyzstan became uncertain of their future. Many Russians eventually emigrated and their share in the Kyrgyz population was reduced by 20%.<sup>71</sup> Besides the tensions felt by the Russians, bloody violence broke out around Osh and the surrounding area in June 1990. It was an expression of pressures that had been brewing for decades between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz over land disputes, employment and representation in government. Many people were killed on both sides as the ethnic riots spread from town to town.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 30.

<sup>71</sup> Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan* 19.

<sup>72</sup> Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia* 146.

John Anderson points out that it were these growing ethnic tensions and growing concerns among Slavic and European groups that undermined ‘the image of Kyrgyzstan as a relatively peaceful corner of the USSR.’<sup>73</sup> In October 1990 therefore, the parliament decided not to re-elect the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Absamat Masaliyev as a new executive president, charging that ‘he had failed to deal with the economic crisis facing the republic and had mismanaged the events in Osh.’<sup>74</sup>

Instead, the ruling Parliament chose to elect Askar Akaev, who Anderson describes as a ‘compromise candidate.’<sup>75</sup> He had made his career mostly outside of the Communist Party and was therefore perceived as being a controllable candidate. Akaev was the first elected non-communist president in Central Asia. He recognized the protestors by meeting with them on his second day in office and was in favour of reforms. Akaev announced sovereignty for Kyrgyzstan within the Soviet Union in December 1990 as a sort of British-style Commonwealth in which members would be more equal. Even small nationalist groups within Kyrgyzstan preferred this over complete independence as the republic depended heavily on the core of the empire.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1991 the last Soviet-wide referendum was organized which included the following question:

‘Do you agree that [name of republic] will enter the renewed union (Federation) as a republic enjoying equal rights [with others]?’<sup>76</sup>

Essentially, this question asked whether the Soviet Socialist Republics wanted to remain part of the Soviet unity, albeit new ‘equal’ terms. Even at this stage of the ongoing implosion of the Soviet Empire, the Central Asian states still voted for retention of the Union – all with percentages over 90.

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<sup>73</sup> Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan* 20.

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>76</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 52.

In other parts of the Soviet Empire, the opposite happened. In July 1990, it was Lithuania that became the first republic to declare its independence.

Kyrgyz president Akaev declared full independence for Kyrgyzstan immediately after the August 1991 coup against the Gorbachev regime. He prevented local communists from attempting a coup of their own and openly supported Boris Yeltsin. The Communist Party Kyrgyzstan was banned and Akaev run unopposed in the next presidential elections of 1991.

Concluding we can say that Kyrgyz history is turbulent. The Kyrgyz founded independent khanates of the first millennium and profited from the Silk Road trade through the mountains. In this period, their distinct identity and language began to emerge. Because of their nomadic lifestyle and the sharing of land, the Kyrgyz did not leave any monumental buildings behind and due to the tradition of oral history and epic poetry only few scriptures were found. Other major empires conquered Central Asia in the following centuries and eventually the Tsarist army of the Russians made its ways south. After the 1917 Russian revolution the Soviets took control, Central Asia was to be changed forever. Nation states were fabricated and the Russians influenced culture, education, politics and the economy. Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991, but this does not mean that the story and influence of the Soviet decades ended. President Akaev would be the one to guide the diverse people to a new Kyrgyzstan.

## CHAPTER 1: Kurmanjan's era

### Kurmanjan and the historical context

In order to study the life of Kurmanjan Datka and her role in Kyrgyz nation building, we need to be able to place her in the correct historical setting. During her lifetime, Central Asia and the modern territory of Kyrgyzstan dealt with several challenges. This chapter describes the historical context in which Kurmanjan lived and gives the necessary biographical information.

When Kurmanjan was born in 1811, contemporary Kyrgyzstan did not yet exist. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Central Asia was experiencing a period of stagnation and political chaos. The trade between East and West declined as it had to compete with emerging European maritime trade. However, we stay critical of such labels of stagnation and decline as they are *European* perceptions of political and economic chaos. In his work *Russian Rule in Samarkand*, Morrison actually describes this period in Turkestan as a time of political and economic *dynamism*.<sup>77</sup> It is true that many of the great empires that had existed disappeared and some regions experienced a decline in population and urbanization, but the rise of the Khanate of Kokand in the Ferghana valley is an example of how not everything was stagnating.

Kokand had been re-founded in 1740 and had 80.000 inhabitants by 1867. The population grew partially as waves of refugees were fleeing Kazakh and Persian invasions in their own regions.<sup>78</sup> Kokand gained wealth from its trading arrangements with Russian and especially China where over 48 trading missions were sent in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The khanate was also able to create great tracts of cultivatable land due to a successful irrigation system which it used to exercise leverage over the Kyrgyz and others. This wealth and control over resources – especially water –

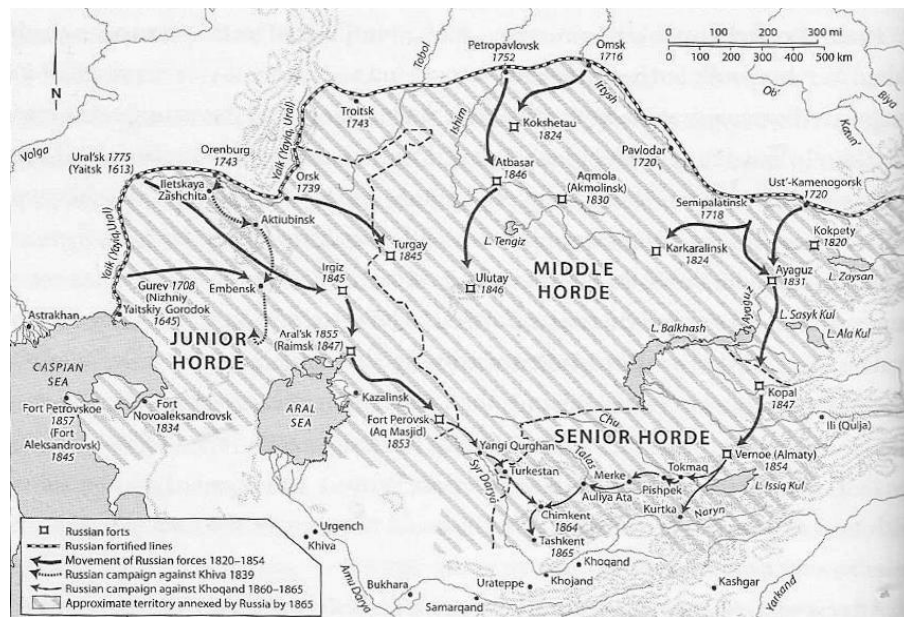
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<sup>77</sup> Turkestan is the region in Central Asia between Siberia to the north, the Gobi desert to the east, with Tibet, India and Afghanistan to the south and the Caspian Sea to the west. | A. Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand, 1868-1910* (New York 2008) 12.

<sup>78</sup> S. Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand: 1709-1876. Central Asia in the Global Age* (Pittsburgh 2017) 211.

eventually resulted in Kokand becoming the dominant power in the Ferghana Valley in 1800.<sup>79</sup> Further to the north, Tashkent traded with its northern neighbours across the Kazakh Steppe: Russia and Siberia. Emirate Bukhara remained the important trading centre it had been throughout this period and its population is estimated to have been between 80.000 and 100.000.<sup>80</sup>

However, the modernized armies of Kokand and the other Khanates were no match for the advancing Russian troops coming from the north. The fighting amongst each other had left the Khanates weak and an easy prey for Russia. After the Crimean War (1853-1856) – which had distracted the Russian conquest temporarily – the Russian armies expanded into Central Asia and disrupted the political environment. Scott Levi argues that the Russian motivation mainly concerned imperialistic ambition and the desire to ‘transform Central Asia into a cotton-producing periphery.’<sup>81</sup>



**Image 2 Russian Conquest of Central Asia (1820-1865)**

In 1855, Russian authority was established over the Kyrgyz tribes in the Ysyk Kol valley and in 1865 over the Kyrgyz in Chatkal, which was close to the Kokand Khanate. Interests collided and the Kokand Khanate was weakened by uprisings, unstable rulers and internal conflicts. The Tsarist troops

<sup>79</sup> Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand* 211.  
<sup>80</sup> Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand* 12.  
<sup>81</sup> Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand* 174.

succeeded eventually and conquered Tashkent in 1865, Samarkand in 1868 and finally Kokand, Osh and Andijan in 1875. It took them almost two years to crush the popular resistance led by the Kyrgyz tribes in the Ferghana valley. The Russians eventually negotiated with Kurmanjan Datka that the tribes under her leadership would accept the Russian protectorate.<sup>82</sup>

The result was the Governate-General of Turkestan that was administered by a military governor who resided in Tashkent. Tashkent became a 'modern' capital; the first of its kind in Central Asia. A Russian quarter was built – inspired by European city planning – which sharply contrasted the traditional native quarters. Between 1865 and 1917, eleven men served as Governor-General and Turkestan was divided into five regions (*oblasts*) and two protectorates. The regions were Syrdarya (centre Tashkent), Semireche (centre Vernyi), Ferghana (centre Skobelev), Samarkand (centre Samarkand) and Zakaspie (Transcaspia, centre Ashgabad). The two protectorates were the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva.<sup>83</sup>

Morrison concludes that the Tsarist rule in Central Asia was however marked by a general lack of knowledge, money and power. It was therefore 'far less effective, but also far more humane, than what was to follow after 1917.'<sup>84</sup>

### **Biographical information on Kurmanjan**

During the lifetime of Kurmanjan Datka, the two Khanates of Kokand, Tashkent and Emirate Bukhara were fighting amongst each other. According to the introduction of the film, the Kyrgyz people were on the verge of extinction and 'only 40 remaining tribes are still surviving in the mountains as part of Kokand Khanate under Bukhara Emirate's ruler ship.'<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 11.

<sup>83</sup> S. Soucek, *History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge 2012) 201.

<sup>84</sup> Morrison, *Russian Rule in Samarkand* 292.

<sup>85</sup> S. Sher-Niyaz (director) and J. Joldosheva, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains* (2014) [Motion Picture], Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyz Film, scene 1.

Kurmanjan was born in 1811 in the Kyrgyz tribe of Mungush near Osh – in an area covering parts of modern-day Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan – governed by the Kokand Khanate. Little is known of her younger years, only that she always had a close bond with her brother Akbalban. When she reached her late teenage years, she was to be married to a man of her family's choice. Kurmanjan refused to marry him and returned to her father's yurt which was against the tribes' traditions.

A conflict between the clans almost arose because of the marriage scandal, but local ruler Alymbek Datka (b.1799) stepped in. Alymbek belonged to the Bargy tribes and was local ruler of the Alai Mountains and surrounding regions. He was a nobleman that supported the unification of the Kyrgyz people as well as independence from other entities.<sup>86</sup> Kurmanjan redeemed her family's honour when Alymbek Datka married her in 1832. The marriage brought forth two sons and two daughters, though only the sons – Abdyldebek and Kamchybek – are portrayed in the film.

In the film, Alymbek Datka expresses multiple times to Kurmanjan his desire to unite the 40 tribes, as he says 'it would be wonderful if we united and had a Great Assembly with all Kyrgyz tribes near this Sacred Stone. Then I will have no regrets.'<sup>87</sup> The Khan of Kokand heard of the intrigues of tribes searching for independence and ordered Alymbek's assassination for siding with the northern tribes. Alymbek was killed in 1862. According to the film, attempts were made on Kurmanjan's life as well, but she escapes.

After the death of Alymbek, a transfer of power took place and Kurmanjan became the new Datka. In this, she was an extraordinary woman as only very few women held this position throughout Kyrgyz history. Not much is known about these other women as they never had the authority Kurmanjan had. One difference was that Kurmanjan Datka was officially recognized by the Emir of Bukhara, the Khan of Kokand and by the Russians as the new ruler of the Alai region.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ovozi, 'Who was Kurmanjan Datka and What Does She Mean to the Kyrgyz People?' (version 31 December 2014) <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-who-was-kurmanjan-datka/26770979.html> (27 February 2018).

<sup>87</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 1.

<sup>88</sup> H. Blakkisrud and N. Kyzy, 'Female Heroes in a Man's World: The Construction of Female Heroes in Kyrgyzstan's Symbolic National Building', *The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25 (2017) 129.

In the following decades, the Alai troops and the Kokand troops have multiple conflicts and battles. The Tsarist troops expand more to the south and eventually the Kokand khanate is conquered. In the meantime, Kurmanjan attempts to unite the different tribes. In the film, this becomes clear in scene 23 where a middle-aged Kurmanjan reads a scroll in which her trusted friend and tribe leader Shabdan explains the unification of the Kyrgyz tribes needs to be completed through a Great Assembly.<sup>89</sup>

However, the Kyrgyz are struggling in their fight with the Russians. It becomes evident in scene 28 that the Russians fought the 'highlanders' for years. Kurmanjan – who is referred to in a letter as the Alai Queen – has called for negotiations. She must have realized that the exhausted Kyrgyz people could no longer fight against the powerful professional Russian army.

Russian General Skobelev was sent to the Alai region to tackle the negotiations. An agreement was signed that ends the Kokand Khanate and concludes that all territories will be under Russian control. The Russians vow 'not to interfere with the lives of local people, nor the religion they profess. Persecution of rebels will stop. Prisoners will be released.'<sup>90</sup> In the film, Kurmanjan is given a cloak, as a symbol of loyalty and submission. General Skobelev seems relatively friendly as he openly admires the strength of Kyrgyz warriors – 'I always mention your warriors as an example to my soldiers' – and their love for their Motherland.<sup>91</sup> According to an interview with the president of the Kyrgyz History Society Tynchtykbek Tchoroev Kurmanjan was definitely respected, but she was also used as a tool to persuade the other tribes in the region to live in peace within the framework of colonial Russia.<sup>92</sup>

As the years pass, General Skobelev made way for Alexander Nikolaevich Shvyikovski, a much less friendly figure who is evidently a different type of person. General Shvyikovski was determined to defeat the 'natives' of the Alai Mountains. It is eventually also this man who sentenced

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<sup>89</sup> A Great Assembly is a military or political council organized by tribe chiefs. | Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 23.

<sup>90</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 29.

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>92</sup> Ovozi, 'Who was Kurmanjan Datka and What Does She Mean to the Kyrgyz People?' (version 31 December 2014) <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-who-was-kurmanjan-datka/26770979.html> (27 February 2018).

Kurmanjan's son Kamchybek to death by hanging in 1893 after he is accused of killing Russian custom officials. Shvyikovski obviously did not respect Kurmanjan Datka the same way as Skobelev and other Russian officials did. Even though there is no clear evidence against Kamchybek – already branded as 'criminal' – his sentence is final. In scene 34, Kurmanjan even offers to take her son's place as a last resort to save him but General Shvyikovski does not change his mind.<sup>93</sup>

As Kurmanjan had already lost her first son in his search for an army in Afghanistan – accused of smuggling – she wanted to save her second son at all costs. The Alai men come up with a plan to save Kamchybek from his death sentence. However, Kurmanjan eventually realized that she could not save him. She had to sacrifice her own son to preserve the future of her people. Her sacrifice allowed her to negotiate and keep the Kyrgyz tribes together.<sup>94</sup> Seven more Kyrgyz prisoners – including Kurmanjan's brother Akbalban – were executed in Osh. Nine others were sent to Siberia in exile.

