

## Article

# Kyrgyz Genealogies and Lineages: Histories, Everyday Life and Patriarchal Institutions in Northwestern Kyrgyzstan

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**Abstract:** Uruu patrilineages and genealogical narratives about them are important aspects of Kyrgyz social practice and reflect some tensions and contradictions in contemporary Kyrgyz self-understanding and identities. This article explores the complex relationship of patrilineal kinship to historical knowledge and lived social experience in northwestern Kyrgyzstan. The contrasting situations of men and women within patrilineages are analyzed to reveal the shifting relationships of gender, genealogy and patrilineal kinship. Local meanings and uses of genealogy and history are shown to differ from those developed at the national level as part of Kyrgyz nation-building: Narratives about local lineages and their heroes portray different sacred and social worlds than those about the hierarchical world of elite politics and the military feats of national heroes.

**Keywords:** descent; kinship; sanjira; genealogy; history; Kyrgyzstan; gender; patriarchy

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Among the Kyrgyz of the Kyrgyz Republic in Central Asia, kin relations are a basic part of sociality and shape social behavior in many settings. A key source of a Kyrgyz person's social identity is membership in the *uruu* or patrilineage, which is a segmental group of agnatic kin usually identified by the name of the apical ancestor. Formalized Kyrgyz genealogical knowledge focuses on *uruu* patrilineages and their members, both to define the descent of the individual person and establish his or her *uruu* membership, and to delineate the links of the apical ancestor to other apical ancestors and thus describe the connections among patrilineages. The patrilineal genealogies known as *sanjira* define personal history and identity by representing connections of an individual and his or her community and ancestors. *Sanjira* do not usually specify Kyrgyz kinship and social ties outside of agnatic kin. A Kyrgyz person is connected to others through mother, siblings, and children, as well as other alliances, but membership in a patrilineage is a permanent identity that starts from birth.

The present article examines the diverse roles of genealogical knowledge in social settings and historical narratives in the Kara Buura district (*rayon*) in western Talas oblast of Kyrgyzstan. The goal is to explore the complex articulation of kinship and genealogy, as well as the intersection of gender, politics, and history at the local level. I argue here that the top-level national lineages have little import when compared to the local social role of *uruu*, but even local *uruu* themselves are not central to most social life and thus genealogical knowledge is highly variable. Membership in the broader *uruu*

<sup>1</sup> I transcribe Cyrillic Kyrgyz into Latin script with j = Ж, i = Ы, y = Ы and i = И, except for well-known names of ethnic groups and states. Thus, for instance, I write *Kyrgyz* but *Chingiz Aymatov* for the author's name often spelled Chingiz or Chyngyz Aitmatov. However, in the bibliography, I have retained the more common Library of Congress system for transcribing Russian. I do not add -s plurals for foreign words. All photos were taken by the author.

patrilineage defines key aspects of a person's kin relations, but ties to closer agnatic and cognatic kin are more important in everyday and ritual life. As a result, Kyrgyz knowledge of close kin is much better than that of their wider uruu and its genealogy. People know their local agnatic kin relations through experience, but often refer to experts or written materials to understand relationships more broadly within their uruu, and among uruu. People's active genealogical knowledge is usually embedded in oral narratives about the ancestors they see as significant, and they will often know their own descent and that of close kin through numerous generations, but detailed knowledge of how other uruu members and ancestors are related is considered a more specialized knowledge that only a few cultivate.

Many analyses of Kyrgyz genealogy have relied upon statements of idealized rules and simplifications, as well as generalizations about "clan politics." This is partly because Kyrgyz themselves maintain a spectrum of knowledge, from more detailed to simpler and more generalized, that is used according to preference and contextual relevance. The goal in this article is to avoid formalized rules, generalizations and simplifications by describing the everyday use of genealogy from a pragmatic and phenomenological perspective, and by comparing this with other studies relying on ethnographic documentation of Kyrgyz genealogy. My data comes from observation of Kyrgyz discussions of kin relationships among themselves and with me in interviews. I analyze local written sources of information in terms of their creation, circulation and use. I also explore links among local understandings and the wider national spectrum of Kyrgyz genealogical information and political discourses about it. My overall purpose is to show the local forms of genealogical knowledge and its place in social life.<sup>2</sup>

The fieldwork for this article was conducted during six fieldwork trips between 2007 and 2017, during which I researched local kinship, ritual, economics and historical knowledge. I lived in villages in Talas oblast in western Kyrgyzstan for over a year in total. Here, I focus on Kara Buura district, which has a population of roughly 64,000 people. The district occupies 4200 km<sup>2</sup> in western Talas oblast bounded by the Kazakhstan border to the west, the Ak Too ridge and Talas River to the north, the Kara Buura River to the east, and the Talas Ala-Too mountain range to the south. Only one-tenth of the district consists of irrigated cropland, with roughly half of the rest sparsely vegetated upland and mountain pastures. The population is mostly Kyrgyz, but with small numbers of Kazakhs, Russians, Kurds, Meskhetian Turks, Uzbeks, and others. Despite wide experience in Kara Buura, I have focused more on some regions and lineages than others, and have deeper ongoing contact with only a small number of households: I use my observations and interview data to describe knowledge and practices that are clearly widespread, but for some practices I can only suggest degrees of frequency or infrequency in this diverse district. Both culturally and historically, this district is complex and little studied: its rich historical and archeological sources cover at least the past two millennia. Kyrgyz documented presence begins in the 16th century, but national and local historical narratives describe activities of the Kyrgyz epic hero Manas and his allies in the Talas region more than 1000 years ago.

While living with and spending extended time with local families, I participated in a wide range of everyday activities, and conducted in-depth interviews with more than 200 local people about economy, ritual, history, and kinship. Because I focus here on uruu patrilineages, the current article does not discuss other aspects of kinship and social relations in much depth.<sup>3</sup> Nor is this article intended to be an exhaustive study of local lineages or knowledge about them; instead, I aim to show how genealogical knowledge is developed, recorded, narrated, and acted upon in local social practice. This perspective does not aim to find "true" histories of lineages and genealogies, but to understand

<sup>2</sup> I have generally maintained anonymity in this analysis because I want to avoid circulating local information that could embarrass individuals and communities. Thus, I identify published authors and the teacher who created sanjira charts reproduced here in Figures 1 and 3, but I do not name others whose documents I use.

<sup>3</sup> See Light 2015a, 2015b. To avoid monotony, I refer to lineage, patrilineage and uruu interchangeably. I describe as "top-level" or national the 30–40 canonical lineages that are presented as founding lineages within Kyrgyzstan's national myth-history.

the place of lineage knowledge in local discourse and activities and its relation to gender and national ideology, seen “from below.”

Kyrgyz genealogical narratives are diverse. The term *sanjira*<sup>4</sup> is applied by Kyrgyz to a variety of genres of recited and written genealogical narratives and histories. In Kara Buura, two self-published *sanjira* give details about the dominant local lineages Kushchu and Kitay (Jakipov 2006a, 2006b). The author Jakipov usually specifies by name the local people he interviewed for information about segments of these lineages. Other published accounts of Kara Buura descent appear in one national *sanjira* (Asanov and Turganbaev 2007), and in a Kara Buura district history and collection of notable biographies (Kerimbekov and Sharshenaliev 2008, pp. 108–18). The famous ethnographer Saul Abramzon (1960) published a rich collection of Kyrgyz *sanjira* genealogies from interviews conducted in 1953–1954, which includes charts for the Kitay and Kushchu lineages. It should be noted that many national *sanjira* focus on more eastern regions of Kyrgyzstan, and tend to neglect the Kitay in particular (e.g., Salk 2009). Although I focus on *sanjira* genealogical knowledge and histories told by locals, I refer to published sources when relevant for my analysis here.

All of the *sanjira* genealogies I know of are patrilineal, and although they occasionally mention women as wives and mothers, this is primarily to distinguish the sons of multiple wives. Jakipov (2006a, 2006b) occasionally names daughters, apparently when they are listed by his consultants. Kinship through mothers, sisters and wives are vital relationships in Kyrgyz society, but are discussed only in exceptional cases in these narratives, as described below. Women are members of their father’s patrilineage, but are considered to change lineage identity when they marry. They may return to their natal lineage in cases of divorce. Lineage identity is transmitted by a child’s father, unless the parents are not married and the father does not acknowledge paternity or the children go with the mother in case of divorce. In such cases, lineage ties can be weak or ambiguous. This article describes some consequences of this focus on lineage membership and identification by descent through men, and its relationship to women’s authority and autonomy.

*Sanjira* form and other aspects of patrilineal descent ideology tend to reinforce agnatic solidarity to which women have limited access. Agnatic lineage identity is a powerful social resource, particularly in communities in Kara Buura in which many men remain in their natal village, and women marry into the village, and end up living in or near the households of their husband’s agnatic kin. In-marrying women have ties of solidarity as *abīsindar*, the kin term used by in-married women of a patrilineage for one another (singular: *abīsīn*), but can also draw upon their links to their natal families and lineages. This offers them greater mobility and access to resources, as well as conferring on them the role of mediators among lineages. Although many aspects of Kyrgyz women’s roles can be seen as reflecting a “bargain with patriarchy” (Kandiyoti 1988, 2005), women also benefit from certain resources, respect and authority in both natal and marital lineages that are less accessible to men (Ismailbekova 2014, 2016).

Patriarchal values and understandings underlie many social interactions in Kyrgyz society, but patriarchy in this context is not a consistent overarching system or even a set of principles that are essentially contested. Rather than viewing it as a fixed structure I argue that patriarchy should be seen more as tendencies within values, conventions, expectations, strategies and practices that lead to gendered hierarchies in some aspects of social relations; patriarchy can also be seen in the tendency to value and identify as models these more hierarchical relations over others. Of course, these tendencies can be quite strong, but I think that in the case of contemporary Kyrgyz society there is considerable variation in male authority, and while in the past, males had more control over resources and authority, it was variable then as well. Here I examine patriarchal relations informed by a pragmatic perspective in selecting examples and developing my analysis; I examine how men and women choose to act in concrete settings, and explore how their choices reflect their salient goals

<sup>4</sup> *Sanjira* is derived from the Arabic word *shajara* (“tree”), which is a common term for “genealogy” in Muslim Central Asia.

and understandings. For example, on the one hand, patrilineal concepts underlying uruu structure and solidarity can serve as a template for other social institutions, such as classmate organization (Light 2015b). On the other hand, women can have important agency in decisions and processes that shape lineage history, such as in the cases of levirate and choosing of second wives discussed below.

## 2. Authority in Politics, Family, and Uruu

Kinship can be an important means to develop connections and obtain or exchange resources among Kyrgyz, but the widely discussed issue of “clan politics” in Kyrgyzstan is problematic because of the complex situational factors involved. A review of the vast literature on this debate is not possible here (see Collins 2006; Gullette 2010; Radnitz 2010; Hardenberg 2016), but I discuss the issue briefly because it is relevant to the analysis below.

Most analyses of political alliance and factions in Central Asia do not make statistically precise analyses that can differentiate between localism, kinship and patrilineal connections. Accurate data is difficult to come by. However, detailed ethnographies show that a broad local base is an important source of political strength, at least in Kyrgyzstan, and kinship becomes an idiom through which people express their support for someone who they see, in Ismailbekova’s (2017) apt term, as a “native son” regardless of actual kin ties. Ismailbekova’s (2017, pp. 134–54) detailed analysis of Kyrgyzstan’s parliamentary election in December 2007 shows that local voters in one community nearly universally chose their “native son” because of his economic importance and demonstrated loyalty to the village.

Radnitz’s (2010, pp. 103–30) careful analysis of rural political mobilization in Aksı district of southern Kyrgyzstan also shows that local elites garner support through networks of close allies and through being “embedded in the fabric of community life” with “access to resources that allow them to compete in high-level political struggles” (Radnitz 2010, p. 129). It is clear from these in-depth studies that people seeking political backing cannot aim only at their patrilineages, but have to find supporters through broader local connections. Beyer (2016, pp. 112–34) details strategies of support-seeking used by political and business elites, usually living in Bishkek but born in the village or nearby: they come and invite all *aksakal*<sup>5</sup> elders in the village to be guests of honor at events they sponsor. Although the ostensible purpose is to give gifts and show respect, the elites also take the opportunity to present a political platform and seek the elders’ blessings (*bata*) and support. Localism is an important source of support here, and public focus on kinship solidarity is actually avoided in such contexts because it threatens the egalitarian cooperation necessary for village life.

A final example from my own fieldwork shows the ineffectiveness of relying upon kin in political action: in the autumn of 2009, there was a commemoration (*ash*) for Chingiz Aytmatov in his home village (Sheker), after his death the previous year. A successful local businessman who had contributed extensively to his village, including funding a large school expansion, attempted to organize his kin to protest in Sheker against the corrupt rule of President Bakiev. Despite his local stature, he could only persuade a few very close kin to join him.

Kinship is thus not at present a strong foundation for political organization, although among close agnatic and patrilineal kin, authority and hierarchies are based in birth order. In other words, in the household, the father, and usually the grandfather have great authority. As Ismailbekova (2016) shows, mothers and grandmothers can have strong authority but this is more dependent upon support from sons and husbands. Women have authority in the household and it is much more their domain than that of men, but in-marrying women will have fewer local allies compared to men who often remain in or near their natal home. In their old age, both men and women risk alienation from their children, and their authority remains dependent on maintaining good relations. Ismailbekova’s (2016) detailed description of four life histories shows the traditional “bargain with hierarchy” that many Kyrgyz women have to make: serving their parents-in-law when they join a household and subsequently

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<sup>5</sup> *Aksakal* literally means “white beard”, but is used to refer to both male and female elders.

nurturing their children for many years. Many conflicts and problems can emerge to disrupt the ideal of becoming a respected and loved matriarch. Sons similarly have to be obedient and stay on good terms with parents when young, and then nurture and support their children to ensure good relations when older. Families in general are zones of ongoing complex and sometimes stressful negotiation, with diverse results. The tendency in Kyrgyz households for the couple to live nearer to the man's natal family, and for the woman to have little independent property means that she is more vulnerable. The household and family are thus much more important as sites of gender and age hierarchies and contestation, while interactions within lineages can be an alternative arena in which people develop more flexible community connections outside of the household.

When young, brothers and sisters also have great authority over siblings younger than them, and this usually continues but to a lesser extent in adulthood. These hierarchies are followed closely in public rituals and household management, and manifested through displays of respect, especially forms of address, but the authority of elders is much weaker at the level of the *uruu* as a whole: the simple hierarchy of birth order does not hold and elders must discuss openly and respectfully with one another. Elders derive respect and authority from many sources, including religious, economic, and political accomplishments, as well as skill in speaking. Within practical politics many considerations apply, and although kinship terms are used to express hierarchy and respect, relations among kin are negotiated and shifting. Respect and authority are granted for effectiveness, not just because of patrilineal position: lineage connections may help someone build a career, but he or she has to demonstrate ongoing effectiveness, and build ties beyond kinship to continue to be successful. The simplest explanation for this shift from the earlier linkage of hierarchies among close kin and the broader regional leadership structure is that the Soviet period introduced stronger egalitarian principles, and did away both with patrilineage-based territorial control and the hierarchical relations among patrilineages deriving from the relative prestige and position of apical ancestors (see [Jacquesson 2010](#), pp. 30–41; [Prior 2013b](#)). However, individual and household autonomy have long been valued among Kyrgyz, and this helps sustain an egalitarian ethos.

A further point here is that even in the 19th century, hierarchies between patrilineages appear to have been more pronounced in the eastern (Narın, Chuy and İsik Köl) regions described by [Prior \(2013b\)](#) and [Jacquesson \(2012a\)](#) than in the Talas region. Local oral narratives as well as textual sources for Talas do not suggest the presence of slavery or strong differences in lineage authority and respect. The prominent leaders who do emerge during the 18th and 19th centuries do not come from established elite lineages, but constructed their positions from varied sources and did not establish permanent hierarchical relations among lineages.

### 3. Ethnicity

In Kyrgyz rural communities in northern Kyrgyzstan, people usually have readily recognized ethnic identities, generally derived from the father's ethnicity. In my research, I found that Kyrgyz with a mother from another ethnic group were sometimes pointed out as having a mixed identity. More broadly in Kyrgyzstan, informal conversations and more rarely media occasionally focus on a person's parentage and genealogy, including ethnic background. People in private conversations in Kara Buura express a variety of prejudices about ethnic identities and how these shape a person's culture, personality and character, but only a few characteristics, such as supernatural abilities (*kasiet*), are seen explicitly as transmitted from a person's ancestors; such characteristics may come from either parent and do not have an ethnic component.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For Kyrgyz ideas about "blood" and inherited characteristics, see [Féaux de la Croix \(2016\)](#), pp. 151–53). The "mixing" of genealogies and ethnic cultures are important phenomena in many regions of Central Asia, with multiple ethnographic studies describing local patterns of mixing and merging among Uzbek and Kyrgyz or Tajik and Uzbek identities (e.g., [Megoran 2017](#); [Finke 2014](#)). What can be termed "ethnic ideologies" or "meta-cultures of ethnicity" shape identity and



A common discourse among Kyrgyz about “true” Kyrgyz traditions is often connected to local practices, but takes contradictory forms. Kyrgyz may debate which traditions are authentic and which regions uphold them better, but most avoid strong judgments about this. In the Kara Buura district, such discourses often include comments about how only in Kara Buura or Talas as a whole do people follow Kyrgyz tradition correctly. But at the same time, people in Kara Buura feel they are influenced by “Kazakh” dialect forms or prepare the “Kazakh” dish, *külchetay*, rather than the “real” Kyrgyz traditional *bish barmak* (both are dishes of meat and noodles eaten with the fingers). In other cases, people simply comment upon but accept that there are different regional styles of preparing and serving food, exchanging gifts, or otherwise engaging in “traditional” sociality, and judge variations less severely. Differences are sometimes simply considered a matter of taste, with people in Narin oblast seen as giving too much meat to guests, and those in Osh not enough. In other regions of Kyrgyzstan, ideas about ethnic purity are sometimes connected to judgements about culture, and some uruu are said to maintain purer Kyrgyz practices than those seen as having joined the Kyrgyz more recently (e.g., [Hardenberg 2016](#), note 10 on page 109). In Kara Buura, however, lineages are seen as equally Kyrgyz in ethnicity and cultural practices, with only a few hints of status differences based in ethnic origins.