A historical moment in 1906 is included in the film. Kurmanjan's photo is taken by Baron Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim – later president of Finland – who travelled as an ethnographer from Russia to China via the Alai Mountains. Mannerheim took unique photos of Kurmanjan Datka. The photos inspired the portrait that features on today's Kyrgyz banknotes.

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<sup>93</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 34.

<sup>94</sup> A. Yunis, 'Epic Nation: Does a legend make a film or does a film make a legend?', *AramcoWorld* (2016) 23.



Image 3 Kurmanjan Datka and on the left Mannerheim.



Image 4 Portrait of Kurmanjan Datka on 50 som banknote.

Kurmanjan died at the age of 96 and is buried in a cemetery near the sacred mountain Sulaiman-Too, near the city of Osh. The sacred mountain – the only World Heritage Site of Kyrgyzstan – has a small mosque and is still today a popular place for local Muslims. Carved in the stone is also the National Historical-Archaeological Museum Complex Sulaiman-Too. Like many other museums, it was built by the Soviets in 1978 and celebrated ‘3000 year of Osh’. It contains many ancient archaeological artefacts that contribute to the somewhat fabricated history, but the museum also exhibits paintings and sculptures that are historical and cultural elements of Kyrgyz national pride.<sup>95</sup> Close to the museum a square is named after Alymbek Datka and a Kurmanjan Datka street. In Gulcha one can find the Alay District Historical Museum which is named after Kurmanjan Datka as well. A stone twice-life size statue of Kurmanjan Datka can be found in Bishkek. She is wearing traditional Kyrgyz clothing.



**Image 5 Statue of Kurmanjan Datka in Bishkek.**

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<sup>95</sup> National History and Archaeological Museum Complex Sulaiman-Too, ‘About the Mountain Sulaiman-Too’, (version unknown), <http://www.sulaimanto.org/en/> (13 July 2018).



Image 6 Statue of Kurmanjan Datka in Gulcha.

## CHAPTER 2: Nation building since 1991

This chapter will explore the nation building of Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s and 2000s. The Kyrgyz state has actively attempted to create a unifying national story for Kyrgyzstan, but this has proved to be difficult. The diverse population and tumultuous history prevent Kyrgyzstan's development into a homogenous state. This chapter will elaborate on the political developments since Kyrgyzstan became an independent country in 1991. This was a turning point in its history because now the national government had to actively *build* the Kyrgyz nation and at the same time deal with its Soviet legacy. This goes along with the creation of symbols, national heroes and the use – and misuse – of history. The state had the primary role in this process of which most took place in the first decade after the independence. The state attempted to create unity by emphasizing the state and civic identity over that of the tribe and clan identity.

### President Akaev

When Kyrgyzstan became independent, the country was led by Askar Akaev who had been elected by the Parliament in October 1990. In other Central Asian states – with the exception of Tajikistan – the leaders of Soviet Republics all won the first elections by considerable margins which only contributed to their legitimacy and authority. These leaders created obstacles for other candidates to bar them from participation and some – in the cases of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – ran unopposed as visible in table 1.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> D. Ó'Beacháin and R. Kevlihan, 'Imagined Democracy? Nation Building and elections in Central Asia', *Nationalities Papers* 43 (2015) 499.

**Table 1 Presidential elections in post-Soviet states of Central Asia (1990-1991)**

	<b>Uzbekistan</b>	<b>Turkmenistan</b>	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>
No. of candidates	2	1	1	1	6
Incumbent vote	87,1%	98,3%	98,8%	95,4%	56,95%
Opposition vote*	12,4%	0%	0%	4,6%	33,1%

\* Voters had an “against all” option in all five presidential elections though, as Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan only had one candidate running the choice was simply for or against the incumbent leader. This option was selected by 0,4% in Uzbekistan, 1,2% in Kazakhstan, 1,7% in Turkmenistan, 3% in Tajikistan and 4,6% in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>97</sup>

One of Akaev’s first acts of president of independent Kyrgyzstan was the introduction of a broad range of political and economic reforms. Kyrgyzstan had to discover how to deal with a Soviet heritage that had brought deep political and economic crises, as well as how to deal with the continuation of ethnic conflicts and growing instability.

When it comes to the Soviet legacy, Rafis Abazov argues in his *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* that this legacy brought Kyrgyzstan real modernization, industrialization, urbanization and technological advancement throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>98</sup> Investments had created modern industry, transportation, communication and agriculture. The change of the political and administrative system contributed to the creation of a ‘modern’ nation state, including its own flag, a national anthem and state institutions. All of this was done within the bigger Soviet framework.

Abazov also acknowledges the negative sides of the Soviet system, in terms of the brutality and repression. The border delimitations of the 1920s that artificially divided Central Asia had forced an unwanted political system upon these republics. Cultural and historical traditions were ignored and the new borders were bound to create conflicts, whether based on ethnicities or on claims on historical heritage. The settlements of other nationalities in the region and dominance of these minorities in several cities marginalized the Kyrgyz in their own republic. The economic changes had

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<sup>97</sup> Ó’Beacháin and Kevlihan, ‘Imagined Democracy?’ (2015) 500.

<sup>98</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 31.

created industry and a monoculture in land cultivation, but it had simultaneously destroyed the thousand-year old agriculture of pastoral nomads.<sup>99</sup>

The Soviet ideology remained in people's lifestyle and identity as well. After decades of Moscow's identity policies and cultural assimilation, Central Asia now deals with a 'Soviet' and 'Post-Soviet' periodization as a widely accepted time frame. These categories are used uncritically, as Diana Ibañez-Tirado argues in her article *How can I be post-Soviet if I was never Soviet?*<sup>100</sup> After anthropological research in southern Tajikistan, she emphasizes how this periodization keeps Central Asians' identities connected to the Soviet era, even if many young people have no experience of these years and therefore do not position their identities or worldviews in these terms.<sup>101</sup> Dividing Central Asia's modern history into these periods of 'Soviet' and 'post-Soviet' demonstrates limitations. It is hard to study history without dividing and categorizing the past, but according to Ibañez-Tirado's research, periodization can become 'intellectual straightjackets' which influence the way we study and identify issues. Many aspects of life and identity in Central Asia continue to be classified as 'Soviet' or 'post-Soviet', but Ibañez-Tirado emphasizes these evidently need rethinking.

Clearly, the question how to deal with the Soviet legacy is not yet answered. We can conclude, however, that the Soviet system did leave behind a base for development after independence, unlike what several European colonial powers left behind after their withdrawal from Asia and Africa. It was now up to president Akaev to reform politically and economically to evade more crises and to create a national consensus over the future of Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>99</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 31.

<sup>100</sup> D. Ibañez-Tirado, '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* 34 (2015) 190.

<sup>101</sup> Ibañez-Tirado, 'How can I be Post-Soviet if I was never Soviet?' 192.

## Growing problems

President Akaev gradually transitioned to the new political system and was re-elected – unopposed – in the elections of October 1991 which increased his mandate. He aimed to ‘revive Kyrgyz identity’ and at the same time stressed his role in representing *all* the peoples of the republic by using the slogan ‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home.’<sup>102</sup> The ethnic Kyrgyz made up a mere 52% of the total population at this moment. President Akaev attempted to overcome the economic crisis by stressing the need for a market-based system. These tasks would not be easy and therefore he claimed that this required a new constitution and especially a strong executive power that was capable of pushing through the reforms.<sup>103</sup>

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1993 Kyrgyzstan adopted its first post-Soviet constitution in order to be able to continue the political transformations. Unlike several other post-Soviet states, such as in the Baltic region, this constitution guaranteed ‘citizenship and full political rights to all people of the republic without discriminating on language, residency or ethnic bases.’<sup>104</sup> This is a first attempt to include different ethnicities in the new Kyrgyz identity.

With the independence, the financial support from Moscow came to an end. At first, this caused an economic crisis in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, inflation rose to 1200% in 1993. A program of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was set up to privatize businesses.<sup>105</sup> The new Kyrgyz government was also financially supported by several western states to set up a more democratic constitution. The 1993 constitution would serve as an example for the rest of the region, but as time passed the political reforms slowed down and the system became corrupt. There were specific accusations of ‘tribalism’, a term that is often associated with corruption, according to David Gullette. In his book ‘The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State and

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<sup>102</sup> N. Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* (Pittsburgh 2017) 103.

<sup>103</sup> Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan* 24.

<sup>104</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 34.

<sup>105</sup> A. Rashid, *Asie Centrale, Champ de Guerres, Cinq Républiques Face à l’Islam Radical* (Paris 2000) 68.

Tribalism', Gulette explains that already in the mid-1990s, political tensions had been growing and tribe-like formations were assuming more control in the field of politics.<sup>106</sup> Several of President Akaev's family members and close allies had acquired strong positions in Kyrgyzstan's business sector as they had easier access to resources, privileged information or control over means of coercion.<sup>107</sup>

The IMF program did not have the predicted outcome. The decline of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) left much of Kyrgyzstan's population living unemployed, in poverty and in famine. To protect and consolidate his position, president Akaev became increasingly authoritarian.<sup>108</sup> Multiple referenda – in 1994, 1996 and 1998 – and resulted in multiple revisions of the constitution – all increased the power of the executive branch and limiting the power of other political parties.<sup>109</sup>

Despite the growing corruption and power concentration around Akaev, the president was re-elected in the elections of 2000. Other possible candidates had been barred from elections and the image of Kyrgyzstan as an 'Island of Democracy' was tarnished as both the parliamentary and presidential elections counted many irregularities.<sup>110</sup>

## **The Tulip Revolution**

The fraudulent parliamentary elections of March 2005 sparked protests in southern Kyrgyzstan. The corruption and failing economic reforms resulted in popular uprisings which were propelled by opposition politicians who had previously backed president Akaev. The demonstrations spread and reached Bishkek where thousands of people demanded Akaev's resignation. The police was not able

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<sup>106</sup> D. Gulette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: kinship, state and tribalism* (Folkstone 2009) 1.

<sup>107</sup> S. Radnitz, 'Power, Peripheries, and Pyramids' in: J. Heathershaw and E. Schatz (ed.), *Paradox of Power: The Logistic of State Weakness in Eurasia* (Pittsburgh 2017) 49.

<sup>108</sup> Rashid, *Asie Centrale* 69.

<sup>109</sup> Gulette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic* 14.

<sup>110</sup> Abazov, *Historical Dictionary of Kyrgyzstan* 37.

to control the masses and the President's office – the White House – was ransacked in what was now framed the Tulip Revolution (sometimes called the Pink Revolution). Akaev was granted asylum in Moscow. After ruling for 15 years, Akaev's rule had come to an end.<sup>111</sup>

However, the Tulip revolution did not bring about an *enduring* regime change. The northern elite of Akaev was replaced by the southern elite of Akaev's successor Kurmanbek Bakiev. As Sally Cummings and Maxim Ryabkov state in their article on the Tulip revolution, the 'revolution' in Kyrgyzstan shows continuity instead of real change. A mere *transfer* of power and the repetition of old patterns hinder efforts of real reform when it comes to pressing issues such as corruption and equitable distribution of wealth.<sup>112</sup> A comparison is made with the other 'colour' revolutions in post Soviet states and the same was reproduced there: revolutions have not provided enduring solutions.<sup>113</sup>

Cummings and Ryabkov argue that the causes of this lack of real change in Kyrgyzstan are predominantly weak state institutions and the continuous question of 'executive versus legislative dominance' – also defined as 'presidentialism' – where the executive has concentrated power at the expense of the legislature.<sup>114</sup>

Another observation the authors make is the prominent role for political elites and the 'informal.' Cummings and Ryabkov argue that even though the revolutions are presented as something of the common people, they see a clear role for political opposition who used their tribal networks to rally supporters from their localities or tribes in their personal struggle for power.<sup>115</sup> Cummings and Ryabkov conclude that it were oppositional elites instead of civil society that ousted president Akaev.

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<sup>111</sup> Gulette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic 2*.

<sup>112</sup> S. Cummings and N. Ryabkov, 'Situating the 'Tulip Revolution'', *Central Asians Survey* 27 (2008) 242.

<sup>113</sup> The colour revolutions are the revolutions that took places in different former-Soviet Republic countries, in the Balkans and in some places in the Middle East and concerned large streets protests around elections. These revolutions often adopted a certain symbolic colour or flower. Examples are the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004).

<sup>114</sup> Cummings and Ryabkov, 'Situating the 'Tulip Revolution'' 243.

<sup>115</sup> Cummings and Ryabkov, 'Situating the 'Tulip Revolution'' 244.

## President Bakiev

President Bakiev – member of the nationalist party Ata Jurt – continued to use the corrupt political system and made sure his family and coalition members all gained high positions within the government or in the business sector.<sup>116</sup>

As president, Bakiev attempted to create a new state narrative with several commissions in charge of finding the correct components.<sup>117</sup> Bakiev ordered one of these commissions to work on ‘guidelines’ for the state and national ideology in 2006. In this project, thousands of people and school pupils were interviewed and asked questions on what national ideology meant for them. The promising project was however disbanded in 2009 as the results showed no consensus. The guidelines were never published.

The continuation of the corrupt system and few immediate improvements in society resulted in quick defections in Bakiev’s team of support. ‘The assassination of businessmen and parliamentary deputies has fuelled fears that Bakiev’s government is incapable of controlling the escalation violence in the country, unable to implement laws, and at worse, being involved in ‘mafia’ business.’<sup>118</sup> In this, it seemed that Bakiev was just as much a product of the corrupt system as Akaev had been. A new opposition formed and the power of the masses was proved again as in 2009 protests against Bakiev started to emerge. It would lead to his downfall in 2010.<sup>119</sup>

## Post 2010

Interim president Roza Otunbayeva held the office of president from April 2010 to December 2011. She had been an ambassador to the US and served as a foreign minister in the previous governments

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<sup>116</sup> Radnitz, ‘Power, Peripheries, and Pyramids’ 50.

<sup>117</sup> M. Laruelle, ‘Kyrgyzstan’s nationhood’, in: Laruelle, M. and J. Engvall (ed.), *Kyrgyzstan beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State”: social and political changes in a post-Soviet Society* (London 2015) 175.

<sup>118</sup> Gulette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic* 16.

<sup>119</sup> Radnitz, ‘Power, Peripheries, and Pyramids’ 52.

of Akaev and Bakiev.<sup>120</sup> After 2010 Kyrgyzstan made advances as the country conducted its first free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections. Political debate among civil society had grown more diverse and the media gained more and more independence. There were also greater opportunities for activism, nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) and entrepreneurs.