The strong appreciation for Kyrgyz national culture, ethnicity and lineages may be inverted when Kyrgyz in Kara Buura seek better knowledge of Islamic practices: they feel they need to seek outside Kyrgyzstan or at least turn to institutionally-established religious authorities to learn proper Muslim beliefs and orthopraxy, and often dismiss locally developed traditions. In other words, ethnic traditions should be found at home or among Kyrgyz recognized for their greater adherence to tradition, while formal religious knowledge now tends to be understood as transcending ethnic practices, and require more globalized expertise. In contrast, spiritual capacities (*kasiet*) and healing abilities are considered to be transmitted by descent, developed through life experience, and cultivated through learning from spiritual experts.

#### 4. From Soviet to Post-Soviet

Genealogical knowledge has been a key element of Kyrgyz national reawakening in the post-Soviet period, and a wide variety of related scholarly and popular publications have appeared. As Svetlana [Jacquesson \(2010, 2012b\)](#) points out, the Soviet government suppressed clans because their traditional authority represented a threat to Soviet control over political and economic life. Commitment to lineage identities promoted factionalism that disrupted working class and interethnic solidarity. Kin loyalty was seen as anti-Soviet, genealogies were not studied in school and rarely at home, and people even went to jail for telling *sanjira* ([Jacquesson 2016](#)). The post-Soviet period facilitated a boom in publishing and public discussion of genealogies, and Kyrgyz national identity was constructed in part through promoting uruu traditions and alliances as the founding history and heritage of the nation ([Collins 2006](#); [Gullette 2010](#)).

Kin ties have become more important in the post-Soviet period, and study of genealogy and national descent has gained many enthusiasts. Ethnographers are investigating the growing salience of kinship and lineage knowledge and their roles in everyday life. Scholars such as [Gullette \(2010\)](#), [Jacquesson \(2012a, 2016, 2018\)](#), and in a broader comparative context, [Geiss \(2003\)](#) and [Sneath \(2007\)](#), evaluate the shifting uses of lineage knowledge in political settings, while close studies of lineages in practice include ethnographies by [Yoshida \(2005\)](#), [Jacquesson \(2010, 2013\)](#), [Isakov and Schoeberlein \(2014\)](#), [Beyer \(2016\)](#), [Féaux de la Croix \(2016\)](#), and [Ismailbekova \(2017\)](#). Finally, [Hardenberg \(2009, 2016\)](#) carefully reviews the theoretical analyses (including those of Geiss, Sneath, and Gullette), as well as providing ethnographic details of Kyrgyz lineage practices from his fieldwork on the southern edge of *İsik Köl*.

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can vary widely, even within the same family. The tendency in Kara Buura has been towards more ethnic differentiation and spatial segregation since the Soviet period, although several communities remain fairly mixed.

Over the course of the 20th century, oral genealogies have been increasingly put into written form, and reworked into more specialized genres, with works such as Jakipov (2006a, 2006b) structured more as a catalog with only a few of the historical narratives which were an important part of earlier genealogies. Many written Kyrgyz genealogies are being published, based in oral sources or manuscripts, and many earlier texts involve far more historical narrative and less genealogical data. In editions such as that by Asanov and Turganbaev (2007), the editors have provided extensive commentary and genealogical detail for an older manuscript text that consists primarily of political narrative about patrilineages and their leaders, and only limited genealogical information. Western scholars have started analyzing these works (Hardenberg 2009, 2012; Salk 2014; Jacquesson 2012b, 2016, 2018). Some Soviet scholars such as Abramzon (1960) published genealogical studies and analyses already in the Soviet period, but many more works appeared after the end of Soviet prohibitions. Nonetheless, there remains little analysis of the forms genealogies took before the 20th century, or of who knew them, how they were performed, and what authority or significance they had in everyday life. Prior's (2013a) in-depth investigation of a manuscript of 19th century historical poems suggests that these and several related genealogies were produced to promote the interests of elites and tell of their exploits. Political power was based in descent and accomplishment, and sanjira genealogies were part of the narrative equipment for building an idealized image of a political and military hero as well as describing his descent and kin ties and those of his allies (Prior 2013a, pp. 291–306).

In contrast, Jacquesson (2016) shows that in the present context, it is genealogists themselves who may work to build their reputation by disputing or ignoring others' narratives, or asserting their own unique knowledge and insights. Despite such media-centered jockeying for authority, in villages where I work, people tend to accept diverse understandings. Similar attitudes are found in other regions of Kyrgyzstan: Ismailbekova (2017) shows that it is relatively easy to discover or create new genealogical knowledge for political reasons, and legitimacy is rarely openly challenged. Newcomers can even join a dominant uruu in some villages if they demonstrate sufficient commitment (Hardenberg 2016). My own field experience shows that attention to sanjira remains limited to a few local publications, personal notebooks, and classroom materials. Genealogies serve as practical histories that explain and sustain local kin ties and describe local heroes.

## 5. Uruu Social and Political Organization

Uruu lineages are an important historical form of social organization in Kyrgyzstan. The uruu, particularly as political and military entities, have been incorporated into Kyrgyz's national history (Gullette 2010). The top-level uruu patrilineages, systematized into a structure of roughly 35 uruu in three unequal divisions are largely heritage categories in the present.<sup>7</sup> They had greater significance in the past when members and sublineages of an uruu were considered to be closely tied to a leader, and frequently took concerted military or ceremonial action in the Central Asian political landscape. Local histories of the 18th and 19th centuries tell of Kyrgyz leaders, such as *manap* and *biy*, with their followers identified by the patrilineages to which they belong (e.g., Asanov and Turganbaev 2007).

In anthropology, the term *clan* has often been used to refer to patrilineages that form corporate groups that own property together, take collective decisions, and act together in political, military and legal contexts. Although group membership was somewhat flexible and the degree of cooperative activity varied according to personal situations and seasonal movements, the uruu did have such a role in the pre-Soviet past. In the early Soviet period, many new *kolkhoz* collective farms were constructed through uniting uruu kin, and these group identities remained strong enough to serve as an organizing principle for private farms created when dividing *kolkhoz* land in the 1990s. However, larger and more diverse villages and towns in Kara Buura, with people from more varied lineages and multiple ethnic groups such as Amanbaevo and Kizil Adir were less inclined to work land cooperatively. By the

<sup>7</sup> See Figure 1. The top-level uruu are popularly called *tribes* in English and *plemen* or *rod* in Russian.

time I began working in Kara Buura in 2007, most of the multi-household farms had separated into household-based units, even in communities such as Sheker, where there were only a few lineages and little ethnic diversity.

Kyrgyz do tend to live near kin because of the many social events in which they work together and share resources, but most households own and manage land and animals separately. After the Soviet period, some Kyrgyz in Kara Buura moved from larger towns to villages where they had more kin, while many non-Kyrgyz villagers moved to larger towns or left Kyrgyzstan altogether. Current Kyrgyz residence patterns vary, but the most common choice is to live nearer and interact more with patrilineal kin. Some households have close ties with the woman's parents, and still others may have closer relations with *kuda* in-laws (the parents of the spouse of one's child). Finally, many end up in more distant towns or cities with few nearby kin.

Although most Kyrgyz in Kara Buura consider their *uruu* to show great solidarity, *uruu* do not have most of the features of clans discussed above. *Uruu* members collectively manage only the property that serves as the *uruu* graveyard, and work together to maintain it and to conduct death rituals for deceased members. They may also collectively own a set of cooking and serving equipment borrowed by hosts for large ritual meals (cf. Beyer 2016). In the pre-Soviet past, *uruu* collectively held rights to fixed winter and summer territories and water rights to particular irrigation channels, and they participated collectively in both legal processes and armed conflicts. Since the end of the Soviet period, land and water rights have been negotiated between local governments and households, and violence is generally handled by negotiations among elders and through the legal system of police, courts, and jails. Close patrilineal kin often provide resources and labor for household life-cycle events, as well as when someone has legal or financial troubles. Except for contributing small amounts of money to support community projects, maintain the graveyard, and help bereaved families, households commit few resources to *uruu*-based activities, and instead manage their economic and civic lives through closer kin, local government and other community institutions (Light 2015a, 2015b). At annual *uruu* feasts in the spring, known as *kuday* or *tülöö*, elders discuss *uruu* affairs and plan for projects (such as graveyard maintenance) during the coming year, as well as confirm the existing *biy* (*uruu* manager) or elect a new one. These are also opportunities to celebrate and commemorate famous ancestors, such as Moldo Asan (1815–1883), an important regional leader (*manap*) under Russian imperial rule, whose descendants gather each year at his tomb. *Uruu* do not gather for other reasons, and only rarely do *uruu* representatives meet to coordinate activities such as fundraising for the community. For most public rituals in a village, people organize according to neighborhoods, known as *jamaat* (Light 2016a).

The use of the term *biy* in Kara Buura for the *uruu* manager is unusual in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz outside Kara Buura have been surprised when I mention this because it is the term for the pre-Soviet judge or leader of a district. *Biy* in Kara Buura act as managers and record keepers for the *uruu*. As mentioned, most are elected (or simply confirmed if doing a satisfactory job) to the position during the annual spring *uruu* meeting near the ancestral graveyard. The *biy* carries out the *aksakals'* decisions about *uruu* activities (mostly involving caretaking for the graveyard), and manages *uruu* contributions of money and work for funerals. The *biy* also takes on a ceremonial position during large *toy* feasts, and serves as the referee and prize distributor for *kök börüü* games that are often part of such celebrations.

The top-level lineages are now treated as a national canon, and are subject of scholarly and popular historical interest, but they have only limited institutional presence in Kyrgyzstan, and none at all in the Kara Buura district<sup>8</sup>. Almost all Kara Buura *uruu* descend from only a few top-level lineages (*Kitay*, *Kushchu*, *Jetigen*, and *Saruu*) in complex and sometimes uncertain ways, and it is these local

<sup>8</sup> Ismailbekova (2018) describes her ongoing study concerned with lineage associations and their activities, which is part of her research on "how kinship is lived in communities today."



uruu that have a significant role in everyday life, and in which most Kyrgyz have a clear and exclusive membership through patrilineal descent. Like Beyer (2016), I have not heard the Kyrgyz term *uruk* used for sublineages in Talas oblast. Instead people refer to a group as *bir ata* (“one father”) or simply as *ata* (“father”) to identify a smaller sublineage that should meet or cooperate for a project, such as organizing a *toy* (life-cycle celebration). A minor example of such an organizational process from my fieldwork was an informal gathering of seven patrilineal kin where they turned from everyday socializing to a brief planning discussion of who should attend a small wedding celebration to be held by a close agnate: on the one hand, it was important that patrilineal kin related within three generations should attend, but on the other, to keep the *toy* small each set of siblings (*bir ata*) in middle age (i.e., householders, married with children), should be represented by only one or two guests. Elders are usually welcome at such events, while young people are less likely to go. I have not heard an equivalent in Kara Buura to the term *kyrk* that Hardenberg (2009) finds used for the subgroup within a lineage that organizes a funeral in the İsik Köl oblast; instead a group is formed as needed from people who are close agnatic kin and other allies of children of the deceased.

## 6. Local Genealogies

Although authors such as Jakipov (2006a, 2006b) of comprehensive Kyrgyz *sanjira* genealogies aspire to name every male descendant of a given ancestor, they are prone to gaps and repetitions. Many *sanjira* are intentionally abbreviated to represent only significant figures, and tellers may prune out generations, brothers, and descent lines. Some genealogies emphasize origins, including Islamic origin myths for the first Kyrgyz ancestors and specifying kinship relations among the top-level uruu, while others focus more locally on the most recent generations of one or several uruu, and show relations among men now alive and their nearer ancestors.

Jakipov (2006a, 2006b) starts his volumes with a version of the widely known Central Asian Muslim descent narrative of all humans from Adam through Noah (*Nuh*) and his sons. He describes the descent of Aryans and Turanians from the seven sons of Yafet (*Yafas*), and lists many Eurasian ethnic groups in each category, and then continues on with Yafet’s eldest son Türk, whose descendants include Tatars, Mongols, followed by Oghuz Khan (Jakipov 2006a, p. 8; cf. Light 2011). The Turkic peoples descend from one son of Oghuz Khan; the Kazakhs are said to descend from an ancestor named Juz (thus making a personal name from the noun meaning “kin group, tribe” that is derived from the Kazakh word for “hundred”). Jakipov tells of the epic hero Manas’s descent from Nogoy Khan, before finally reaching the mythical Kyrgyz ancestor Dolon Biy and his sons Kuu uul, Ak uul, and Kizil uul (Jakipov 2006a, p. 11). He explains Kara Buura lineages as descending from Kuu uul’s son Jayil who had seven sons, with Kushchu born to Karatal, and Kutay (Kitay) and Saruu born to Karanay. However, such national and Muslim history has little role in local oral histories in Kara Buura, and what is told in connection to lineages is quite different, usually about lived events and actions of individuals within Kuschchu, Kitay and Saruu lineages.

Many local people keep personal documentation of genealogies, often using charts and diagrams to indicate the brothers in each generation, but sometimes simplifying the information to a simple list of their own seven or ten patrilineal ancestors with little or no annotation. Some men keep notebooks with copies of genealogical information that they learn about and update it when they have access to additional sources. As can be seen in the examples in Figures 1 and 3–5, *sanjira* genealogical diagrams appear in three basic forms: the most complex graphic representation consists of descending branched diagrams that spread somewhat like the roots of a tree, with names often written in boxes and connected with lines. The lines usually connect downwards or left to right from ancestors to descendants, and sets of sons are often represented through vertically stacking the names of brothers in order by age, but left-to-right horizontal arrangement is also used (both appear in Figure 1). Occasionally the sons of a father are divided into groups with different mothers indicated (as seen in Figure 4), but otherwise wives and daughters are usually not named. Another common form is textual, especially in the comprehensive published *sanjira*, with long lists of fathers and their

sons, broken up into paragraphs, with only occasional comments specifying profession, birth place, marriages, or deaths. Only the most significant figures receive more detailed narratives in these textual genealogies. This form is the most compact and tends to be used by those such as Jakipov who aim at maximal inclusiveness. The third important form is the more limited *jeti ata* (seven fathers) list of ancestors which may in fact list 10 or more, and is often said to be the basic personal genealogy that a man should know. These lists specify only the direct line of forefathers of the individual, and ignore other agnatic ties.



**Figure 1.** Chart in a Kara Buura middle-school history classroom showing the national *Kyrgyz sanjirası* (“sanjira of the Kyrgyz”) with the three branches at the top leading to 34 canonical top-level lineages. This common simplification in Kyrgyzstan creates a spectrum of categories rather than detailed chronologies, and implies that the apical ancestors were all within a few generations of one another and closely related. Important uruu in Kara Buura district are Kushchu and Kutay (Kıtay) at the bottom right, along with Saruu in the middle of the group of five above them. Jetigen does not appear in this version.

A somewhat contradictory ideology underlies *jeti ata* because one rule sometimes mentioned is that a couple should not marry if they share an ancestor in seven generations. The more common way of describing this is to say that two people from the same *uruu* should not marry, and in Kara Buura this is often a recognized stage in the developmental history of lineages: people discuss widely when segments within the lineage begin to differentiate enough to intermarry. In fact, since many women locally show little interest in their *jeti ata*, couples rely much more on knowledge of *uruu* membership. The principle of exogamy is strongly adhered to, although occasional scandals arise when distant kin marry who are considered to be within the same *uruu*. Conversely, a man and a woman whose parents are related as sisters—such cousins are known as *bölä*—are allowed to marry, and occasionally do so, although people who know of biological genetics sometimes argue against this.

Another very simple form of descent narrative can be seen in the now common combination of Kyrgyz personal names with Russian-style patronymics and family names (see Figure 2). Family names with Russian endings (-ov/-ev for men and -ova/-eva for women) were introduced in the early Soviet period, but the first generation used the father's or grandfather's personal name to create the family name. Thus, the famous Kyrgyz author, Chingiz Törökulovich Aytmatov has a name with a patronymic based on his father's name Törökul and a family name based on his grandfather Aytmat, while his father's name was simply Törökul Aytmatov without a patronymic. Later generations continue using the same family name. Less commonly, the first generation with a Russian-style name used the father's personal name for both family name and patronymic, e.g., Guljan Akmatovna Akmatova. This latter pattern still occurs, apparently reflecting cases where the child is born out of wedlock and the father does not accept paternity when the birth is registered. Kyrgyz women rarely change their family name upon marriage. In the post-Soviet period, Russian-style naming is still used by many, but a common alternative is to use the father's name as a surname followed by the possessed forms, *kyzy* for "daughter" or *uulu* for "son" (Hvoslef 2001 covers details of Kyrgyz naming, but has many errors.) Because Kyrgyz avoid using personal names when addressing elders, the Russian-style name and patronymic is used as a respectful form of address in only a few institutional settings among Kyrgyz.

A married woman is considered a member of the *uruu* she marries into and in it she takes the position and status of her husband in relation to his kin, although as an in-married woman she is generally expected to act more subordinately in a number of ways. A married woman in Kara Buura may know her own *jeti ata* or those of her husband, or both, but would not usually try to list them. Although women are not usually considered proper narrators of *sanjira*, in practice they often do tell stories about ancestors even in their marital *uruu* (Light 2016a), and they sometimes offered suggestions during interviews when a man had trouble remembering. Perhaps the most important gendered distinction in narrative forms is that men feel greater authority in telling about important lineage ancestors of the past, while women tend to narrate about kin they have personally known, and feel greater freedom to choose what to tell about people whom they judge important (i.e., men or women from natal or marital lineages). One important local example is a woman whose father had been executed in 1937 during the Stalinist terror: she made great effort to clear his name and to inform people about him. Other researchers among both Kyrgyz and Kazakhs have observed grandmothers teaching their grandsons their *jeti ata* (Ismailbekova 2014; Yessenova 2003), but I do not have examples from Kara Buura, because I did not spend much time in households where grandmothers cared for children in that age range.