Even though Otunbayeva supported the protests against both Akaev and Bakiev, she herself could also not bring about big changes. Between April and June 2010 violence and conflict aimed at Uzbek communities returned and according to Erica Marat, this period was marked by 'the lack of legitimate state leadership' and 'the provisional leaders' inability to control the regime's monopoly over the use of violence within the country's borders.<sup>121</sup>

Civic activists attempted to move beyond the notion of titular nationhood and aimed to build a new identity based on civic values. They competed with nationalist policies that resonate with many ethnic Kyrgyz thanks to weak citizenship-based identity. In her article, Marat mentions a 2013 study by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that explains that 'while ethnic Kyrgyz consider ethnicity identity the most important determinant of identity, members of other ethnic groups put more emphasis on citizenship'.<sup>122</sup> However, the activists who propagated civic rights reached one of their goals: adaptation of the constitution. It was no longer stated that a dominant ethnic group 'makes up' the state. The constitution now reiterates that all citizens have equal rights with rights to preserve native languages. That said, it should be mentioned that Kyrgyzstan is the only country in Central Asia to grant Russian the status of an official language.

Otunbayeva's successor Almazbek Atambaev – of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan – resurrect the massive ideological projects of the 1990s. His campaign posters included slogans like 'Together we are Kyrgyzstan' which call for a unification of the country and resemble Akaev's

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<sup>120</sup> A. Osborn, 'Profile: Roza Otunbayeva, the head of Kyrgyzstan's interim government', (version 8 April 2010), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/kyrgyzstan/7568727/Profile-Roza-Otunbayeva-the-head-of-Kyrgyzstans-interim-government.html> (29 March 2018).

<sup>121</sup> E. Marat, "We Disputed Every Word", in: Laruelle, M. and J. Engvall (ed.), *Kyrgyzstan beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State": social and political changes in a post-Soviet Society* (London 2015) 213.

<sup>122</sup> Marat, "We Disputed Every Word" 214.

'common home' ideology. Marat presents a quotation of a speech Atambaev made that shows the continuation of his civic rhetoric:

'We must build a new Kyrgyzstan where everyone can work, keep his/her family and set them on their feet, where everyone, irrespective of nationality, religion and social status, can feel equal and valuable.'<sup>123</sup>

In 2013, Atambaev signed the 'Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic' presenting a broad consensus on how to reconcile the competing visions within Kyrgyzstan after June 2010. It intends to serve as a blueprint to transform Kyrgyzstan's legal code and the work of governments to foster diversity and national unity. The Concept aimed at a more inclusive language policy where the Kyrgyz language is the state language but linguistic diversity cheered on as an element of Kyrgyz civil identity, mainly to protect the rights of minorities. Russian served as the *lingua franca* among the educated elite since the 1950s and in the south Uzbek is widely spoken. The Concept is considered to be a balance between Atambaev's moderates and the nationalistic opposition.<sup>124</sup>

Atambev's attempts of creating a new state narrative of balancing the different powers in Kyrgyzstan led to the election of Sooranbaj Jeenbekov in 2017 – also a member of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan. The battle between the moderates and nationalists continues as still today those who promote ethnic Kyrgyzness prevail over the activists that call for greater inclusion.

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<sup>123</sup> Marat, "We Disputed Every Word" 217.

<sup>124</sup> Ibidem.

## Demographic development of Kyrgyzstan

The nationalist policies of the governments of president Akaev and president Bakiev aimed to create a feeling of community and belonging among the population of Kyrgyzstan. This would have been relatively easy if it wasn't for the relatively large ethnic variety of the people. That makes the creation of one common identity difficult. Demographically speaking is the population of Kyrgyzstan divided in other ways as well besides along ethnicity lines. People do not automatically identify with the state, but rather with their own local or regional ties.

Due to the history of the region, Kyrgyzstan has a high percentage of non-Kyrgyz. The populations of Central Asia blended firstly by the commercial and military influences of the Silk Roads. Secondly, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century different peoples in Central Asia adopted sedentary lifestyles, 'whilst the tribes in southwest Central Asia (Turkmen) and the inhabitants of the Asian steppe (Kazakhs/Kyrgyz) remained nomadic.'<sup>125</sup> And lastly – during the Soviet years – the borders of Central Asia were altered multiple times between 1924 and 1936 and ethnicity became the basis of the new artificial nations.<sup>126</sup> Despite several exceptions these national units were quite accurate as 86% of the ethnic Kyrgyz lived within the new Kyrgyz territory. The other 14% of the Kyrgyz population lives in neighbouring countries, such as Tajikistan and western China.

As Sally Cummings shows in her work *Understanding Central Asia*, in 1989 only 52% of the population of Kyrgyzstan was ethnic Kyrgyz. The remainder of the population was made up of Russians (21%), Uzbek (13%) and smaller ethnic groups. This demographic composition has changed over the last 30 years. As visible on table 2, the percentage of Russians has declined from 21% in 1989 to 5,8% in 2017. This decline is caused by an outward migration when end of the Soviet period left to anti-Russian sentiment and an uncertain future.

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<sup>125</sup> Phillips and James, 'National Identity between Tradition and Reflexive Modernisation' 26.

<sup>126</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 38.

**Table 2 Population of Kyrgyzstan**

Year → Ethnicity ↓	1989	1993 <sup>127</sup>	2010 <sup>128</sup>	2017 <sup>129</sup>
Kyrgyz	52%	52,4%	64,9%	73,2%
Russians	21%	21,5%	12,5%	5,8%
Uzbeks	13%	12,9%	13,8%	14,6%
Other*	14%	13,2%	8,8%	6,4%

\*Other includes: Dungan, Ukrainian, Uighur, Germans, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh and Tatar

According to the latest estimates in the *World Fact Book*, the Kyrgyz population today counts around 5.7 million people of which almost half is younger than 25 years old.<sup>130</sup> Of this population 73,2% is ethnic Kyrgyz. Still, bloody ethnic conflicts return in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the Ferghana valley. This valley stretches across Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Besides nationals from these countries, its population also includes Koreans, Russians and Roma. It hosts many religions as well. According to Svetlana Peshkova – who focuses on gender and Islam in Asia – most studies in the region have focused on Muslims, but there are also large numbers of Jews, Christians and Buddhists.<sup>131</sup> Between 11 and 14 June 2010, violence broke out in this area and it led to riots and looting. Hundreds of people died, mostly Uzbeks and over 2.000 buildings were destroyed. According to Sally Cummings, the reason for these riots were more societal-based than perhaps ethnic.<sup>132</sup> The root of the problems was caused by the state that was neglecting the economic decline and the deteriorating living standards. Morgan Liu agrees and explains that Uzbek citizens – as well as many other minorities – experience discrimination in the nationalistic Kyrgyz state. People yearn for structural societal change especially in the fields of education, the labour market and economic and political participation.<sup>133</sup> However, Liu argues that in the later 2000s, the Uzbeks saw their status improving. In Osh and

<sup>127</sup> 1989 and 1993 in: Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 55.

<sup>128</sup> 2010 in: Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 7.

<sup>129</sup> 2017 in: Central Intelligence Agency, 'Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan' (version 3 January 2018), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html> (11 April 2018).

<sup>130</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, 'Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan' (version 3 January 2018), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html> (11 April 2018).

<sup>131</sup> S. Peshkova, 'Beyond Piety: Self-Related Muslims in Uzbekistan', in: P. Jones (ed.), *Islam, Society and Politics in Central Asia* 30.

<sup>132</sup> Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia* 118.

<sup>133</sup> M. Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh 2012) 186.

Bishkek, 'there was a noticeable increase during this period in public evidence of economic prosperity.'<sup>134</sup> The relative new economic freedom allowed Uzbeks to gain wealth that they could not have made in Uzbekistan as conditions across the border were far worse.

Kyrgyzstan furthermore has a north-south divide – caused by the mountains that split the country in half – which according to Robert Lowe is the 'most apparent sub-national divide.'<sup>135</sup> The north is industrialized and heavily settled by Slavic groups whereas the south is described as a more traditionally Asian and Islamic environment.

A third division within Kyrgyzstan is the rural-urban split. Only one out of three Kyrgyz citizens lives in urban areas, mostly in the capital Bishkek and in the second city of Osh. The majority of the people live in rural areas that are signified by few people per square kilometre. The least populated regions are in the east and southeast near the Tien Shan Mountains.<sup>136</sup>

Research on territorial disputes, identity and nationhood continue to be a substantial part of Central Asian studies. According to Robert Lowe, it is difficult to judge how deep these different tribal and sub-national allegiances are held among the people. They do trouble the formation of one national identity.

### **National symbols of Kyrgyzstan**

Due to the lack of strong independent movements of nationalists in the region prior to the fall of the USSR, it was now the task of the post-Soviet regimes to establish nationalizing policies. Central Asian leaders use grand public events and symbols to justify their regime. Commemoration, monuments, museums and the reinterpretation of collective memory and history are ways of the state to unite

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<sup>134</sup> Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne* 191.

<sup>135</sup> Lowe, 'Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic' 126.

<sup>136</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, 'Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan' (version 3 January 2018), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kg.html> (11 April 2018).

the sub-national groups into one identity.<sup>137</sup> In the 1990s, the Kyrgyz state attempted to create national consciousness through recognizable icons and symbols, but also by reviving and manipulating collective narratives and memories. These projects can be seen all in one line and as predecessors to the endeavour of using Kurmanjan Datka as a nation building tool.

However, it has been difficult for Kyrgyzstan to create national symbols that are accepted by all citizens. When the Soviets were in charge, they installed in Central Asia several elements of ‘modern’ nation states. Each of the Soviet Social Republics was also provided with a flag. A national flag is the most recognizable and visible symbol of a country and should be treated with respect as it symbolizes the nation. Governments flow their national flag as an image of patriotism and flag elements often reappear in the coat of arms or presidential standard. The burning of a national flag is therefore considered a very symbolic act. A change of national flag usually occurs after a regime change, civil war or revolution.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, a modified version of the Soviet Red Banner was introduced in 1952. It has a red background by which was added a white-bordered blue horizontal stripe through the centre. In the left top corner, a star, a hammer and a sickle appear which connect the Kyrgyz SSR with the Soviet ideology.



**Image 7 Flag of the Soviet Socialist Republic (1952-1992).**

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<sup>137</sup> Isaacs and Polese, ‘Between “Imagined” and “Real” nation building’ 374.

All the Soviet Republic flags had similar looks which created a bond. They shared their red colour and symbols and connected all identities under one Soviet umbrella. Each country had a small variation that represented the colours of their own location.

When Kyrgyzstan gained its independence in 1991, the flag did not immediately change. It was first merely adapted and the hammer, sickle and star disappeared from the composition. It was not until the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1992 that the state replaced the flag with a new national design.

The new national flag – that was supposed to unite the nation – has a red base, which correlates with the flag that national hero Manas is supposed to have carried in his battles. It represents bravery and valour. In the centre of the flag a yellow sun with 40 rays is depicted. The sun is a symbol of light, peace and eternity. The 40 rays represent the original 40 Kyrgyz tribes, united by Manas. At the centre of the sun is a stylized bird's eye view of the *tunduk* – or roof – of a Kyrgyz *yurt*. It symbolizes the unity of time and space, the origin of life, hearth and home, and the Kyrgyz history as nomads. Few Kyrgyz live in *yurts* nowadays, but the image of the yurt still represents the traditional Kyrgyz home.<sup>138</sup>



**Image 8 Flag of Kyrgyzstan since 1992.**

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<sup>138</sup> Smith, W., 'Flag of Kyrgyzstan' (version 9 February 2011), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-Kyrgyzstan> (4 May 2018).

However, the 20 year old flag has been criticized. According to a 2012 newspaper article in the Washington Times by Tolkun Namatbaeva, the flag was part of a fierce debate in Kyrgyzstan. A special flag-changing commission was set up to research it, which included politicians as well as scientists, writers, designers and historians. Mar Baygiev – playwright and member of the commission – argued that the red colour is an inappropriate choice as it reminds the people of the blood that was spilled by Manas as he conquered communities of Uzbeks, Uighurs and other ethnic communities – groups that are still a very present in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. The flag supposedly refers to Kyrgyzstan’s turbulent and violent history as well contemporary conflicts in southern Kyrgyzstan. Karganbek Samakov – a member of Parliament – submitted a bill for the change of the national flag in March 2012 as he agreed that the red colour is associated with the blood of the people that died and went as far as suggesting that the red colour even *contributed* to the unrest.<sup>139</sup>

Some critics claim that the red reminds too much of communism and the yellow seems almost like a sunflower. This is considered problematic as the sunflower is considered a symbol of dependence: a flower that turns to the sun that it needs to stay alive, reminding Kyrgyzstan of its historical dependence on Russia. A change of flag would mean a real break with the past 20 years.

Yet others prefer to keep the flag as it is. Renat Samudinov – leader of a political youth group – claimed that this flag has been part of the two important revolutions Kyrgyzstan saw in the past decades. These protests involved a lot of young people who used this flag in their demonstrations and some ‘even lost their lives for this flag.’<sup>140</sup> He believes that the discussion over the flag’s colour merely distracts from the actual problems which are much more pressing matters, such as violent conflicts in the Osh region or economic malaise. A change of flag won’t resolve the conflicts. Since the 2012 discussion, the state has not changed the Kyrgyz national flag.

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<sup>139</sup> Namatbaeva, T., ‘Fight rages over Kyrgyzstan’s flag’, (March 2012), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/mar/9/fight-rages-over-kyrgyzstan-flag/>, *Washington Times* (9 March 2012).

<sup>140</sup> Namatbaeva, T., ‘Fight rages over Kyrgyzstan’s flag’, (March 2012), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/mar/9/fight-rages-over-kyrgyzstan-flag/>, *Washington Times* (9 March 2012).

Kyrgyzstan's national emblem (image 3) can also be considered problematic as it features some Soviet components. The emblem has a round shape and in the centre a white eagle is depicted, spreading its wings.<sup>141</sup> In the background, the high Tien Shan mountains are covered in snow – a reminder of the importance of the Kyrgyz landscape – and behind it a panorama of a radiant rising sun. The blue colour represents Kyrgyz courage and generosity. Around this scene are wreaths of wheat and cotton, Kyrgyzstan's main agricultural products since the Soviet decades and underneath the name of the state in Kyrgyz written in Cyrillic letters. The design is undoubtedly inspired by Soviet symbols and imagery as the Kyrgyz SSR emblem (image 4) also featured wheat, cotton, the Tien Shan Mountains and the rising sun.



Image 9 National emblem of Kyrgyzstan.



Image 10 Emblem of the Kyrgyz SSR.

Although the current government may want to let go of aspects of the Soviet legacy, the symbols still resonate in official state imagery. This does not really benefit the state's effort to construct a Kyrgyz national identity. The national flag of Kyrgyzstan does not succeed in its role to unite all Kyrgyz citizens. Ethnic communities of Uzbeks and Uighurs feel that this flag does not represent them as it reminds them of Manas' victories over their ancestral communities.

<sup>141</sup> Other sources describe the bird as a falcon or hawk.