Some adults raised during the Soviet period considered *uruu* identities to interfere with social harmony and promote factionalism. One man born around 1960 that I interviewed said that he did not know his own *jeti ata*, but his daughter had been doing research on their lineage for a middle school history class, and she knew their lineage better than he. He implied that this inverted the usual gendering of such knowledge. *Sanjira* has become a heritage subject studied in school as part of connecting personal identity and national history. This can be seen in the two charts from a history classroom (Figures 1 and 3), which were created and used by a female teacher. *Sanjira* have also begun to appear in some media reporting, political discourse, and academic publications. Many men and some women are interested in learning about *sanjira*, but often did not feel they could provide reliable information, and directed me instead to a village expert or written sources.<sup>9</sup> Most adults do develop a wide knowledge of kin relations in their communities, but women who move to a new village as brides may initially be at a disadvantage due to more limited local experience. When I asked teenagers who

<sup>9</sup> In one village I did visit a local expert who was reputed to have won a regional *sanjira*-telling contest in 1986, but he was reluctant to tell me anything and claimed he had given his written materials to a scholar from the National History Museum in Bishkek. The history teacher who created the charts in Figures 1 and 3, Gulnara Ashiralieva, told me she had also asked this same expert but he did not help her either.



had grown up together in Kara Buura, I found boys better informed about their classmates' lineage identities than were girls, suggesting that boys discuss this among themselves in ways that girls do not.



**Figure 2.** Two generations of graves showing naming after the Soviet-imposed adoption of family names and patronymics. This cemetery is at Ak Döbö (the site of the ancient city Tekabket) across the river from Talas city. This man's given name Anatoliy is very uncommon among Kyrgyz, but reflects a limited Russianization of Kyrgyz personal names during the Soviet period.

## 7. History, Genealogy, and Experience

In addition to the sanjira charts and lists, which have become much more common in recent decades, narrative histories are often part of genealogies in Kyrgyzstan, although published sanjira vary widely in the quantity of narrative and how it is organized. It is not possible to provide a full analysis of sanjira genres here, but here I examine some basic distinctions about oral and written forms of genealogy that exist in Kara Buura.

Like any genre of verbal performance, sanjira genealogies emphasize certain themes and facts, and ignore others, and because sanjira are quite diverse, tellers have wide latitude about what they choose to describe. Many written sanjira reflect the interests and values of Kyrgyz patriarchal elites, with only simple histories for non-elites. In fact, detailed genealogical representations were not common or important for most Kyrgyz in the past. Rather than now returning to prior popularity, it seems clear that sanjira are a marginal and largely elite genre that is only now gaining wider acceptance and authority (Jacquesson 2012b, 2016). Some older sanjira describe leaders, their communities and allies, and their actions, while others list more men and position them within patrilineages, but say less about their accomplishments and roles in events. Dates and places of birth or death are usually neglected,

so synchronizing sanjira narratives with other histories requires identifying links by name, kinship, and events.

Sanjira are thus highly schematic accounts of patrilineal descent and history, and do not accommodate the complexity of real-world families. In addition to second or third wives, whether sequentially due to divorce or death, or simultaneously as was common, women might also take second or third husbands due to divorce or death, and thus children may be related by having the same mother but different fathers. Children may be adopted, often by their patrilineal grandparents, but more rarely into a different patrilineage. One common form of simultaneous remarriage and adoption is levirate marriage in which a widowed woman and her children are kept in the clan through marriage to a brother of the deceased husband. An unusual example is the case of Süyütbek, who was born in Kara Buura in 1920. In a 2007 interview he told me about his return from WWII in 1944 and marriage. When his uncle died in the war that same year, Süyütbek decided to marry his uncle's widow. His first wife supported his decision and they officially divorced, so he could marry the second wife, but in fact both wives were in the same household with him. Interestingly, Jakipov (2006a, p. 102) relies on Süyütbek as an oral source, and he names some of the few women that appear in this sanjira, the daughters Gülsat, Ayzat, and Perizat from one father, and Ayjan, Meerim, and Begimay from another. However, his levirate marriage and second wife are not mentioned.

Sanjira thus gloss over many tensions and tragedies of real families and their kin relations. The obvious neglect of women and their relations is highly significant and Hardenberg (2016) attempts to show how women in fact do have a role in shaping lineages. His evidence, and the examples I discuss below suggest that patrilineal ideology and its expression in sanjira are in ongoing negotiation with the broader knowledge of kin relations in the community. The social significance and solidarity of uruu clans is changing along with shifting forms of kinship knowledge, and sanjira remain only partial representations of the complex vitality of kin relations within Kyrgyz sociality. Written sanjira tend to integrate a wide range of people within a flatter account of events, while oral accounts focus more on personal experiences, the roles of women, the complexities of social life, the spiritual powers of heroes, and other dimensions that can be seen as extraneous to patrilineal descent. Local oral narratives focus on details that appear less in written sanjira and other histories. Better ethnographic attention to everyday talk and its narrative genres will help improve the understanding of how Kyrgyz construct their pasts.

Because sanjira provide simplified accounts of patrilineal sociality, they deflect attention from the intimate complexities of village life and its numerous flexible institutions, and instead offer a formal facade of strictly patrilineal kinship. Both oral and written sanjira also reach beyond the practical sociality of local kin ties to identify lineages and their members with broader and temporally deeper national histories. In the pre-Soviet period, top-level uruu served as political entities, but identification with them would have developed both through effective practical alliance and formal genealogical justification (cf. Jacquesson 2012a).

In recent decades, formalizations of national uruu organization have begun to provide a canonical structure with genealogical charts that support Kyrgyz nation-building efforts, and deny the intricacies of uruu history that are preserved in oral accounts. But close scholarship shows that different *sanjirachi* (sanjira-tellers) have preserved widely varying accounts, and many conundrums emerge that stymie attempts to create canonical national sanjira. This is not a great concern for people in Kara Buura however, and there are few debates about these details.

Beyer (2016) shows that locals recognize that people offer different narratives even about well-known, shared local genealogies, according to personal patrilineal positions. She was informed that it is natural for someone to praise and increase the significance of his own *uruu*, even at the expense of other lineages that are recognized as locally dominant. Further, Beyer finds that some people customize and elaborate on genealogies themselves and do not think it necessary to refer back to written sources as authorities. Accounts may be motivated by rhetorical goals such as claims to precedence in settling the region, but nonetheless do not result in disputes (Beyer 2016, pp. 44–45).



This contrasts considerably with the attitude [Shryock \(1997\)](#) finds in his study of genealogy in Jordan, where problems emerge as soon as people compare written genealogical accounts, and where the ethnographer has to decide whether to mention conflicting perspectives. Beyer's account suggests that tolerance for individuals and respect for their autonomy enable people to avoid conflict over historical details.

## 8. Lineage Segments in Kara Buura

To explore the ways that regional lineages in Kara Buura have developed over the past three centuries, I discuss here current local understandings of regional history and place it within the context of other accounts of Kyrgyz history. Both academic and popular historical narratives in Kyrgyzstan have begun to claim a global geographic range and several millennia of history in the post-Soviet period, developing new interpretations of Kyrgyz historical identity and relations among Kyrgyz and other peoples ([Light 2016b](#); [Jacquesson 2016, 2018](#)). However, most Kyrgyz in Kara Buura tell lineage histories about the past three centuries about a limited range of lineage groups, territories and aspects of life. There is general agreement about what are the relevant lineages, but accounts of origins and connections to broader political and religious history are more variable and wide-ranging. People construct accounts from narratives from print and broadcast media and multiple local sources: tellers recognize both that such history will have gaps and details may vary from one account to the other, but they also avoid most of the fanciful and far-fetched connections to world history that appear in some contemporary oral and written Kyrgyz histories.

I begin this section by introducing local lineages and showing the relationships among them. The table below shows that these lineages are relatively closely related, but nonetheless the apical ancestors for each lineage may be four or more generations apart, although this has little effect on relationships among these groups. [Hardenberg \(2016\)](#) mentions a similar phenomenon at the top levels of genealogical structure, where the lineages are considered parallel or equivalent to one another, despite founding ancestors who are many generations apart. Nonetheless, [Hardenberg \(2009\)](#) does suggest that people in the region where he worked perceived hierarchies among lineages based in both birth seniority among apical ancestors, and in ethnic differentiation, such as if the ancestor descends from a non-Kyrgyz concubine (cf. [Féaux de la Croix 2016](#), p. 147). [Beyer \(2016, p. 44\)](#) quotes a local who attributes foreign origins to the Jetigen uruu, although this does not seem linked to any hierarchy or status difference in the eastern Talas villages where she worked. In Kara Buura, I have noted strongly egalitarian ideas about lineage relations, and would argue that generational seniority or precedence in settlement does not confer status hierarchies among local lineages, although political and economic differentiation were stronger in the past, when uruu were a basic part of social organization.