## Collective memory

A second way in which the Kyrgyz government attempted to create a collective identity amongst its population is by emphasizing certain parts of Kyrgyz history which are mostly referred to as a nations' 'collective memory' or a country's 'national myth.' They shape identity and the nation. This – often sentimental – common history can be a story of glory, but also of tragedy, suffering or sacrifice and often contains a moral or ethical element. Besides, these myths create a 'true' continuity between generations and 'provide the reassurance that the national community of which one now forms part is solidly based in history.'<sup>142</sup> However, these common memories are often highly selective. Remembering and commemoration are just as important as forgetting. In this way, the collective memories are distorted and leave out certain historical facts that could damage the collective and undermine regime legitimacy.

It is a mistake to understand these national histories as the complete truth, according to Benedict Anderson. In his theory of nations as imagined communities, he states that we should see these myths not immediately as lies or fabrications of the truth, but simply as inspiring narratives which tell a people who they are or perhaps who they want to be.<sup>143</sup>

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the struggle for independence is presented and framed by the government as being 'the strongest desire in Kyrgyz hearts.' The independence of the Kyrgyz republic in 1991 is portrayed as the realization of a long held dream, by president Akaev whose leadership should therefore be supported.<sup>144</sup> Kyrgyz national identity is partially formed with the help of historical forgery, stressing certain episodes and leaving out others.

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<sup>142</sup> A. Abizadeh, 'Historical Truth, National Myths and Liberal Democracy: On the Coherence of Liberal Nationalism', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12 (2004) 294.

<sup>143</sup> Anderson, *Imagined communities* 6.

<sup>144</sup> M. Suleymanov, 'The Role of History in the Creation of National Identities in Central Asia: Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan Case Studies', *Peace & Conflict Review* 1 (2008) 22.

## Manas

Besides the flag and national narrative, the state opted for a third case to encourage national patriotism. This is the example of the use – or misuse – of the Manas epic. After the independence, the state coined it the national epic of Kyrgyzstan which was acclaimed as the embodiment of being Kyrgyz. It supposedly contains all elements that exemplify the Kyrgyz nation such as perseverance, courage and again the eternal striving for independence. The idea is that everybody should be able to identify with these qualities of their Kyrgyz ancestors.<sup>145</sup> Even though Kyrgyzstan is a multi-ethnic country, all school children are taught the ‘seven principles of Manas’ in their *Manasology* class, which emphasize national unity, humanism, friendship and cooperation in harmony with nature, hard, work, education and defending the state.<sup>146</sup>

Manas – now considered an actual 9<sup>th</sup> century historical figure – united the divided Kyrgyz tribes to defend against foreign oppressors – creating a sense of unity and national pride. The story is presented in a way so it implies that the contemporary divisions within the Kyrgyz society should be erased as well. According to Robert Lowe, the state policies that revived and promoted the nationalist reinterpretation Manas epic had the ‘intention that the epic tales will be considered “the Kyrgyz spiritual object” and the pivotal component of the Kyrgyz peoples’ mentality.’<sup>147</sup>

Manas’ name and status as a national symbol is widely recognized throughout modern day Kyrgyzstan, on TV, in monuments and at schools. The year 1995 was promoted as the ‘International Year of Manas’ which was recognized by UNESCO. The authorities built a historical park – Manas Ordo – including a mausoleum near Manas’ supposed birthplace Talas, which is even visited by Muslim pilgrims. In 2014, Manas Ordo was visited by almost 150.000 people and it is therefore one of Kyrgyzstan’s main tourist spots.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Gulette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic* 9.

<sup>146</sup> J. Féaux de la Croix, *Iconic Places in Central Asia: The Moral Geography of Dams, Pastures and Holy Sites* (2016) 115.

<sup>147</sup> Lowe, ‘Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic’ 117.

<sup>148</sup> Laruelle, ‘Kyrgyzstan’s nationhood’ 172.

However, also this national icon does not speak to everyone in Kyrgyzstan. Nienke van der Heide acknowledges that on the first sight, Manas has great potential of being a national symbol. However, the story does have no positive references to non-ethnic Kyrgyz. The reinterpreted epic is a symbol for the *Kyrgyz*, not for the entire Kyrgyz population. It does not resonate with the *civic* approach of statehood that Akaev had earlier propagated in his 'Common Home' policies.<sup>149</sup> Similar to the national flag of Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz national epic strongly promotes being Kyrgyz and therefore excludes non-Kyrgyz citizens.<sup>150</sup>

### **Kyrgyz statehood**

Another event that was supposed to increase nationalist and patriotic feelings of the Kyrgyz was the '2.200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Kyrgyz Statehood' in 2003. Festivities were organized throughout the year to commemorate ancestral values that are considered the legacy that strengthens the state today. Historians surprisingly supported the idea of Kyrgyz as the 'oldest nation of Central Asia, instead of challenging it.<sup>151</sup> According to Suleymanov, 'one might even argue that critique would be perceived as both inappropriate and unpatriotic.'<sup>152</sup> In order to suppress possible critique, president Akaev legitimized the 2.200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Kyrgyz Statehood by referring to a United Nations General Assembly resolution (UN GA). It is true that the General Assembly passed a resolution on this celebration, but this resolution does not mention the '2.200' years, but shows support only for the celebration of statehood itself. Kyrgyz politicians and historians certainly interpreted this resolution in their favour. The 2.200 Anniversary of Kyrgyz Statehood was an attempt to unite the citizens in the

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<sup>149</sup> N. van der Heide, *Spirited Performance: The Manas Epic and Society in Kyrgyzstan* (2015) 299.

<sup>150</sup> Lowe, 'Nation Building and Identity in the Kyrgyz Republic' 117.

<sup>151</sup> Suleymanov, 'The Role of History in the Creation of National Identities in Central Asia' 20.

<sup>152</sup> Suleymanov, 'The Role of History in the Creation of National Identities in Central Asia' 21.

concept of the state but the celebrations could not overcome political tensions that had been brewing since the death of demonstrators the year before.<sup>153</sup>

The 2.200 Anniversary of Kyrgyz Statehood also did not appeal to all Kyrgyz citizens because President Akaev saw the celebrations as another moment to promote national Kyrgyz-centric hero Manas. During speeches, Akaev formulated seven principles – drawn from the epic – that became the core of his program for independent Kyrgyzstan.<sup>154</sup> This way, Akaev presented the Manas epic as the blueprint of the contemporary Kyrgyz constitution, morals and ‘a testament for the Kyrgyz generations to come.’<sup>155</sup> The term ‘statehood’ emphasizes civic identity and civic values but the involvement of Manas moulded the celebration into something for ethnic Kyrgyz only. In the words of Erica Marat, ‘Manas ideals prevailed over voices calling for greater inclusion’.<sup>156</sup> The opportunity to highlight state identity could have been fruitful, but was eventually no real success.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the government of Kyrgyzstan launched different ideological projects in order to encourage the creation of national identities after Kyrgyzstan’s independence. Through educational institutions and mass celebrations, they promoted what they consider ‘Kyrgyz’ values. It is a way for the state to ‘spread the image and heritage of the nation’.<sup>157</sup> These are accompanied by the national story or narrative and through national symbols, such as the national flag. However, the discussed symbols only resonated to the ethnic Kyrgyz and not to non-Kyrgyz people. In multi-ethnic Kyrgyzstan it is difficult to create a story or symbol that speaks to all Kyrgyz citizens. In the next chapter, the figure of Kurmanjan Datka is analyzed in order to see if she *can* unite all citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>153</sup> Gulette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic* 9.

<sup>154</sup> Laruelle, ‘Kyrgyzstan’s nationhood’ 172.

<sup>155</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>156</sup> Marat, “We Disputed Every Word” 216.

<sup>157</sup> Suleymanov, ‘The Role of History in the Creation of National Identities in Central Asia’ 14.

## CHAPTER 3: *Kurmanjan Datka* and nation building

In this chapter, the image of Kurmanjan Datka is analyzed. After a short introduction on cinema in Kyrgyzstan, the question is how this particular film portrays Kurmanjan Datka. What sort of identity is she given and how does this connect her to nation building theories? These questions are answered in this chapter. I look at the theories that I have introduced and see how nationalist discourses are reflected in the film.

One thing to remember is that the film *Kurmanjan Datka* stands in line with other nation building projects of the Kyrgyz state. After other projects had not reached their ideological goals, the state came up with new unifying narratives and symbols.

### Cinema and nationalism

Cinema first came to Central Asia during the Russian expansion and the first film was screened in Tashkent in 1897. The film industry benefitted of Soviet investments in the 1920s and 1930s, but also suffered from its ideological control. Film makers were educated in Russia under the guidance of the Moscow establishment. Film production and distribution was regulated by a government institution: the State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino).<sup>158</sup>

These early Soviet films sketch an image of Central Asia as a backward place in desperate need of 'Soviet salvation.' Common themes in these films were the emancipation of women, redistribution of land and collectivization and the popular genre of the Central Asian adventure film. Documentaries emphasized the 'exotic' landscapes of Central Asia as well the different peoples of the Russian Empire and how to help them escape their backwardness.

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<sup>158</sup> M. Rouland, 'A Historical Introduction', in: M. Rouland, G. Abikeyeva and B. Beumers (ed.), *Cinema in Central Asia* (London 2013) 2.

Michael Rouland is a historian and researched nationalism, cinema and Islam. He writes in the introduction of a book *Cinema in Central Asia*, that 'cinema was viewed as an effective means to inculcate and educate the population with images of modernity.'<sup>159</sup> The Central Asian population was educated in hygiene, history and politics. Film had the power to shape the minds of the people of the 'periphery.' Rouland describes how film was used as a combination of an art form, an entertainment industry and a mass medium that contains ideological notions.

In the later Soviet decades, historical adventures and revolutionary heroism continued to be a major branch in Central Asian cinema.<sup>160</sup> Films were made increasingly from a Central Asian perspective and national literature, epics and biographies were brought to the screen. In Kyrgyzstan, development went relatively slow as the first full-length documentary was only produced in 1946. Most productions were made in the 1960s and 1970s. Only since this period can we speak of real national cinema in the Soviet East, according to Sally Cummings. More Kyrgyz directors, writers and technicians emerged, as well as an indigenous critics' culture. Besides, the Kyrgyz language was encouraged to be perfected as many films from other Union republics were translated into Kyrgyz.<sup>161</sup> Recurring elements in these Kyrgyz films were the importance of nature and landscape, collective tragedy, the maternal in national understandings and the powerlessness of the small community countering imperial Russia. Some of these elements together with symbols, myths and memories are detectable in *Kurmanjan Datka*.

After the independence of the republics deep-rooted Soviet traditions remained strong. Kyrgyzstan had heavily depended on the Soviet economy and the economic crisis that followed the independence caused constant budgetary restrictions on film production in the 1990s. This continued until early 2000s, when according to Rouland, Kyrgyzstan placed its cinema on the map through international film festivals, with films from directors Ernest Abdyjaparov, Aktan Abdykalykov

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<sup>159</sup> Rouland, 'A Historical Introduction' 4.

<sup>160</sup> Rouland, 'A Historical Introduction' 18.

<sup>161</sup> S. Cummings, 'Soviet Rule, nation and film: the Kyrgyz 'Wonder' years', *Nations and Nationalism* 15 (2009) 641.

and Marat Sarulu.<sup>162</sup> However, Rouland also admits that state funding remained little and there is only a small domestic market. Kyrgyzstan is no longer experiencing economic crises like in the 1990s, but many people are poor and simply cannot afford to go to the cinema.<sup>163</sup>

In 2004 the Kyrgyz government issued a law that required 0,1% of the state's budget to be assigned to cinema. Multiple production companies were founded by the state and with the financing from the state several long-length films, short films and documentaries were produced each year.<sup>164</sup> Film producers no longer study in Moscow, but at the Institute of Fine Arts in Bishkek which has a special department of Film and Television.

As the Soviets knew, film is a powerful tool in nation building. Even though Benedict Anderson did not include film in his theory on nationalism, we can however use his theory if we view film as another modern means of communication. Anderson concluded that modern means of communication greatly contributed to the formation of nations. Film can promote 'the titular national majority' and combined with language, symbols and other cultural elements it contributes to creating a common sense of belonging. This can also consist of assimilating and incorporating other existing ethnic groups.<sup>165</sup> In Cummings' words: 'cinematic works, in their distillations of time and space, contribute to the kinds of imaginings that sustain nation-state.'<sup>166</sup> State-led film policy aids in the process of identity formation by establishing a sense of national identity, through myths, historical struggles and symbols. It is another tool for the state to show who and what the nation is and it projects this image on new generations.

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<sup>162</sup> Rouland, 'A Historical Introduction' 28.

<sup>163</sup> G. Dönmez-Colin, *Cinemas of the other: a personal journey with film-makers from the Middle East and Central Asia* (Bristol 2006) 14.

<sup>164</sup> Chapron, 'A Small History of Kyrgyz Cinema', in: Rouland, M., Abikeyeva, G. and Beumers, B. (ed.), *Cinema in Central Asia* (London 2013) 132.

<sup>165</sup> R. Isaacs, 'Nomads, warriors and bureaucrats: nation building and film in post-Soviet Kazakhstan', *Nationalities Papers* 43 (2015) 400.

<sup>166</sup> Cummings, 'Soviet Rule, nation and film' 637.

### ***Kurmanjan Datka*: production and reception**

The film *Kurmanjan Datka* was made by director Sadyk Sher-Niyaz and was released in 2014. The world premiere of the film took place during the *Festival des Films du Monde* in Montreal in Canada. The film was the Kyrgyz submission for the Academy Awards in the category 'Best Foreign Language Film.'

The production of the film cost \$1,5 million which makes it the most expensive Kyrgyz film ever made. The film was partially financed by the state's agency Kyrgyz Film and by the private company of director Sher-Niyaz, who is himself a former minister. Kyrgyz minister for Culture Sultan Raev was also involved in the production. Other financiers were members of Parliament from the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan – where Kurmanjan herself was from – who persuaded the government to invest more into the new film. In an article on the website of *Eurasianet* before the film came out, Akmatbek Keldibekov – native of the Alai district and parliamentarian – said that the government 'shouldn't scimp on money... preserving our ideological values.'<sup>167</sup>

Investments for the production of *Kurmanjan Datka* were spent on new equipment as the existing was very old fashioned.<sup>168</sup> According to producer Jyldyz Joldosheva, it took two years to shoot the film. It was made without any special effects, which includes the scenes of the stunning landscapes and the tiger from Moscow Zoo. Nearly 10.000 people took part in the production, including a team of stunt horse riders and thousands of extras.<sup>169</sup> It is no miracle that director Sadyk Sher-Niyaz described the film as a 'national collaboration.'<sup>170</sup> Special attention was paid throughout

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<sup>167</sup> C. Rickleton, 'Kyrgyzstan: Nation-Building Efforts Reach the Silver Screen' (version 20 August 2013) <https://eurasianet.org/s/kyrgyzstan-nation-building-efforts-reach-the-silver-screen> (4 April 2018).

<sup>168</sup> B. Kelly, 'Kurmanjan Datka: Uncomfortable truths and the fight for independence' (version 22 Augustus 2014) <http://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment/movie-guide/Kurmanjan+Datka+Uncomfortable+truths+fight+independence/10141307/story.html> (7 April 2018).