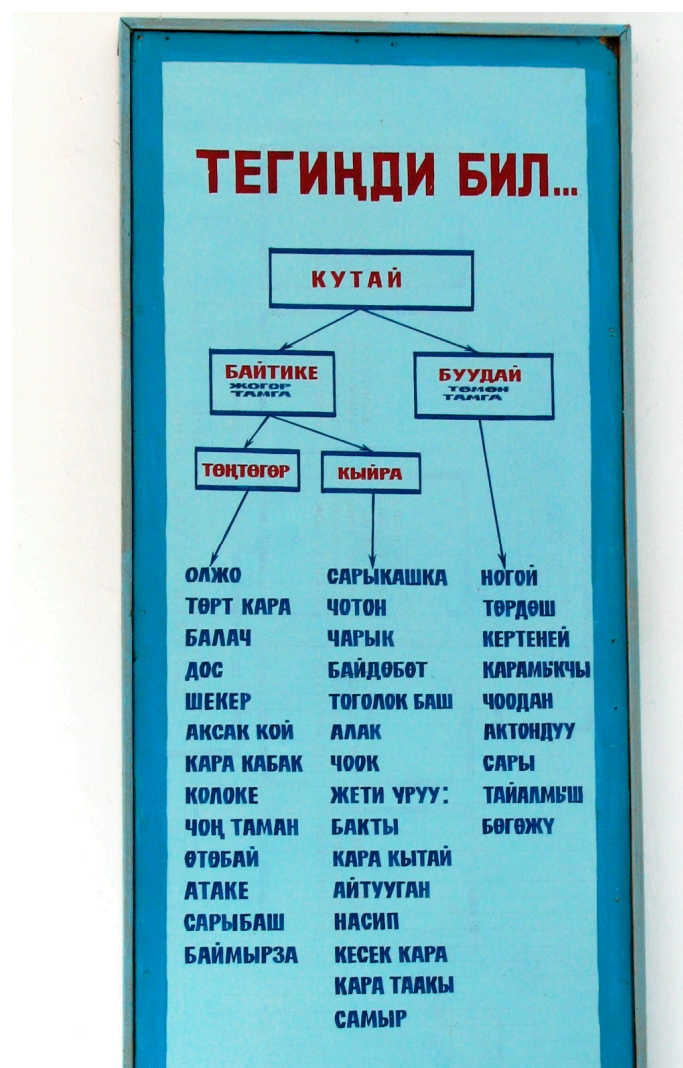
Table 1 shows dominant lineages in Kara Buura district. They controlled a variety of different summer pastures and winter quarters in the pre-Soviet period, but were settled into kolkhoz (collective farms) and sovkhoz (state farms) over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. The first three lines of the table show the descent of top-level groups, who descend from the mythical first Kyrgyz, Dolon Biy, and his son Kuu uul (whose branch is also called *sol kanat* "left wing"). Kuu uul's son Köbösh had six sons, of whom the third, Jayıl had two sons Karatal and Karanay. Karatal's son Toktobogul had a son Kushchu, who gives his name to one of the canonical Kyrgyz uruu that appears in Kara Buura. The other son of Jayıl, Karanay, had two sons, Kitay and Saruu, who are also both founders of canonical uruu and important in Talas oblast (Figure 1 presents a simplified and altered version of this genealogy, just as Figure 3 simplifies the more detailed accounts I draw on for Table 1). Lineages descending from the Saruu, Kushchu, Basız and Jetigen dominate in central and eastern Talas, while those of from Kitay are more important in the Kara Buura district. Although many other lineages descend from Kitay, I limit the discussion here to some representative uruu as examples for further discussion.

**Table 1.** Kıtay lineages and their vertical generational distances. The first three rows (in bold) compare the descent of Kıtay with two other Kara Buura top-level lineages. The subsequent lineages descend from Baytike and Buuday, sons of Tülkü Biy, son of Kıtay. Each of the lineages listed below includes at least 100 households in the Kara Buura district. These data come from a variety of local oral and written sanjira.

Uruu Name	Forefathers (after Tülkü Biy, Except First Three Lines)	Generations from Kıtay
<b>Kıtay</b>	Dolon Biy → Kuu uul → Köbösh → Jayıl → Karanay	0
<b>Kushchu</b>	Dolon Biy → Kuu uul → Köbösh → Jayıl → Karatal → Toktobogul	NA
<b>Jetigen</b>	Multiple versions	NA
Alak	Baytike → Kiyra	4
Chook	Baytike → Kiyra	4
Togolok Bash (given name Nazaraalı)	Baytike → Kiyra	4
Baydöböt	Baytike → Kiyra → Kochkor	5
Charık	Baytike → Kiyra → Kochkor → Karaboto Khan	6
Choton	Baytike → Kiyra → Kochkor → Karaboto Khan	6
Kesek Kara (given name Ormotoo)	Baytike → Kiyra → Kochkor → Karaboto Khan	6
Karataki	Baytike → Jeti Uruu	4
Nasip	Baytike → Jeti Uruu	4
Sheker	Baytike → Töngtögör	4
Atake	Baytike → Töngtögör → Aji	5
Tört Kara	Baytike → Töngtögör → Aji → Arik → Chapkinchi → Edilbay	8
Ötöbay	Baytike → Töngtögör → Aji → Arik → Chüyüt → Sölpü baatir	8
Kerteney	Buuday → Togotoy	4
Moldo Asan	Buuday → Togotoy → Tördösh	5
Aktondu	Buuday → Togotoy	4

Kıtay is the most populous top-level lineage in Kara Buura (Kutay is an alternate form that seems to be an effort to avoid the Turkic and Slavic name for “China”, as I discuss below). Most genealogies specify that Kıtay lineages all descend from his son Tülkü Biy who had three sons: Baytike, Buuday, and Böğöjü. The first son’s descendants are collectively described as the Jogoru Tamga (upper mark) Kıtay, while the other two are the Tömön Tamga (lower mark) Kıtay, which refers to the form of their *tamga* or cattle marking. Both Figures 3 and 5 leave out Tülkü Biy. Figure 3 shows the two tamga categories as the first division, but puts Böğöjü below, while Figure 4 mentions Tülkü Biy and specifies the three sons including Böğöjü, but only continues the lines from Baytike and his three sons by two wives. Figure 5 lists Baytik, Buuday, and Algojo as sons of Kıtay.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jakipov (2006a, p.13) adds another generation, specifying Koruk as son of Kutay, and father of Tulki Biy [sic]. He also lists the three sons of Tulki Biy as Baytike, Buuday, and Algojo, which is close to what is given in Figure 5. He later (Jakipov 2006a, p.15) writes it Algojo, and specifies that his son is Bogoju [sic].



**Figure 3.** A local sanjira in the same history classroom as Figure 1: genealogy of “Kutay” with the heading “Know your roots.” This simplified form provides only three levels of descent before simply listing the uruu contained within each group. Here the “jeti uruu” (seven uruu) are squeezed into the bottom of the middle column, similar to Kerimbekov and Sharshenaliev (2008, p. 118), although most sources specify that they descend from the first son of Baytike. The jети uruu are in fact managed by a single local biy, but treated as separate lineages that can intermarry. Here the list includes Kesek Kara and leaves out Bolku.

As mentioned, lineages vary widely with respect to the number of generations included within them, as well as their generational position relative to one another. One lineage may identify with a more distant apical ancestor, while others are identified with an apical ancestor from one or more generations below a brother of the first. A more ambiguous case is when people identify with two levels, such as belonging to both Jети Uruu and a sublineage such as Nasip or Karataki. Such cases suggest that the larger lineage identity and organization is useful for some activities, while the smaller is better for others. In the case of Jети Uruu, the whole group is managed by two biys, one in Bishkek (including 70 households in 2007) and one in Kara Buura with considerably more households. However,

each sublineage of Jeti Uruu considers itself independent for purposes of exogamy and they are able to intermarry.<sup>11</sup> See Figures 3–5.

Table 1 shows how wide the generational difference can be, with the four uruu descending from Baytike and Töngtögör, in which Sheker is only four generations from Kitay, while Atake is five, and Ötöbay and Tört Kara are eight. There seem to be a variety of interacting reasons that one apical ancestor may remain important after his brothers' lineages have divided into sublineages identified by apical ancestors from later generations: these include lineage members wanting to retain a more recognizable identity or feeling it has not grown too large. In the case of Sheker, it would appear that the current reputation of the group prevents its division, since this is the uruu of Chingiz Aytmatov, and many of them live in the eponymous village of Sheker or in the capital Bishkek. Another example is the case of the Kushchu lineage that is a well-known and large top-level lineage in Kyrgyzstan overall, but in Kara Buura, people still identify themselves simply as Kushchu because the group is small. Another locally small lineage is the Jetigen: they are generally accepted as top-level national lineage, although some people identify them as descending from Kushchu. Generally, uruu identities seem chosen according to considerations of segment structure and not reputation, because few are named for heroes. Each local hero belongs to and is often important for uruu identity, but an uruu rarely takes its name from a hero. An exception is the case of Moldo Asan, a hero whose name has now been taken for the uruu and for his home village. That most heroes do not become apical ancestors suggests that other factors shape apicality more than reputation. I have not heard any clear explanations, but it seems related to the fact that apical ancestors are seen as shifting, because eventually the lineage should divide and lineage segments adopt new apical ancestors.

The local lineages listed in Table 1 are institutionally equivalent, in the sense that they are mutually exclusive groups including all the households of male lineage members, and they serve roughly the same functions for participants, organizing and helping with rituals such as funerals, celebrations and kудay feasts. Elements found in many Kyrgyz genealogies appear in this table: some apical ancestors are known by nicknames, and lineage names come from these informal names, while genealogies tend to specify the formal given name of the ancestor. This is related to the principle that younger people, especially in-married women, should not use the given name of men older than them (*tergöö* is a verb meaning showing respect by avoiding using a person's name)<sup>12</sup>. For example, the uruu name Togolok Bash ("round head") comes from the nickname for the apical ancestor Nazaraali. Jakipov (2006a, p. 13) specifies that this nickname was given by Bolduke, "the wife of Kochkor and Chook". Kesek Kara ("black piece") is the uruu name based on the nickname for Ormotoo.