<sup>169</sup> A. Simon, 'Film Review: 'Kurmanjan Datka Queen of the Mountains'' (version 29 December 2014) <http://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/film-review-kurmanjan-datka-queen-of-the-mountains-1201388282/> (7 April 2018).

<sup>170</sup> Yunis, 'Epic Nation' 21.

the film to the traditional Kyrgyz costumes, music, dance and sports which create a sense of strong nostalgia towards traditional Kyrgyz nomadic lifestyles.



Image 11 Promotion poster for *Kurmanjan Datka* (2014).

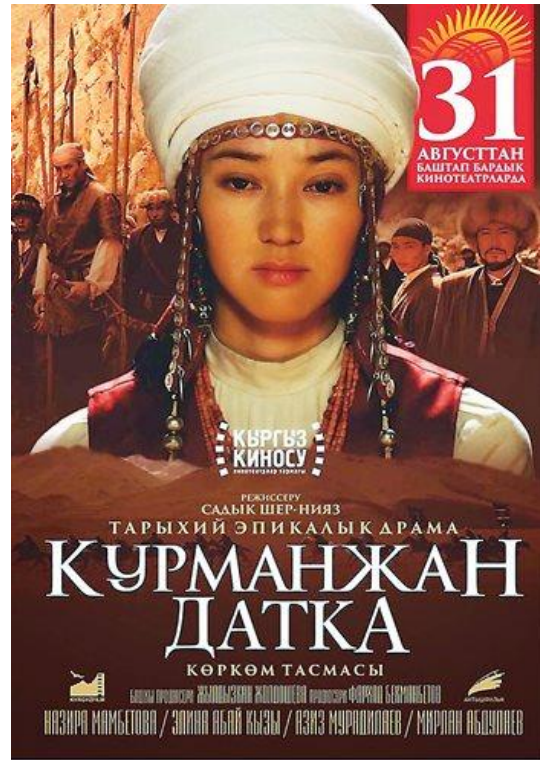


Image 12 Promotion poster for *Kurmanjan Datka* (2014).

Director Sher-Niyaz was asked about the film in several interviews. One of the main reasons for him to produce the film is the fact that Kurmanjan’s story contains many elements that would make a great film. “Her life is very dramatic and full of tragedy” and Sher-Niyaz elaborates on this by explaining how her whole life was a sacrifice for her country. She lost her husband and both her sons in her struggle. ‘We [the Kyrgyz] have to always understand the price of independence.’<sup>171</sup> The director continues that the gender aspect appealed to him as well. The fact that a woman can make

<sup>171</sup> Kelly, ‘Kurmanjan Datka: Uncomfortable truths and the fight for independence’ (7 April 2018).

it in a man's world is exceptional. It is important for Sher-Niyaz because gender issues are very present in Kyrgyzstan in different ways.<sup>172</sup>



**Image 13** Director Sadyk Sher-Niyaz on the set of *Kurmanjan Datka*.

According to Yunis, Kyrgyz historians have commented on the film. Having good intentions is not enough to produce a good historical story: it needs historical accuracy. They claim that several characters featured in the film were not alive anymore in Kurmanjan's lifetime. Besides this, there were several comments made on traditions in the film that are not considered part of Kyrgyz culture. An example of this is scene 2, where a woman is almost stoned to death for being unfaithful, while according to historian Tynchtykbek Chorotegin this is not a Kyrgyz custom nor is it part of Kyrgyz Islam. A second example of a historical error is the fact that Kurmanjan is seen writing in a runic script in scene 23 and scene 37, which was only used till the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> J. Kay, 'Sadyk Sher-Niyaz, Kurmanjan Datka' (version 9 October 2014) <https://www.screendaily.com/features/sadyk-sher-niyaz-kurmanjan-datka/5078455.article> (7 April 2018).

<sup>173</sup> Yunis, 'Epic Nation' 21. | Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 1.

The film was a success domestically as well as it was shown in theatres for months after its release on Kyrgyzstan's Independence Day the 31<sup>st</sup> of August. Just like the promotion of Manas in the 1990s, the authorities of interim president Roza Otunbayeva proclaimed a year of celebrations: 2011 was the Year of Kurmanjan Datka. In this year the production of the film began and it was also the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kurmanjan's birth. Otunbayeva also introduced an award – the 'State Order of Kurmanzhan Datka' – for Kyrgyzstani women 'for outstanding achievements in politics and society, including "contributions to protect and strengthen the state and the unity of the people, the traditions of the people of Kyrgyzstan, and to bring up the younger generation in the spirit of love and respect for their homeland".<sup>174</sup> Kurmanjan is – through this award – linked immediately to political achievements, the unity of the people and the role of the mother that brought forth new generations.



**Image 14 President Otunbayeva speaking with a depiction of Kurmanjan Datka in the background.**

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<sup>174</sup> Blakkisrud and Kyzy, 'Female Heroes in a Man's World' 112.

Professor of heritage and literature Elmira Kuchumkulova explains in an interview done by Alia Yunis that the film made Kurmanjan's historical story much more popular. She clarifies that 'many people looked forward to it [the release of the film] because they had read about her in history textbooks, but they did not have a clear picture of her.'<sup>175</sup> We can conclude therefore that bringing Kurmanjan to life on screen boosted her popularity in Kyrgyzstan and contributed to her image as a heroine. It is since this rise in her popularity due to the film that she is remembered not only as a rightful *Datka*, but 'also as Queen of the Alai, Queen of the South and, most of all, *ulut enesi* – mother – of the Kyrgyz nation.'<sup>176</sup>

### **Kurmanjan's image**

The question is now how heroine Kurmanjan Datka's image is fabricated in the film to boost national coherence and how her image encourages and stimulates nation building. In the following paragraphs I analyzed some of the key scenes and recurring themes. Throughout the film, Kurmanjan Datka is portrayed in different manners. She is presented as a strong female figure. I analyzed some of the speeches from the film and explain how they contribute to Kurmanjan's image of a strong woman that can lead and unite. I shortly demonstrate the other ways in which the nationalist discourse is displayed in the film. Lastly, I answer the question whether Kurmanjan can unite the people of Kyrgyzstan a second time through this film.

The film begins with a narrator disclosing the history of the Kyrgyz people. It is explained how 'hundreds of years ago' the Kyrgyz Khanate fell due to the conflicts among local clans and the invasions by others. This immediately confirms the tragedy and weakness of disunity of the tribes, which is a continuously returning theme in Kyrgyz history. Here an immediate link is made with

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<sup>175</sup> Yunis, 'Epic Nation' 21.

<sup>176</sup> Yunis, 'Epic Nation' 24.

Manas as the first scene in the film is a *manaschi* reciting the epic.<sup>177</sup> It is in this scene that Kurmanjan first appears on the screen – as a little girl – when visiting the recitation with her parents. Kurmanjan’s fate is therefore explicitly linked to the great mythical hero Manas and the Manas tradition. A cultural continuity is created between Kurmanjan as an actual living person and the legendary hero of the past. Kurmanjan is here clearly presented an extension and perpetuation of Kyrgyz tradition and culture.

### **Kurmanjan as a heroine**

Kurmanjan Datka’s image of a heroine in Kyrgyz history comes forth in several scenes. The question is what characteristics make Kurmanjan a good heroine? If we look at the theories that were discussed earlier, we can connect her to the theory of Franco Zeno and Kathy Blau in their article *Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism*. In their article, they describe certain character traits of heroes and make a division of 12 subtypes based on qualities such as leadership, representation, sympathy and place in collective experience or trauma.<sup>178</sup>

Kurmanjan fits in their first subtype – military and other duty-bound physical risk heroes – as she is involved in dangerous situations which she willingly and consciously enters.<sup>179</sup> She enters the Russian camps to negotiate, which puts her in a vulnerable position. Kurmanjan is also present at her son’s execution. She puts herself in physical risk by exposing herself to these situations.

The first subtype is closely related to the sixth subtype: political or military leaders. This subtype is typically an individual that leads ‘a nation or a group during a time of difficulty’, such as a war or a natural disaster. These heroes unify nations, provide a shared vision and are vital for the

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<sup>177</sup> The Manas epic is traditionally passed on orally. A *manashi* is a narrator of the epic who recites in social gatherings, at schools and at festivals. Each *manashi* has his or her own version of the epic. | Heide, van der, *Spirited Performance* 17. | Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 1.

<sup>178</sup> Zeno and Blau, ‘Heroism’ 102.

<sup>179</sup> Ibidem.

survival of the group. This is the category that Kurmanjan fits in best as she is considered the one that united all the Kyrgyz tribes and led them out of their era of division. As *Datka*, Kurmanjan embodies the dream of her late husband Alymbek of bringing the tribes together.

The tenth subtype is that is the 'odds beater' or 'underdog'. Even though this does not seem very evident in the film, Kurmanjan is indeed an underdog because she is a woman. This already becomes clear in the first scene of the film where Kurmanjan's parents ask the *manashi* for their blessing to have a child. The *manashi* asks why they have come for a blessing when they already have a child. Kurmanjan's father admits that Kurmanjan is indeed their child, 'but she is a girl.' It is obvious here that girls are not considered as valuable as boys. However, when the *manashi* asks for Kurmanjan, he says the following: 'Your daughter is worth ten sons. Our country will need her tomorrow.'<sup>180</sup> The scene is supposed to prove that even a small girl – a real underdog – can bring great promise and serve her country. The fact that – after this conversation – other villagers make fun of Kurmanjan's father for this, contributes even more to the image of Kurmanjan being an underdog. In other scenes, Kurmanjan is again and again the only woman in negotiations and meetings – whether in Russian or Kyrgyz sphere. Kurmanjan is clearly an 'odd beater' as she seems to be the only female leader in the highly male dominated society of the Kyrgyz tribes. She overcomes these adverse conditions and becomes a model for others.

### **Kurmanjan in a man's world**

The way Kurmanjan fits into the heavily male-dominated narrative of the Kyrgyz nation buildings is also analyzed by Helge Blakkisrud and Nuraida Abdykapar Kyzy in their article *Female Heroes in a Man's World*. Working from the point that nations are imagined and socially constructed communities, Blakkisrud and Kyzy consider the film *Kurmanjan Datka* as a way to 'bolster patriotism

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<sup>180</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 1.

and national consolidation' after the removal of president Bakiev in 2010 and the ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>181</sup> After the independence of 1991, Kyrgyzstan lacked a 'readily available historical base' on which a new national identity could be built. The authors illustrate how the constructed state-approved history curriculum has included only very few female heroes.<sup>182</sup> In their opinion, the revival of Kurmanjan's story is an attempt to create a new image to reconcile the nation. This is the reason the state heavily funded the production.

In their article, Blakkisrud and Kyzy see Kurmanjan as one of the few women that has a place in national Kyrgyz history. However – just as the other female figures that they discuss – the figure of Kurmanjan is a victim of 'masculinization'. She merely stepped in power when it was necessary and took the responsibilities that are usually associated with the male domain. As mentioned before, Kurmanjan enters an all-male realm: her interactions in the film involve almost entirely other men. Becoming *datka* was only possible for Kurmanjan because she was at first the wife of a prominent leader Alymbek. Before his death, she only participates in the political realm by counselling her husband in private. However, after his death, she becomes more than merely a bride or a mother and becomes a leader. Similar to the other female figures that Blakkisrud and Kyzy discuss, Kurmanjan is cast as an 'honorary male.'<sup>183</sup> According to Alia Yunis' article, this rather manly image of Kurmanjan is debated by Kurmanjan's descendents. In a small interview they explain how their own forefathers remember Kurmanjan as a feminine woman, who was caring and tender and had a cheerful personality. 'In the film, she didn't talk much and behaved more like a man.'<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Blakkisrud and Kyzy, 'Female Heroes in a Man's World' 114.

<sup>182</sup> The other heroines that Blakkisrud and Kyzy analyze are – together with Kurmanjan Datka – the only four women that are referred to in more than one historical textbook: Kyz Saikal (a female warrior in the Manas epic), Kanykei (Manas' wife and counselor) Zhangyl Myrza (16<sup>th</sup> century epic heroine) | Blakkisrud and Kyzy, 'Female Heroes in a Man's World' 127.

<sup>183</sup> Blakkisrud and Kyzy, 'Female Heroes in a Man's World' 133.

<sup>184</sup> Yunis, 'Epic Nation' 25.

In the film, the transfer of power from Alymbek to Kurmanjan is depicted by the birth of a child in scene 17. It represents the rebirth of Kurmanjan as a rightful leader. This new role for Kurmanjan is confirmed by Emir Muzaffar, who praises her for her wisdom and fairness.<sup>185</sup>

Blakkisrud and Kyzy conclude their article by stating that Kurmanjan Datka is in their eyes a 'quick-fix' national hero. They argue her story was readily at hand; through the school curriculum as well as everyday nationalism. In the aftermath of the 2010 regime change and conflicts the choice for her is understandable: she is presented as a southern leader that was willing to make a great sacrifice for the Kyrgyz nation. Bringing her story to life does not seem to be aimed at women but serves as an example 'to the (male-dominated) leadership (...) of the need to overcome petty rivalry and short-sighted self-interests.'<sup>186</sup> The authors deduce that perhaps contemporary Kyrgyz leaders should follow her example by putting 'their personal aspirations aside, and work for the consolidation of the nation.'<sup>187</sup>

### **Marriage and motherhood**

Kurmanjan's role in Kyrgyz nation building contains another element that is related to her femininity: motherhood. As Nira Yuval-Davis writes in *Gender and Nation*, women are identified with nature, emotion and the private sphere. She argues that in nationalist theories women symbolize continuity, purity and the family honour. In the film, family and family honour are emphasized in the ritual before Kurmanjan's marriage. She is washed by the other women of her family. A song is sung by one of the older women which demands Kurmanjan to preserve her fathers' honour, respect her new father-in-law 'as if he were a king', and to be happy with her new groom. Her role as a new wife is

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<sup>185</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 22.

<sup>186</sup> Blakkisrud and Kyzy, 'Female Heroes in a Man's World' 134.

<sup>187</sup> Ibidem.

also to bring forth a new generation, as the song asks her to 'rock a golden cradle very soon' and let her family blossom.<sup>188</sup>

However, Kurmanjan rebels against tradition and escapes from this first marriage. She has not 'held up her fathers' honour' and her mother is upset with her, asking 'how can we look people in the face?'.<sup>189</sup> Kurmanjan redeems herself later as she marries Alymbek. This act of insurgency may however inspire and empower women today because Kurmanjan challenged existing patterns of female behaviour. Domestic violence and abduction in relation to forced marriage are pervasive forms of violence against women in Kyrgyzstan that have long been neglected by the government.<sup>190</sup>

Kurmanjan's role as a mother of her children, as well as mother of the nation, culminates in scene 39. After being imprisoned for 2 years, Kamchybek is executed on the main square of Osh. Kurmanjan wanted to save him, but realized that she needed to spare her people from an unequal match against the Russian army.

Yuval Davis explains in *Gender and Nation* that in traditional nationalism men are associated with the rational, civilization and the public whereas women are associated with the emotional, natural and private sphere. Instead of acting on her emotions, Kurmanjan shows her rational side when she has to choose between her son and the future of the nation. She accepts Kamchybek's faith and surrenders him to preserve relations with Russia. This is the critical moment of Kurmanjan's legacy: 'Kyrgyz widely believe the Russians would have utterly destroyed them.'<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 4.

<sup>189</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 6.

<sup>190</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Reconciled to Violence: State Failure to Stop Domestic Abuse and Abduction of Women in Kyrgyzstan', *Human Rights Watch* 18 (2006) 1.

<sup>191</sup> Yunis, 'Epic Nation' 23.



**Image 15 Kamchybek - played by Adilet Usubaliyev - moments before he is executed; a critical scene in the film and in Kurmanjan Datka's story.**

### **Visual representation: the strength of a tiger**

Just after the prediction is made about Kurmanjan's future in scene 1, little Kurmanjan spots a tiger lurking in the high grass and growling softly. The tiger returns several times in the film at crucial moments of strength and represents Kurmanjan's spirit animal. As mentioned before, Central Asia has animism intertwined in its religious traditions. In multiple Asian cultures, tigers are part of tales, myths and worship. They are renowned for their strength, courage, ferocity and elegance and are considered strong and fierce animals. In many mythical or artistic perceptions, the tiger is the king of all other animals and therefore represents royalty. In Imperial Chinese art, tigers were used to depict the highest generals because of their stalking and hunting skills. The big cats are also one of the twelve animals of the Kyrgyz zodiac and there are several existing Kyrgyz tribes who believe they are descendants of tigers.<sup>192</sup>

It then makes sense that the tiger is Kurmanjan's personification in an animal. It shows that Kurmanjan has a strong courageous personality – and already at a young age. The tiger returns in

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<sup>192</sup> 'The Kyrgyz people – some of the tribes – think they are descendents of tigers. We are a nation of 40 tribes, and each tribe belongs to an animal, like one is the deer, the wolf, the bear.' | Yunis, 'Epic Nation' 26.

scene 5, when Kurmanjan is escaping from her first marriage. As she crosses the river on her horse, the tiger is shown running and swimming as well. The tiger returns again when Kurmanjan flees from attackers in scene 15 and another time when her spirits rise in scene 37.

The tiger returns for the last time at the very end of the film when Kurmanjan is already an old woman. The tiger however still sprints across the fields and suggests that Kurmanjan's spirit is high and will always be alive.

### **Speeches and leadership**

The film has some key speeches and letters that show Kurmanjan's ability to lead and inspire. One of these key speeches features in scene 18, when Akbalban – Kurmanjan's brother – is criticized by some Alai men who are concerned for their families and livestock as the Kokand army is approaching. They want to flee and save their families and themselves. However, Kurmanjan reminds the men what it really means to be Kyrgyz in troubled times:

*Kurmanjan: 'Why do you men look so down? Sarymsak, you say you want to leave. Fine. Let's give our ancestor's land to the enemy. If so, do we have a right to continue our lineage? Kokand's army is powerful and each life is precious. But aren't the freedom of our people and the happiness of our children even more precious? You men may go. We women will stay. We swore to not let the enemy pass... Should the descendants of our great hero, Manas, simply run away?! It is better to die standing than to live on one's knees. Kyrgyz people have never died lying in their beds during war. What can be more honourable than to die for our Motherland? Borochoy, who will take care of your wife? Sanjarbek, where will your wife be safe? We have come here to stand with you. If you fight with spears, we'll throw stones. If you*

*shoot, we'll pass you arrows. If we die, we'll die together. If we live, we will build our unified nation. What do you say?'*

*Villager: 'To battle, men! Let Manas' spirit support us. Let's fight!'<sup>193</sup>*

In this speech, Kurmanjan touches upon the elements that are key to being Kyrgyz. She reminds the men that Kyrgyz people should never give up their Motherland because if they do, they have no right to continue their lineage. She then relates this to Kyrgyz hero Manas and stresses the importance of the freedom that Manas also fought for. She emphasizes the importance of unity and standing together to fight the enemy. In her eyes, women can join this battle as much as the men. This speech shows exactly why Kurmanjan could be a great symbol for the promotion of Kyrgyz unity as she mentions many key elements of being Kyrgyz: the importance of ancestors, national hero Manas and the continuous fight for freedom and independence; the very same elements that are stressed in nation building projects since Kyrgyzstan's independence.

Another scene has the same goal and effect is scene 23 where Kurmanjan reads a letter from advisor and tribe leader Shabdan on the Great Assembly and the expanding Tsarist armies.

*'We ask God to give long life and health to Kurmanjan Datka, mother of the Alai people and devoted wife to Alymbek Datka, who strives for the unification of all Kyrgyz people. The time has come to unite with tribes living apart no longer fighting amongst themselves, set against one another by Emirs and enemies. Weakened by destructive wars, we were forced to accept the protection of the Russian Empire. Understanding that we wouldn't be able to resist them, with neither sufficient people, not quantity of people, we accepted their proposal to sign a peace agreement. That's why I warn you not to resist the Russian troops. Otherwise, hundreds of brave Alai warriors will be killed. In conclusion, we support the idea of unification*

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<sup>193</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 17.

*and realise the necessity for a Great Assembly representing all of our people. I hope I'll see you at the meeting. Shabdan.*<sup>194</sup>

In this letter, the disunity of the tribes is considered a great problem in relation to internal and external threats. The plans for a Great Assembly should bring about the reunification of the people – something leaders of contemporary Kyrgyzstan wish to accomplish as well. Disunity makes the people weak and therefore weakens authority and autonomy of the state. 'A strong united people makes a stronger state' is exactly the message that the contemporary Kyrgyz regime would like to express and they promote that through this film.

Kurmanjan's vision for the future is presented in scene 40. The scroll which contains her text is read aloud at the Great Assembly. All the leaders of the tribes have come together to pay their respects to Kamchybek and acknowledge Kurmanjan's sacrifice. The flags of the tribes are brought in and posted in a circle.

*'An undying dream has been saving Kyrgyz people throughout the centuries and won't allow them to disappear without a trace. That dream is to return our lost state. To achieve this dream many generations perished and many tears were shed. But the flame in our hearts have never been extinguished. No one knows which path to take in order to achieve our aim. Maybe we're expected to fight for freedom beyond a human being's strength but we must never relent nor submit. Mothers give birth to their children to serve the nation. Let unity and courage help us on our way. For the sake of our Motherland people must be ready to sacrifice loves ones..'*<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 23.

<sup>195</sup> Sher-Niyaz, *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains*, scene 40.

Kurmanjan expresses the 'undying dream' of unification and longing for an independent state. She refers to the sacrifice made by many ancestral generations and the collective trauma that unites the community of the Kyrgyz tribes. Unity and courage are the keys in this speech.

### **Other expressions**

Besides the figure of Kurmanjan Datka, the film has other nationalist expressions that are worth mentioning. Flags are featured often to show nationalities or allegiance. Each of the tribes at the National Assembly bring their own flag to the ceremony and they are all shown together in a circle when the assembly takes place. The Russians are clearly defined as one group as they all wear uniforms with authoritative emblems. This unity in dress also contributes the suggestion that they are numerous.

Many important meetings always take place in yurts, the traditional nomadic Kyrgyz home. When Kurmanjan leaves her own family for her first marriage, thunder strikes as she exits her own yurt. Further in the film, guests are received in yurts and political discussions also take place here. In meetings, often horse milk and meals are offered to guests. These meetings sometimes involve traditional Kyrgyz music. Encounters between Kyrgyz and Russians in diplomatic spheres are somewhat cold.

The film regularly shows other national symbols, such as birds of prey, horses, the use of bow and arrow and traditional Central Asian sports. National hero Manas is a continuous inspiration for all Kyrgyz warriors. The film opens with the *manaschi* and the 'spirit of Manas' invigorates the men to fight for their ancestral lands.

There is a lot of attention for these lands as the landscape takes an important role in the film. As the film was made without special effects, many of the scenes are filmed outside and provide beautiful visions – especially in scene 15 when Kurmanjan is chased on horseback by Kokand men.

The relationship of the Kyrgyz people with the landscape also shows in scene 19 when confident and determined Alai men attack de-motivated Kokand troops in a sort of guerrilla style battle in a mountain pass, an environment not unfamiliar to the Kyrgyz. The spiritual connection of the people to the landscape is expressed by Kurmanjan's son who – as he is about to leave his home for Afghanistan in scene 30 – declares that his heart would always return him to the Alai mountains. When Kurmanjan's other son Kamchybek is about to be executed, we see him staring to the Alai mountains in the distance one last time. As Jeanne Féaux de la Croix explains in her work *Iconic Places in Central Asia*, the landscape is the image of the Kyrgyz love for nature and the pride of the ancestral homeland.<sup>196</sup>

Another element to pay attention to is language. The film shows through language how the Russian occupation played out. When General Skobelev visits Kurmanjan Datka in her home he starts his conversation in Kyrgyz. Yet – after formalities and expressing mutual respect – he continues in Russian to state that this is the language of business and politics. This reflects the current situation in Kyrgyzstan. Despite government's efforts to promote the Kyrgyz language, Russian continues to be the language of officials.

### **The figure of Kurmanjan**

In many ways Kurmanjan embodies the Kyrgyz spirit. Her representation in the film shows courage, strength and vigour. Like a tiger, she is considered a strong, yet elegant figure. Her image as a mother of her son contributed to her image as a mother of the nation. The personal sacrifice that she makes for the nation to avoid destruction and more bloodshed is a crucial element of her story. In a time of great difficulty, she stands up and sets aside her personal wishes in order to unite and lead her people to a new future.

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<sup>196</sup> Féaux de la Croix, *Iconic Places in Central Asia* 80.

However, we have to conclude that also Kurmanjan Datka is a heroine for the Kyrgyz people only – not for the entire Kyrgyz population, similar to the other nation building projects over the last decades. The national Kyrgyz flag led to discussion and so did the continuous emphasis on Kyrgyz hero Manas. President Akaev attempted to stress Kyrgyz statehood in the hope that people would identify more with the state instead of with their clan or tribe, but local and regional affiliations remain strong. Divisions among the varied population make finding a uniting element challenging.

The choice for a film on Kurmanjan as a next nation building ‘project’ is logical as she came from the south and could therefore perhaps be a national figure for the Kyrgyz as well as the Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan. The government heavily funded this ideological film to bolster patriotism in difficult times as most Kyrgyz today are too poor to afford a visit to the cinema. It seems therefore that also Kurmanjan Datka does not have the ability to unify the fractured Kyrgyz state a second time.

## CONCLUSION

Since Kyrgyzstan gained its independence in 1991 the Kyrgyz state has been struggling to create a universal Kyrgyz identity: an identity that would fit the titular nationality as well as the many different ethnic groups. However, the national symbols that were created were not able bring together the culturally and socially distinctive northern and southern citizens of Kyrgyzstan. The national flag – the most recognizable symbol of a nation – has been criticized for focussing too much on the ethnic Kyrgyz people only and other national symbols still refer to the Soviet times that the state is attempting to retire from. The nationalist reinterpretation of the Manas epic as Kyrgyzstan's national epic was a success, but again for the ethnic Kyrgyz only. In the 1990s and early 2000s president Akaev and president Bakiev launched ideological programs to strengthen civic identity and encourage unity among the population, but these projects proved unsuccessful so far. On top of that, Kyrgyzstan long struggled with economic crises, poverty and corruption.

The reason for presidents to launch nationalistic projects is partially that Kyrgyzstan is still a highly divided country where tribal identities and local affiliations persist. People identify themselves with their own community more than with the state. Besides that, non-ethnic Kyrgyz experience discrimination when it comes to job opportunities, education, economic activity, justice and political participation. The heterogeneous population has been formed because of several historical reasons. Commercial traffic along the Silk Road, changing lifestyles and the creation of artificial borders in the 1920s all contributed to Kyrgyzstan's diverse population. People's identities changed during the rule of the Soviets as attempts were made to create one universal identity for all peoples in the Socialist Soviet Republics. These historical factors make it difficult for the state to come up with elements that unify *all* citizens and not just the ethnic Kyrgyz. And it is exactly history that plays such a pivotal role in nationalism and nation building. It is the bedrock of people's identity because it answers the questions 'who are we?', 'where do we come from?' and 'what connects us?'

On top of that, inter-ethnic violence breaks out regularly and it seems that the state is unable to reconcile. On the other hand, in recent years Kyrgyzstan has been developing a stronger civil society, political parties and other actors that claim their role in defining what the nation is or should be. The influence of Islam is increasing as well, as religion has always been a substantial part of national heritage in Central Asia. As Andrew Philips and Paul James conclude in their article: in the past, the 'nomadic ancestors were able to syncretise Islam with shamanistic practices, so too it is possible that contemporary Central Asians will be able to retain a layered sense of national identity in conjunction with their traditional identities.'<sup>197</sup>

The film *Kurmanjan Datka* could be seen as another state financed project aiming to boost nationalist feelings and promote unity among the people. Kurmanjan is a female leader that united the tribes of Kyrgyzstan in a fight against oppressors. The film features intense speeches and from an inspiring underdog position, Kurmanjan Datka attempted to resist the forces that would take away the Kyrgyz freedom and independence. In her battle, she lost her husband, first son and had no choice but to sacrifice her second son as well. In director Sher-Niyaz's words, Kurmanjan's life had all elements for a film as her whole life was a sacrifice for her country. It is this combination of unification and sacrifice for the Motherland that make *Kurmanjan Datka* such a strong and powerful national image.

We can conclude that also *Kurmanjan Datka* appeals to large part of the Kyrgyz population as was shown by the great success of the film domestically. However – just as the discussed other national symbols – the story of Kurmanjan most likely appeals only to the ethnic Kyrgyz. Even though I have not discussed it extensively, Kurmanjan might be an example for many women, who are inspired by her act of leaving her first arranged marriage and eventually marrying for love. Hopefully she will also inspire Kyrgyzstan's future politicians: Kurmanjan Datka put the interests of her subjects before those of her own, something that the leaders of independent Kyrgyzstan have rarely done.

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<sup>197</sup> Philips and James, 'National Identity between Tradition and Reflexive Modernization' 33.

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## APPENDIX

### Scene description

#### Note:

The English translation of the film *Kurmanjan Datka* that I used, translated the Kyrgyz word for 'Motherland' in the English 'Fatherland.' As mentioned in the introduction, Central Asian countries have a feminine personification of the nation and refer to it as 'Motherland'. I have therefore changed 'Fatherland' to 'Motherland' in this overview of the scenes.

#### Scene 1:

##### Introduction

Narrator: 'Hundreds of years ago this land was named Kyrgyz Kaganat. As time passed with conflicts amongst local clans and merciless invasions by Genghiz Khan and Tamerlane, the great power of the Kyrgyz Kaganat fell. Over a thousand years, this former empire shattered into pieces leaving the Kyrgyz people on the verge of extinction. Only 40 remaining tribes are still surviving in the mountains as part of Kokand Khanate under Bukhara Emirate's ruler ship.