Another common issue is that lineages may be named collectively for a set of brothers, such as the lineage called Jeti Uruu (literally "seven uruu"). The seven named uruu within this group (such as Karataki and Nasip on the chart) are relatively small, and as discussed, the Jeti Uruu in Kara Buura have a single biy and organize events together. Tört Kara ("four blacks") is another group of four brothers and their descendants. Names may also describe other identifying features, such as the lower and upper tamga mentioned above, which refers to marks made on cattle to show ownership by the lineage. Some name origins are obscure, such as the Jetigen which is probably derived from "jeti" and an uncertain second term. They may descend from three or seven sons of Kushchu's son Nusup,

<sup>11</sup> My data does not provide a full account of how an uruu divides into new mutually exclusive identities. The situation in the Jeti Uruu suggests a period when people identify with both a larger lineage and one of several smaller segments, but no one suggested that this was a temporary stage of development. The establishment of new smaller segments in community knowledge, or public announcement of new identities, are not obvious processes. Nor is it clear whether the desire of people in one sublineage to be independent puts pressure on other sublineages to divide and identify with a new apical ancestor.

<sup>12</sup> Ismailbekova (2017, pp. 45, 55) discusses the suppression of given names and replacement with nicknames, although she does not make explicit how the humorous names may serve to challenge patriarchal authority. In Ismailbekova (2014, p. 378), she argues that nicknames are forms of women's knowledge from which men are excluded. In his catalogue of ethnonyms, Karataev (2003) identifies dozens of uruu names as *lakap* (nickname).









**Figure 5.** A notebook kept by a veterinarian from a former collective farm, consisting of 25 pages of genealogical charts. The first page above shows the descent of Kushchu and Kitai from Jayil, and the division of Kitai into upper and lower tamga (property marks). *Jeti Uruu* ('seven lineages') is given as if the name of one son at the top of the second page, but then *jetu uruu* without capital letters below seems to clarify that this is collective name for the seven lineages listed: this list includes the same seven uruu as in Figure 4, although in a different order.

This narrative shows an important form of agency for women in building up the uruu through beneficial marriages. As with the case of levirate described above, women actively choose to marry a younger man to stay within the lineage, but further, Bolduke also finds a second wife for her second husband. Later, Karaboto became Khan of the Talas valley because of his aristocratic descent through his mother. Karaboto Khan is said to have fought and defeated the Jungar Kalmaks.

Karaboto had four sons from two wives, and from his Kalmak third wife was his son Jolon. Accounts vary: One narrator explained that the *Jeti Uruu* also descends from Karaboto Khan, and he did not mention a Kalmak wife, but said Charik, Choton and Jolon were all from the same wife. A published *sanjira* says that Karaboto Khan fathered Jolon when he was 101 years old and then died at 102, and Jolon's mother, named Telegey, took the orphaned Jolon with her back to her Sayak natal family, who lived in Toktogul district (Jakipov 2006a, pp. 14, 97). This variety of accounts suggests that some narrators try to avoid mentioning a lower or ambiguous status felt to attach to someone of non-Kyrgyz origins. *Sanjira* remains in such cases a partial account of local history not only for leaving out most women, but also in neglecting men for a variety of reasons, such as those with non-Kyrgyz mothers. At the same time, foreign maternal origin can result in higher status as with Karaboto becoming khan because his mother was daughter of a khan. The khan title appears to be only recognized locally, and he is identified as Karaboto Biy in archival sources, which describe him as active in the mid-18th century (Asanov and Turganbaev 2007, *passim*).

Local oral history includes knowledge of the areas where uruu had shared pastures during summer and winter. One narrator from the Kerteney uruu said that before the founding of the Soviet Union, the land along the K rk r   River in western Kara Buura was divided into the winter quarters

of the different uruu: The area south of Archagul village was held by Baydöböt, the Sheker uruu lived near where the village of Sheker is now (across the river from Archagul), and the Kerteney lived in a settlement north of Archagul, where there is a small canal called Kerteney-Arik. The Karataki (one of the Jetti uruu) had around 20–30 households living further north, down the river from Archagul, as did the Togolok Bash. All of these people eventually were included into the kolkhoz and sovkhoz farms that were established in Jöön Döbö, Amanbaevo, Sheker, and Kök Say, during the collectivization and settlement drive that rapidly expanded in 1932 (Loring 2008). People were granted fixed plots of land, but most could not afford to build permanent houses until the 1940s and after. Some uruu graveyards are still located at their winter quarters and there is a large shared graveyard immediately south of Sheker as well.

Summer pastures were vitally important for Kyrgyz in Kara Buura, and both before and during the Soviet period, the richest pastures were reached by going south over the Talas Ala-Too around Manas Peak to enter the lush Maydantal and Oy-Kayıng (Oygaing) valleys, which are now part of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respectively. In the Soviet period, smaller groups of herders and their households would go to these distant summer pastures, taking large herds from local sovkhoz and kolkhoz farms. Present-day herders often point out that they cannot be as successful because after the Soviet period they lost access to these traditional pastures.

## 10. Heroes and Supernatural Powers

Knowledge about descent and lineages in Kara Buura is closely connected to representations of heroes, who may be famous for military exploits or supernatural powers, and occasionally both. Few of the many Kyrgyz genres of religious, political, and martial narratives have been carefully studied. Among the best researched are epic narratives about Manas and his descendants, who are the most prominent heroes in Kyrgyz oral tradition. Other well-known Kyrgyz heroes (*baatır*) mostly lived in the past three centuries, and include many uruu leaders with both political and military accomplishments (Gullette 2010; Şahin 2012; Prior 2013a; Beyer 2016).

Despite the expanding number of histories being composed, many based in oral narratives, there are few studies of local oral tradition to understand what people tell, when, and to whom. There is a 30-volume collection of Kyrgyz “folk literature”, composed from sources transcribed in the early 20th century but not edited and published until the post-Soviet period (*El Adabiyatı Seriyası* 1996–2003), however its narratives consist primarily of the songs and poetry of specialist or professional performers, and do not include the dominant genres of local religious and lineage histories that circulate orally in Kara Buura. These volumes and other studies show the diversity of narrators and narratives, but we lack details about performances and popular knowledge. In his analysis of a manuscript of written historical narratives, Prior (2013a) carefully examines the social settings in which these texts appeared, as well as those of oral versions. He concludes that these performers composed their histories for elite patrons.

At the local level, in Kara Buura, no works seem to reflect patronage in this traditional sense.<sup>14</sup> At present, some local people support composing and publishing of histories but they are oriented towards the region and community as a whole, with more inclusive representations of local history and notable people without much regard for lineage identities (for a similar situation with southern İsik Köl histories, see Hardenberg 2012). One carefully produced local volume surveying the history, geography and notable biographies of the district includes an overview of local uruu, but gives few details (Kerimbekov and Sharshenaliev 2008). The many capsule biographies included in this volume, organized by village, specify lineage identities only for pre-Soviet figures, thus perpetuating the

<sup>14</sup> One relevant work in this genre (Asanov and Turganbaev 2007) is well-known among scholars and mentions Talas frequently, but I never saw a copy in Talas. It is an elite political history of the 18th century that describes interactions among Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Jungar but makes no mention of the local legends that interest people in Kara Buura.

anti-uruu ideology of similar Soviet-era biographic compilations. In contrast, oral accounts I have collected often focus on the narrator's kin, but are not exclusively patrilineal. One narrative about Sidigali Moldo shows how his spiritual capacities (*kasiet*) helped him gain freedom from a Siberian prison camp, where he was sent in the 1930s (Light 2016a). This figure is a hero for the Tört Kara lineage that the narrator married into in 1949, a little before Sidigali Moldo's death in 1953. Importantly, this spiritual hero who overcame Soviet oppression is not from the Tört Kara uruu itself, but is the father of the teller's husband's mother, so from another uruu. Sidigali Moldo is not mentioned in any published accounts I have found. The widespread Soviet persecution of believers has not resulted in a recognized narrative genre nor attracted extensive study, but many healers and pilgrims (*ziyaratchi*) tell personal narratives of persecution by Soviet officials (e.g., Aitpaeva 2007, pp. 351–76).

More widely known in the Kara Buura region are narratives about earlier figures that are important ancestors to present-day lineages. Local narratives about Karaboto Khan usually mention his military accomplishments, including his defeat of the Jungar, but give few details. More frequent and detailed are accounts of his supernatural powers. He could easily strike people with the evil eye and was careful not to look at anyone because of this, but one day he looked at his son by mistake. As one narrator tells it:

Our Karaboto Ata had the evil eye. He had twin sons: Asan and Üsön. Üsön became a strong warrior. Once he was riding horses with his friends. He was lifting one friend from a horse's back and putting him on the back of another horse while the horses were galloping. Karaboto heard this and opened his eyes to look, and asked, "Who is this great strong man?" He always kept his eyes turned down so as not to look at people. If he looked at someone and liked that person even a little bit then he or she would die immediately. People told him, "Oh, that's your son." Karaboto said, "Oh, now it is done. Put up your yurts." They were on the way to another pasture, but they stopped and put up their yurts [for a funeral]. His son died immediately. Karaboto Khan never opened his eyes, his eyes were always closed. He would ask his wife, "Hey, who is this? Who is that?"