Visuals: a map of the former Kyrgyz empire shatters

Manas epic sung: 'carcasses of horses lie everywhere still, corpses of dead warriors form a hill. The ground is groaning from a grief that is so deep, bending trees inconsolably weep. A hero's wife mourned for long. All widows accompanied her in a funeral song. I'm alone and don't know where to cling, our hero passed away and he used to be by my wing.'

Visuals: small Kurmanjan is present with her parents, who ask to be blessed with a child, after visiting holy places in vain. Her father admits they already have a child after questioned by the *manashi*, but 'she is a girl', he answers. The *manashi* asks her to come to him and he says 'your daughter is worth ten sons. Our country will need her tomorrow. Let the Lord give you a long life.'

Kurmanjan's father is clearly irritated and her mother tries to calm him. Her father called a beggar by other men, told to get his kid out of the way and the men are name-calling: 'ruler of the people', 'future queen'.

Kurmanjan spots a tiger in the field.

#### Scene 2 (00:05:52):

Kurmanjan has grown up. Asked if she loves her fiancé Kulseit, yet by her brother Akbalban. He doesn't want her to marry him, because 'he can't ride a horse properly.' Kurmanjan explains she was engaged as she was a child, Akbalban suggests to return the engagement earrings.

Carriage comes by, with a woman in a cage. Woman tied to a post and men grab stones. Her hair is almost cut, just in time Alymbek comes in. Men explain they want to stone 'this whore, according to

Sharia law', claiming she committed adultery. Alymbek asks for proof and apparently two people have it. Young boy – her brother – comes from the crowd, saying she is innocent. Alymbek is told by the villagers not to violate Sharia law. He asks the boy for witnesses and he says that two female neighbours can confirm her innocence, but the men say that a woman's word is not evidence. Alymbek orders the woman to be set free. The men drop the stones, but they refuse to give her water. Kurmanjan brings a jar of water. This is the first time she lays eyes on Alymbek. Alymbek asks her about the text on the jug and Kurmanjan tells him she can read. 'God bless you, Kurmanjan', he says. Alymbek warns the men not to cut off hair or they will pay with their heads. He leaves.

### **Scene 3 (00:11:34):**

Kurmanjan and her brother return home. Their father is angry with their mother, asking what her daughter was doing at the execution site. Mother says she went to fetch water. Father 'an engaged girl shouldn't give cause for gossip.'

Kurmanjan asks: 'did you ever ask me if I wanted to marry Kulseit? As I told mother, I'll never marry him.'

Father: 'you have only one husband in front of God and the people. That is Kulsait'

### **Scene 4 (00:12:30):**

Singing, 'on the hill where grasses sway, the hawk came flying in and wished to stay. People gathered for a feast under the moon, to see you off to your intended bridegroom. Our angel, keep your head proud and high. Preserve your father's honour, never say anything on the sly. Show respect to your father-in-law as if he were a king. The home of your husband is your castle where to cling. Live long and be happy with your groom. May you rock a golden cradle very soon. Never separate from your groom. Rock a silver cradle day and night very soon. Let your family blossom like flower right away. Look after our daughter, protect her, we pray. Our angel, we now have a heavy heart, from how on we'll live forever apart.'

Visuals: rituals of women and girls, burning small branches creating smoke. All dressed traditionally. Kurmanjan is being washed. Chest with possessions is locked. Kurmanjan is dressed and veiled. Thunder sounds as she leaves her yurt. She gets on a horse. Her mother asks her mother-in-law for Kurmanjan to be happy, to treat Kurmanjan as her own daughter, but the lady seems unimpressed. Brother Akbalban runs to her – for a final goodbye – and gives her a small knife.

### **Scene 5 (00:16:42):**

Kurmanjan has arrived in her new home. She is offered horse milk, but she doesn't want any. The women leave. Mother in law brings Kurmanjan's new husband.

He comes out of the yurt again and sits by fire.

Kurmanjan hides in a corner, when a strange man comes into the tent. Kurmanjan takes out her knife. She throws the milk at him. There is a quick view of the tiger again which is growling and running away.

Kurmanjan rides her horse escaping. The tiger swims as Kurmanjan crosses the river with her horse. The tiger and Kurmanjan both make it to the other side.

**Scene 6 (00:21:22):**

Akbalban practises his bow skills, when he hears Kurmanjan's horse. He guides her home. Kurmanjan looks certain and determined with her decision. The other women are shocked and surprised she is back. They drop their silk and follow her.

Kurmanjan's mother consoles her and gives her some food, but Kurmanjan hasn't eaten in three days. She refuses her mother to touch her, clearly upset and angry. Mother tells her father is ill and there was nothing he could do.

'How can we look people in the face?', mother clearly ashamed about Kurmanjan. Kurmanjan continues her embroidery, dresses her brother and gives it to him.

'Scarlet coloured silk is never left in the sun, your Highness. Silver is never thrown into the ash, your Highness. The swan is not hunted with a kite to catch, your Highness. And only you will be my perfect match, your Highness.'

Eagles fly in the sky.

**Scene 7 (00:24:46):**

Governor's office, Osh.

Alymbek has a hawk with a cap on. Alymbek receives a complaint, 'Kulseit from the Bargy tribe has made a complaint.' Alymbek laughs when he hears it's about Kulseit's wife. Decides to send a judge to Alai, judge Kudaiberdy to investigate. He is not aware it is about Kurmanjan.

**Scene 8 (00:25:37):**

View of horses coming over the mountain. Men prepare themselves for the arrival of the judge, who starts an argument: 'Idiots, not honouring our ancestors' customs!', 'We're going to return your disobedient girl back to her husband'. They are asked if they let her run away from her husband at night. The men calmly ask if the judge wants to dismount and talk. They say that they will answer for it if the judge thinks they are to blame. They enter the yurt to discuss.

At night, the women wait. Akbalban sits outside in the night, testing how far his arrow can bend.

Kurmanjan is called in, but she is holding back

Akbalban sends an arrow to the sky when another delegation arrives which is heard by the women. Alymbek comes into her tent.

**Scene 9 (00:29:48):**

The next day, Akbalban is given a knife by one of the riders from Alymbek's delegation.

Alymbek and Kurmanjan ride horses together and their marriage seems certain. Akbalban shows his bow and arrow skills to come with his sister and join the guard of Alymbek.

**Scene 10 (00:31:14):**

Jump to the future. Alymbek helps Abdyldabek with his skills, then Kamchybek. Kurmanjan and Alymbek watch over them.

Swords and weapons made. Akbalban makes a whip for Kurmanjan, son Kamchybek has his own. Akbalban shows him different woods, firmness of wood.

Kurmanjan talks to the women, Kamchybek tries to get on a horse.

**Scene 11 (00:33:37):**

Khan's palace, Kokand.

Alymbek visits. The Khan complains about the low taxes, Alymbek explains people cannot pay that much. 'Most tax much be paid by Tashkent and the Fergana valley.' Alymbek says that his Bukhara ruler has the same situation, but he is not tormenting people.

Khan: 'now when our Kokand Khanate is experiencing hard times, your northern borders, under Juntai's leadership, are seeking freedom from us, trying to liberate themselves. Despite that, I believe you, and I think you won't betray our common interests, my Datka.'

Alymbek is given a cloak and leaves.

**Scene 12 (00:35:34):**

Arrival of a group of people, including a crying woman who claims she only just lost her husband and his older brother wants to marry her. Akbalban tells Kurmanjan women should not disturb a meeting and she is refused entrance. Alymbek notices her.

He meets her later that day, showing her he still has her linen cloth, and a ring symbolizing unity. Alymbek says: 'Our people have been broken into 40 tribes, 40 standards and 40 seals. It would be wonderful if we united and had a Great Assembly with all Kyrgyz tribes near this Sacred Stone. Then I will have no regrets.'

Kurmanjan: 'Isn't it possible to unite without destroying people's destiny?'

**Scene 13 (00:38:29):**

Riders with banners approach, a beacon is lit.

Ill Khan is visited by a doctor and is given medicine but he refuses.

Man comes in, 'people are coming from the Vergana valley, under Alymbek Datka's leadership.'

Alymbek received by the Khan. Asked to come in, asked about journey, and his people. He is given milk to drink: 'Dear Khan, let me begin with my concerns.'

Khan: 'you have come to your brothers. Let us first celebrate your visit. Show respect to our traditions. I cannot let you leave without a celebration. During the feast we will talk.'

Feast begins, music, horse riding, wrestling, food, flags.

Alymbek: 'here is the declaration for the unification of all our people.'

Khan's son Shabdan addressed by the Khan, 'my son, in these times of troubles, when the great powers restrict us from all sides, by capturing our land, we have to be united. Both Alymbek and I, have undertaken the responsibility for calling a Great Assembly of our people. Son, it is your duty to organize this meeting.'

Alymbek: 'Khan, let us now go.'

Khan: 'My son will escort you to the river crossing.'

Alymbek makes his leave by horse, with the Khan's son. Riding through the mountains.

At the river, they stop. Alymbek tells Shabdan to go home soon, because this father is not well. He hurries home. His father is sick again and dying. Khan: 'Son, have you seen the guests off?' 'Yes father'. 'They are your brothers..' He passes away.

#### **Scene 14 (00:46:18):**

Kokand Khan receives the information that Alymbek has been north to meet Jantai, calls him a traitor. 'A leopard never changes his spots. So he decided to unite with the Northern tribes. Invade.., I'll invade Alai!' His servant suggests beheading for Alymbek.

Views of fog rising in the mountains.

#### **Scene 15 (00:47:10):**

Alymbek's men realize they cannot find him and they realize that Kurmanjan is not with him either. They prepare the horses for a search.

Alymbek is with a servant, on horseback, an hour from Alai, around prayer time. They stop near a small mosque. Alymbek washes his hands, his servant has to hand in his weapons. When they get ready to start their prayer, men appear from the small mosque. Alymbek realizes immediately they come from the Kokand Khan. He tells his servant to go and care for the horses, who questions him, but obeys. Alymbek: 'Right now, this message is more important...' (gives him the purple cloth), 'than any life. Get on my horse. Go.' He is allowed to leave and rides away.

Alymbek spreads his prayer carpet and makes his final prayers. He prepares himself as the executor stands next to him, with his sword. He strikes.

In the mean time, Kurmanjan is riding and sees men at the horizon. She commands her ladies to return and they ride fast through the fields, while the chase begins. They leave their possessions and the ladies hide in the forests. Kurmanjan is spotted and one of the men follows here.

Beautiful slow motion views of Kurmanjan, looking behind her, clothes swirling in the wind. Exciting music during the chase on horseback. She enters a rocky mountainous area. She tries to get rid of him, but her perpetrator sees her. On a cliff edge, she loses her traditional headscarf hat. Her pursuer comes closer and together with the horse, Kurmanjan jumps off the cliff into the water. Short view of the tiger again, growling loud and the pursuer's horse throws off his rider.

Kurmanjan safely gets out of the water on her horse. Alymbek's servant comes from the other side. Slow motion picture as he approaches her. Has he purple cloth with him for her.

#### **Scene 16 (00:57:23):**

Kurmanjan is in mourning, her 6 and 9 year old sons exclaim they also want to fight but that Akbalban won't take them. 'We'll get revenge for our father.'

Akbalban joins the riders who will fight.

#### **Scene 17 (00:58:16):**

It is night time. A woman is about to give birth.

'Heavens hear us now. Please bless us and hear us now. Let the child be born. Ease her pain. Stop this torment. Let her give birth soon. Don't let her die. You'll regret it. Heaven hear us now.'

Slow drums in background.

A rider arrives with news for Kurmanjan.

'Kokand's troops are approaching. No one knows what's going to happen. Akbalban asks you to flee with the women and children.'

The child is born and the women start to pack.

#### **Scene 18 (00:59:54):**

View of Kokand's troops. Camp of Alai troops. Akbalban and generals discuss their strategy in the mountains. They are approached by villagers: 'tell me, the battle has not begun yet, but you're telling people from your own village to run away! Secretly sending a courier to Kurmanjan... What about our families? Our livestock? Our crops? We also want to live and save our homes. If you want to fight, fight yourselves. We're leaving!'

Kurmanjan arrives on horse with other women.

'Why do you men look so down? Sarymsak, you say you want to leave. Fine. Let's give our ancestor's land to the enemy. If so, do we have a right to continue our lineage? Kokand's army is powerful and each life is precious. But aren't the freedom of our people and the happiness of our children even more precious? You men may go. We women will stay. We swore to not let the enemy pass... Should the descendants of our great hero, Manas, simply run away?! It is better to die standing than to live on one's knees. Kyrgyz people have never died lying in their beds during war. What can be more honourable than to die for our Motherland? Borochoy, who will take care of your wife? Sanjarbek, where will your wife be safe? We have come here to stand with you. If you fight with spears, we'll throw stones. If you shoot, we'll pass you arrows. If we die, we'll die together. If we live, we will build our unified nation. What do you say?'

Man: 'to battle, men! Let Manas' spirit support us. Let's fight!' All men agree and yell in support.

#### **Scene 19 (01:03:46):**

Troops of Kokand are coming through the mountain pass. Kurmanjan's troops are hiding and they attack. Fighting breaks out in a guerrilla style. There are some guns, but fighting is mostly done with swords and bow and arrow. The Kokand troops retreat and Alai men come out of hiding.

Kokand khan gets off his horse and says goodbye to his horse. He attempts to get his men ready to fight on the ground. 'Get up and fight.' They look tired and unenthusiastic, compared to the Alai men who look ready and determined. They attack each other. Screen fades out.

#### **Scene 20 (01:07:21):**

Kokand Khan is questioned by his superior, 'what did you achieve by assassinating Alymbek Datka?' He says to the Emir that there was no other way. 'If Alymbek were alive, Alai would ..'

Emir: 'I heard, how you attacked Alai. I also heard that in the canyon you were defeated by the woman. Who? Who carried out the execution?'

Khan: 'A Kyrgyz man, named Choton.'

#### **Scene 21 (01:08:30):**

View of market place.

Alymbek's assassin comes out, gets on his horse to come home but notices suspicious circumstances. It becomes clear that men are closing in on him. He tries to escape, but his horse is made to fall. Fighting breaks out and he is killed. They take his head.

#### **Scene 22 (01:11:41):**

View of mountain pass, controlled by Alai troops. Men from Emir Muzaffar (Emir of Bukhara) try to pass, returning the mortal remains of Alymbek Datka to Alai, head of assassin as well. The road is cleared for them. Two men accompany the delegation.

Kurmanjan thanks them and shows gratitude. 'We would be grateful, if you could convey our gratitude to the Emir for fulfilling his Muslim duty and for his respect to the late Alymbek Datka. The people of Alai will never forget this gesture.'

Men: 'The Emirate of Bukhara highly appreciated Datka's fairness and bravery.'

Kurmanjan: 'Dear Ambassador, your voice seems familiar.'

Ambassador: 'we briefly spoke when you visited Bukhara with Alymbek Datka.'

Kurmanjan: 'your Honour, Emir. I apologise for not recognizing you.'

Emir Muzaffar: 'Excusable. Quite excusable. In these times of trouble, for state security, I must travel like this.'

Kurmanjan: 'God bless you.'

Emir Muzaffar: 'Our valiant friend Alymbek Datka was murdered by traitors. But his position won't remain vacant. Another name is already known from Kokand to Bukhara, from Tashkent to Kashgar. Everywhere this person is known to be wise and fair. One Datka has perished, but another has been revealed. That's you!'

Emir Muzaffar comes out of the tent, visible. The troops recognize him and present their swords. He rides away with his men.

### **Scene 23 (01:16:23):**

Jump in time

Older Kurmanjan reads a scroll:

'We ask God to give long life and health to Kurmanjan Datka, mother of the Alai people and devoted wife to Alymbek Datka, who strives for the unification of all Kyrgyz people. The time has come to unite with tribes living apart no longer fighting amongst themselves, set against one another by Emirs and enemies. Weakened by destructive wars, we were forced to accept the protection of the Russian Empire. Understanding that we wouldn't be able to resist them, with neither sufficient people, not quantity of people, we accepted their proposal to sign a peace agreement. That's why I warn you not to resist the Russian troops. Otherwise, hundreds of brave Alai warriors will be killed. In conclusion, we support the idea of unification and realise the necessity for a Great Assembly representing all of our people. I hope I'll see you at the meeting. Shabdan.'

Views: tribe leaders meeting, discussing. Russian soldiers come in: represented with a canon, entering the cities, many men in uniforms to show their quantity. Swimming in the rivers, with their horses.

**Scene 24 (01:17:55):**

Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Meeting of important men who are discussing Russian's next move.

Mihail Dmitrievich: 'Your Excellency, the only obstacle on our way to the British-Indian border is Kokand Khanate. Khanate is on the verge of collapse. We must use this opportunity to inflict a final, decisive blow.'

Excellency: 'Dear Mihail Dmitrievich, do you really think that the conquest of Kokand will subordinate all Central Asia to our sovereignty?'

Dmitrievich: 'Your Excellency, I'm sure of it.'

2<sup>nd</sup> man: 'What will Europe say? How will England react? Won't the Queen pursue retaliatory measures?'

3<sup>rd</sup> man: 'Europe? England? Winners are not judged.'

**Scene 25 (1:19:30)**

Inside a yurt, traditional music is played.

Kurmanjan is outside, near a fire enjoying the music.

Her sons are inside, with their wives.

Riders appear from a distance.

**Scene 26 (1:22:15)**

View inside a yurt through the top.

Messenger: 'Kokand Khanate has fallen, my Datka! The flag of the Kokand army is now in your hands.'

Flag is offered to Kurmanjan Datka.

Kurmanjan: 'This flag is covered in blood.'

Son Abdyl dabek: 'There isn't a flag not steeped in blood, mother. Even so, at least we were one state with one religion. Do you really think the Russians have better intentions?'

Son Kamchybek: 'Today you may stop the Russians. What about tomorrow? A Kokand's sword may cut off your head.'

Son Abdyl dabek: 'Do you expect us to hide our heads?'

Son Kamchybek: 'If Kokand officials valued a man, our father would still be here with us.'

Kurmanjan: 'Stop it, sons'

Son Abdyldebek : 'No, mother. Kokand may have killed our father, but he died in the interest of the state. When the enemy stands at the gate, it's not time for dwelling over the past.'

Kurmanjan: 'Don't be angry, son. Abdyldebek!'

Son Abdyldebek: 'If any of you want to stop the enemy, I'll be waiting at dawn at Janyryk Mountain.'

### **Scene 27 (1:24:07):**

Alai men see a traitor amongst the Kokand soldiers, Sarymsak, who had come to Kurmanjan to ask for protection.

Sarymsak sense the ambush, he is shot, but not mortally wounded.

Abdyldebek tells his men to mount their horses and they attack. However, the Russians are waiting for them. Canons fire, clearly more systematic planned warfare instead of random attacks. Abdyldebek sees his men are being hit, horses panic and he realizes it was a mistake.

He sees Sarymsak among the men and attacks him with his sword, who begs him not to kill him. Abdyldebek raises his sword, but due to a cannonball coming in, he is blown off his feet. He is not conscious and men put him on a horse to retreat.

### **Scene 28 (1:28:09):**

Russia

Two men report to the Tsar.

Man1: 'Your majesty, the only obstacle in our expedition's way are the Alai people under the leadership of Kurmanjan Datka.'

Tsar: 'Kokand fell in 2 days. These highlanders have resisted you for two years.'

Man2: 'Your majesty, the problem is the bravery and resolve of the savages.'

Tsar: 'So then we have to increase the strength of our expedition's forces.'

Man2: 'Your majesty, according to the letter, sent by General Skobelev, there is another possible solution.'

Man1, reading the letter: 'Our attacks result in big losses. Mountain dwellers desperately defend their land. I will soon have to temporarily stop operations. However, judging by information received, so Alai Queen – so-called Alai Queen – wants to stop the bloodshed and is ready to negotiate.'

Tsar: 'General Skobelev is well aware not only of the battlefields in Turkestan, but also knows a lot about the Asians. Immediately inform Michael Dmitrievich that he is given authority to negotiate with the Alai Queen. I hope knows what he's doing.'

**Scene 29 (1:30:11):**

Kurmanjan Datka rides to a Russian military camp. Soldiers are training in the background, tents are up.

Narrator: 'The terms of the agreement signed between General Skobelev and Kurmanjan Datka are the liquidation of Kokand Khanate and the establishment of peace. Restoration of the Kokand Khanate is pointless. All these territories will be under the control of the Russian Empire. Russia vows not to interfere in the lives of local people, nor the religion they profess. Persecution of rebels will stop. Prisoners will be released. All occupied lands will be returned.'

Visuals: Kurmanjan Datka takes a seat behind a table and the agreement is signed. Victorious music is played. Kurmanjan is given a cloak.

General Skobelev: 'I must confess that I can't help but admire the courage of Kyrgyz warriors and their undying devotion and love for their Motherland! I always mention your warriors as an example to my soldiers. Giving birth to and raising such brave warriors, you must be the happiest mother. Therefore, I ask you to consider me as your son.'

**Scene 30 (1:32:32):**

Kurmanjan rides in the snow with her son Kamchybek to meet son Abdyldabek, who is asking her for her blessing.

Kurmanjan: 'Are you leaving your Motherland out of spite to the enemy?'

Abdyldadek: 'Don't grieve, mother. I won't stand for those unfaithful non-believers tramping down our land. I'll go to Afghanistan and bring back an army to drive the enemy away.'

Kurmanjan: 'What can I do? After all, you're a son of warriors.'

Abdyldadek: 'My heart will always return me to these mountains.'

He rides away.

**Scene 31 (1:34:21):**

Russians arrive in Alai settlement.

General Skobelev asks how Kurmanjan is doing. She invites him to come inside the yurt to have a meal.

Skobelev: 'I have come to bid you farewell. I have been ordered to go to the Balkans.'

Translator present.

Skobelev: 'His Excellency, Alexander Nikolaevich Shvykovski, is replacing me. I beg you to live and respect him. I hope you will find a common language.'

Kurmanjan does not seem happy about it.

Shvyikovski: 'Isn't this too much of an honour, Mihail Dmitrievich, for these natives? I think they must find a common language with me.'

The translate hesitates.

Skobelev: 'Everything will be fine.'

**Scene 32 (1:36:25):**

Flags are collected. Kurmanjan approaches Eltoidu.

Kurmanjan: 'I heard you have been prosecuted by Kokand's Khan.'

Eltoidu: 'I see you're well prepared for the Great Assembly.'

Kurmanjan: 'Everything is ready. Only the yurts are left for Shabdan to finish.'

Eltoidu: 'Alymbek Datka always dreamed about holding the meeting in his place.'

Kurmanjan: 'During my dreams whilst he was alive, a tiger looked after me. You must help me now. Take control over this Great Assembly. Let your friend, in another realm, be happy.'

**Scene 33 (1:38:17):**

Russian border control, 'suspected smugglers' and Akbalban is ordered to open their trunks.

Kamchybek's wife is with the group and has to give the key. She starts crying when the Russians cut her hair off to get the key.

Kamchybek himself is on top of a mountain.

A Russian soldier finds an arrow in the ground, the bodies of the men from the border control are found.

Kamchybek sees the group coming.

Flashback to the scene at the border control: Akbalban fires an arrow at the Russian soldier who took the key from Kamchybek's wife.

Russian soldiers enter the scene. They compare the arrows and conclude that Kamchybek is the one who killed them.

**Scene 34 (1:43:42):**

Local administration office

'Such a sentence is too severe, Alexander Nikolaevich. Take into account the high rank of this woman in the Ferghana valley, I..'

Alexander Nikolaevich: 'Stop it, Mihael Efremovich. She's an ordinary woman and she will do anything to save her own son. By the way, she's due to arrive any minute.'

Door opens and Kurmanjan enters the room, is offered a seat.

Alexander Nikolaevich: 'I am very sad, that among the sons of a respected lady like you, is a criminal, who has gone against the Great Empire, dear Datka.'

Kurmanjan: 'There is no proof that Kamchybek was at the place of the crime.'

Translator: 'She said her son wasn't where the crime was committed.'

Alexander Nikolaevich: 'According to wartime law, a commander is responsible for the misdeeds of his soldiers.'

Kurmanjan: 'Punish me instead of my son, but please, don't take his life.'

Alexander Nikolaevich: 'It is impossible. A criminal must be punished.'

Kurmanjan rises and is close to tears.

Alexander Nikolaevich: 'Also, Datka, not long ago, some violators of the borders were captured. One of them clasped this thing to his chest and kept saying: Abdyldebek, Abdyldebek. Take it, maybe you need it.'

Alexander Nikolaevich takes a box from his desk.

Kurmanjan leaves the building and visits the prisoners.

Kurmanjan: 'Is that you, Niazaly?'

Niazaly: 'Yes, it's me, Datka.'

Kurmanjan: 'Where is the man you left with? Where is my son, Abdyldebek?'

Niazaly does not answer, but instead takes out his musical instrument and plays a tune. Kurmanjan realizes that he is dead.

She leaves on horseback, 'we lost Abdyldebek. I can't bury both my sons at the same time! No matter what happens, save Kamchybek at any price!

Music continues to play in the background as Kurmanjan makes her way home, visions of beautiful landscapes.

**Scene 35 (1:48:34):**

Prisoners at night, arrow flies in.

Eltoidu sits around a fire with two boys, of which one asks when his father will be freed. He admits he does not know what will happen.

**Scene 36 (1:49:43):**

Alexander Nikolaevich stares at a map of Central Asia.

Asks his messenger: 'Who else knows about their plan?'

Messenger: 'Nobody, but you.'

Alexander Nikolaevich: 'Well, war means war.'

**Scene 37 (1:50:20):**

Kurmanjan lies in bed, clearly ill. Visions of roaring tiger and fire and a flashback to the first scene of the film where Manas' story is told. Last view of the running tiger.

She tells her servant: 'Get me my inkwell and a scroll.'

Kurmanjan writes on the scroll.

She revisits the place where she and Alymbek often sat, near a small water hole. She takes out the purple silk and ring that he had given her.

**Scene 38 (1:54:04):**

Kyrgyz tribes travelling to the Great Assembly, all carrying their flags.

A messenger comes to Russian border control: 'We are guests, going to visit Kurmanjan Datka.'

Border officers: 'I know, Mr Shabdan.'

Messenger: 'Good. Then why are you standing in the way?'

Border officers: 'Circumstances have changed. I'm not obliged to tell you. Until I get an order from above, I have to stop you here.'

Messenger: 'Stop us? Are you sure you can stop us?'. To his own man: 'Turn back, we'll go around another way.'

Man1: 'The way back is closed. There are about 40 soldiers at the mouth of the gorge.'

Back in the group:

Man2: 'There don't seem to be many soldiers. What if we force our way through?'

Man3: 'You want the Russians to kill us?'

Man4: 'I warned you. Believing a woman's word, you've endangered all our lives!'

**Scene 39 (1:55:40):**

A Russian soldier prepares the gallows. Russian officers take their seat. Kamchybek is taken out of the prison and led to the gallows. The Kyrgyz crowd is restless. Military drums stop. In the crowd, Kamchybek spots some of his men, with their weapons hidden, but ready. From the arrow that was shot into the prison, he fabricated a small tool to undo the ropes around his hands. Outside, Kyrgyz men ride their horses.

Alexander Nikolaevich almost gives the signal, his men stand ready in the tents to attack the Kyrgyz. Then, from outside comes Kurmanjan on her horse. She looks at her son. He stands proud, knowing the sacrifice his mother must make. She cries quietly and Kamchybek realizes he will die. The men in the crowd know as well that they will not continue their plans. Kamchybek looks at the mountains one last time and sees his father in the crowd.

**Scene 40 (2:00:14):**

All the Kyrgyz tribes are united in the Great Assembly. Flags are tied to posts. Kamchybek is buried. The scroll that Kurmanjan wrote is read aloud. All the different tribes are represented at the burial.

Kurmanjan speaks: 'An undying dream has been saving Kyrgyz people throughout the centuries and won't allow them to disappear without a trace. That dream is to return our lost state. To achieve this dream many generations perished and many tears were shed. But the flame in our hearts have never been extinguished. No one knows which path to take in order to achieve our aim. Maybe we're expected to fight for freedom beyond a human being's strength but we must never relent nor submit. Mothers give birth to their children to serve the nation. Let unity and courage help us on our way. For the sake of our Motherland people must be ready to sacrifice loves ones..'

A quick flashback to the execution shows several officers standing out of respect, but not Alexander Nikolaevich. Kurmanjan leads the carriage with her son's body away. The people follow.

**Scene 41 (2:03:15):**

1906

Children gather to have their photo taken. Kurmanjan watches from a distance, on horseback. Her photos is taken as well.

Photographer: 'That's all. It's the last plate. Does this women realize we're preserving her place in history?'

'This woman herself made history. If this day becomes part of history, then you and I will be there too, thanks to this picture.'

Kurmanjan asks her servant the name of the young man. It is Mannerheim. 'Heaven bless him. He will achieve great success.'

She sees the tiger again, sprinting across a field in the mountains.

**End titles:**

'Kurmanjan Datka died at the age of 96. In 1991 Kyrgyzstan became an independent republic. Akbalban and seven other prisoners were executed in the city of Osh. Nine others were exiled to Siberia. Emir Muzaffar, the last leader of Bukhara died at the age of 51. General Skobelev, after campaigns in the Balkans, died suddenly, under suspicious circumstances in 1882, aged 38. Alexander Nikolaevich Shvykovski's incompetence led to the Andijan Uprising in 1898. Mannerheim was promoted to Marshal and in 1944 became the president of Finland.'

The rest of the end titles show historical photos of the Russian occupation, Central Asian villages and cities. All photographs were taken by Mannerheim.