Tales about lineage heroes with supernatural powers are related to ongoing beliefs in the powers of local healers and their links to sacred places (Aitpaeva 2007). Another important local figure is the famous mystic of the Charik uruu, who was born in the mid-1800s. Known as Chargin Moldo, he went to study Islam in Bukhara. When he returned with many books, he continued his studies and would not go out and mix with local people. People asked what was the use of such a *moldo* (Kyrgyz for *mullah*) if he would not heal people. One day, his father asked him to heal his uncle, but he said he could not bear going out because he would see people who were *makürip* (the narrator explains this means "unclean, not reading *namaz*"). His father told the people to wash (implying that they could then pray). When they had washed for three days, Chargin Moldo went and stood for three minutes outside the wall of the yurt where the sick man lay and cured him, and he lived for three more years. Chargin Moldo was famous for living at the mosque on the hill overlooking the village of Sheker from the south, and sleeping in the nearby tomb-shaped structure known as Ak Uy ("white house", Aitpaeva 2007, pp. 96–97). Ak Uy is roughly 3.5 m square and resembles the *hujra* prayer retreats known from other parts of Central Asia (See Figure 6).

One of Chargin's sons was Siyali Moldo, considered by some to be the greatest moldo of the region. I was told by a local healer that Siyali Moldo's mother was named Nabat, a woman from same Aktondu uruu as this healer herself, and because the Aktondu have many healers and people with special powers, some of Siyali Moldo's abilities (*kasiet*) must have come to him through his mother.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Nabat appears in the published sanjira of Jakipov (2006a, p. 107), but it is not clear if the author recognizes she is a woman. Jakipov mentions Chargin Moldo and his descendants but with no biographical details (Jakipov 2006a, p. 102).





Figure 6. Ak Uy.

Moldo Asan is another local hero, from the Tördösh branch of the Kitay uruu (see [Gullette 2010](#), p. 64; [Jakipov 2006a](#), p. 120). He is known in historical sources as an important manap (on manaps see [Prior 2006, 2013b](#); [Akiyama 2015](#)), but locally there is a legend that when he joined a delegation to St. Petersburg to the Russian court with other Kyrgyz leaders, Tsar Alexander II asked before the meeting what group he was from, and when told “Kitay” he mistook this for the Russian word for “Chinese” and would not agree to meet him. Kyrgyz often use alternate spellings for the Kitay name, to avoid its similarity to the name for “Chinese”. The use of the term *Kitay* or *Cathay* for China in fact originates from the period of Khitan Liao dynastic rule (907–1125 CE), and the word *Kitay* appears often as an ethnonym in Central and Inner Asian history. This anecdote about Moldo Asan seems to be a way Kitay members warn about ethnic misrecognition by Europeans, and about the possibility of confusion of uruu and ethnic identities. In fact, Moldo Asan was a respected leader with extensive contacts with Russian officials, and [Grodekov \(1889\)](#) cites Moldo Asan many times in his study of Kyrgyz and Kazakh legal systems. Grodekov’s book now serves as a symbol of Moldo Asan’s significance for people in his home village of Jiyde, which has now been renamed Moldo Asan. Moldo Asan’s tomb is prominent along the road from the town of Amanbaevo to Jöön Döbö, but like other monuments to heroes, it serves more as an uruu symbol and site for collective rituals rather than a pilgrimage destination.<sup>16</sup>

The heroic pattern is complex and diverse, and local heroes can be local religious or political leaders, or holy figures with supernatural powers. The explicit title *baatir* seems to apply only to military heroes however, while some political leaders such as Moldo (*mullah*) Asan have titles that suggest their authority is rooted in religious abilities or knowledge. Some heroes inherit their supernatural powers through women, but no women are held up locally as leaders or heroes, while many are recognized as healers. This is a widespread phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan, where very few women are seen as heroes for military or political accomplishments ([Blakkisrud and Abdykapar Kyzy 2017](#)).

<sup>16</sup> This raises interesting questions that I cannot address here about the contrast of more inclusive religious sites and sites with stronger lineage symbolism. Rituals for ancestors at tombs are also religious, but would rarely include people who are not lineage members. Inclusive village events can take place at a mosque or at a natural sacred site to avoid the lineage associations of tombs that are identified by a lineage ancestor.

Local interest in heroes encompasses political and military elites as well as others who are valued as lineage members at the local level. None of those from Kara Buura are seen as major national heroes, but locals recognize them for their special powers and accomplishments. The narratives they tell often describe flaws, weaknesses, or failures. Local stories focus on social relations rather than politics and heroic success. Some of the most recognized local figures do not appear in the national historical canon at all, but stand out for their close connection to familiar local places and for their manifestations of spiritual capacities, some of which are not under their control in potentially tragic ways.

## 11. Conclusions

This article has analyzed some aspects of patrilineal uruu institutions among Kyrgyz living in Kara Buura and explored ways these Kyrgyz use local genealogies and narratives to construct their identities in history. Sanjira genealogies are widely varying compilations of information about descent, primarily that of men, and about historical events and experiences of notable individuals. Sanjira narratives characterize personal lives of past uruu members, but are only a small subset of the local histories and legends that people tell. Because of the prevailing emphasis on men and descent through men, women and their kinship ties are not well-represented. The few women who do appear in the published genealogies about Kara Buura lineages (Jakipov 2006a, 2006b) include mothers of some famous ancestors, such as Karaboto Khan, as well as some daughters born over the last century but with no details about their lives, marriages and children. However, women tell everyday oral narratives that are not considered sanjira, and range widely across a past composed mostly from personal experiences and those of people they have known.

Very few sanjira narratives describe the actions of women or life within households, although these are obviously crucial to the perpetuation of the lineage. Sanjira are restricted narratives, with little mention of personal experiences and struggles of family life, although men and women frequently tell of such realities from their own experiences and those of kin. Both men and women often tell of spiritual experiences, and these appear rarely in published sanjira. And as we have seen, supernatural narratives are one way women are able to insert their own commentary and experience into narratives about uruu, without being restricted to the patriarchal and patrilineal ideology that uruu genealogies embody.

The close examination of the processes that shape patrilineages and narratives about them offer a way to understand patriarchy in Kyrgyz experience in Kara Buura. Rather than being an overarching and omnipresent determinant of experience, patriarchy is better understood in terms of its appearance in particular settings, negotiations and choices. Kandiyoti (2005) raises the question of “bargaining power”, which emphasizes conflict more than seems accurate for the gendered division of authority, even in so obviously a male-dominated sphere as that of uruu patrilineages and their representations in sanjira. Relations in the household and among close kin are more prone to conflict (cf. Ismailbekova 2016), while uruu relations tend to involve less contestation because the stakes are lower. Some Kara Buura oral narratives may promote a heroic past, but more often they evoke life’s complexity, not making overt claims or promoting or contesting ideologies such as patriarchy: Instead, they entertain and enrich social life by sharing what individuals feel are important experiences.

I do not take up Kandiyoti’s (2005) more detailed analysis of subjectivity and forms of cooptation and resistance here, because within the scope of this article gendered power relations and roles appear to be more rooted in shared conventions, not characterized either by women’s false consciousness or overt critique. Women do critique gender and class inequalities in other aspects of Kyrgyz social life (Light 2015b), and in the case of patrilineal institutions women both have some agency within them and ample agency outside of them for decision-making, access to resources, and open discourse about society and values. I suggest that pre-Soviet uruu practices were more hierarchical in general, and as a result women had less authority in public life, in uruu affairs, and perhaps within the household as well, but this requires further analysis. However, the patriarchal model of the uruu has also been extended to newer contexts, such as the organization of middle-school classmates in recent years (Light 2015b).



Contemporary Kyrgyz society has developed a widespread enthusiasm for local heroes, with monuments and tombs used to commemorate many historical and legendary figures from the past. But popular local narratives about heroes in Kara Buura suggest a lack of interest in their political or military accomplishments, and instead lineage ancestors and heroes are better known for social and spiritual events and life struggles. This is perhaps linked to a broad egalitarian ethos: boastful accounts created through patronage have not shaped ideas about the past in Kara Buura. Nor do people tell about lineage origins in the sense of presenting claims to precedence in occupying territory or through legends that explain the founding role or significance of apical ancestors. Instead, narratives tell of heroes of the lineage whose accomplishments and struggles revolve about spiritual experiences and abilities. Others present women shaping descent through choosing marital partners both for levirate and second wives. These accounts are usually attached only to genealogical time, with very few accounts that specify absolute chronology in years or geographic location besides occasional mentions of religious sites. This contrasts strongly with local people's usual report of exact dates and specific places in narratives about their personal lives.

Ongoing research and expanding public knowledge about patrilineal genealogies are an important aspect of creating a distinctively Kyrgyz national history, as well as generating ethnic exclusivity. At the local level, history both in school and in the community tends to emphasize Kyrgyz accomplishments, but there is usually some sense of multiethnic participation particularly in the Soviet period, and the dominant Soviet anti-uruu ideology continues to have an impact on many narratives about the Soviet period, in which uruu identities are rarely mentioned: such local heroes from Soviet times are community members who were scholars, doctors, sports professionals or contributed to building collective agriculture. In post-Soviet public life, uruu origins are also not emphasized, but are treated more as a matter of local and private identity.

I have suggested here that patrilineages play a much less important role than in the past, and at the national level they are best seen as a heritage category: widely researched for their historical importance, valued as symbols of national tradition, but with a current ongoing role only among a limited number of aficionados. There is a potential for further revival, but they seem unlikely to gain a much greater role. Locally however, patrilineages are important for certain ritual events and serve as a key source of social identity, although they do not require extensive time or resources from members. Kinship and relatedness are crucial aspects of Kyrgyz social life, and involve commitments and resource flows along a wide variety of links formed through mother and father, siblings, and marriage partners, and supplemented by ties among classmates, neighbors, and friends.

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