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The force of custom: law and the ordering of everyday life in Kyrgyzstan

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BOOK REVIEW

The force of custom: law and the ordering of everyday life in Kyrgyzstan, by Judith Beyer, Pittsburgh, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016, xxvi + 274 pp., US$28.95, ISBN 978-0-8229-6420-9

In *The Force of Custom: Law and the Ordering of Everyday Life in Kyrgyzstan*, Judith Beyer establishes a compelling anthropological framework for analysing daily life in present-day Kyrgyzstan. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork in Talas (specifically in Aral and Engels) from 2005 to 2015, Beyer looks at how informants in her research sites understand their history and order their daily lives in ways that cast doubt on current scholarship's clichéd dichotomies of Soviet versus post-Soviet and change versus continuity. Indeed, Beyer dispels the historiographical importance of 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, showing how 'sedentarization, collectivization, the loss of livestock, starvation and hunger, [and] the end of transhumance' (173) during the Soviet era affected socio-political developments in Kyrgyzstan more thoroughly than new waves of democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead of formal political and legal structures, Beyer specifically examines the bottom-up creations and invocations of *salt*, a hierarchical order of social and legal codes that reproduce cultural idioms of gender, law, and social structures and behaviours through everyday interactions and transactions in Kyrgyzstan.

The Force of Custom provides an innovative approach to contemporary understandings of *salt* within Kyrgyz provincial life. The author explores this multifaceted socio-legal idiom through seven chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. She begins the book with an in-depth discussion of Russian and Soviet colonial impacts on Kyrgyz customary law, before illustrating how post-Soviet life is understood and interpreted among her informants in chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 4–7 show the intricacies of *salt* through Beyer's ethnographic research: how it is invoked by and embodied in *aksakal*s (elders) and *aksakal* courts (customary law courts); how it operates as a performative socio-legal code; and how the state and individuals understand the importance and impact of *salt* on Kyrgyz society. Beyer includes a short but thought-provoking conclusion, ample endnotes and a useful glossary of terms.

Beyer analyses the complex nature of *salt* not through any direct definition but by showing how this concept is understood and invoked in Kyrgyz life. For Beyer's informants, *salt* is an innate and primordial trait (9): it encompasses all aspects of *urp-adat* (traditions and customs) in the social sense as well as legal codes of behaviour. True to her ethnographic method, Beyer studies *salt* by observing what informants say they do, what they actually do, what they say they should do, and their reflections thereupon. This ethnographic approach brings out some crucial aspects of *salt* in relation to state-building, social engineering and collective remembrance in present-day Kyrgyzstan. One may compare *salt* with social niceties in other Turco-Persianate societies, such as *taʿārof* (offering) and *adat* (customs), but Beyer distinguishes *salt* as being much more than merely custom, writing: 'Beyond a small set of codified principles and rules, it is also perceived as an embodied, gendered age-specific, and all-encompassing way of conduct' (176). This decisive characteristic allows *salt* to be malleable in absorbing new socio-political mores that may not originate from within Krygyz society and in incorporating state law, Islamic law and customs into a system of ordering daily life. In as much as *salt* achieves 'normativity and orderliness in one's life' (xvii), then, it also permits the adoption of external norms – with many Soviet and post-Soviet socio-political ideals coming to mind – as 'authentically' Kyrgyz.

It is precisely through its malleable reception to non-native norms that Beyer discusses the relation of *salt* to the state, a highlight in the monograph. In chapter 2, she illustrates how her informants 'altered the imperial landscape' in order actively to remember top-down Russian and Soviet reforms as part of their own lives (46). Delving into the unmaking of the *Kolkhoz Kommunism*, Beyer illustrates how the post-Soviet policies of decollectivization are nonetheless remembered by her informants as an active choice. Tellingly, they do not perceive privatizing and decollectivizing buildings, livestock and organizational units as forced upon them; rather, her informants narrativize these turbulent episodes of recent history as though they jointly agreed upon these measures and followed common directives in paving their own way after independence from the Soviet Union, which they also view as an active decision (46–54).

This attention to her informants' agency in memory and narrative lays the groundwork to further her engagement with the state in chapter 3 through a fruitful discussion of *aksakal* courts, and the state's presence in the provinces. Upon the initiative of the government under Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan's first president, *aksakal* courts were officially instated for the first time in the 1993 constitution. As a means of nation-building and decentralization, Akaev promoted *aksakal* courts to take the burden of litigation off the state and to encourage greater local governance (32–33, 63–64). Despite the inexorable decline of the state's material presence in provincial Kyrgyzstan, villagers in Beyer's field sites nonetheless invoke its symbolic presence through the use of emblems, language and rituals that they associate with the state (60). These symbolic invocations of the state allow the provincial elders to create order (*tartip*) through the production of the 'atmosphere' of the state (73), thereby strengthening *aksakal* courts and permitting processes of customization within provincial legal orders. In a way, these developments of a symbolic state run parallel to the formation of what Beyer claims to be a pseudo-Potemkin state: following Akaev's emphasis on decentralization, the Kyrgyz government pays for amplified police forces and visible state insignia while ignoring basic necessities such as clean water, electricity and healthcare (81).

Scholars of Central Asia and Iran will find particularly stimulating a more socio-anthropologically focused discussion on *salt* in chapter 6, where Beyer analyses the cultural discourse around shame, or *uiat*, and shame-anxiety. In a subsection entitled '*Uiat* as Shame-Anxiety', Beyer explores how *uiat*, 'an emotional practice by means of which individuals are socialized into subjecting themselves to an awareness of others' expectations' (148), is used by adults to socialize children through shame and to alter adults' social behaviours through shame-anxiety. Much like other aspects of *salt*, *uiat* takes on gendered connotations. Women understand shame-anxiety within the context of *uiat*, that is, operating to avoid shame, whereas men interpret their actions toward *urmat* (respect), in order to prevent the loss of social status, perceived or actual. Though Beyer does not draw direct links, this discourse of shame in Kyrgyz society suggests comparisons with other Turko-Persianate social customs. Akin to Iranian shame and socialization customs of *ʿayb* (*ayıp* in Turkish), *uiat* is tethered to phrases, such as '*uiat bolot!*' (it will be *uiat*!) and '*uialbaisynby?*' (aren't you ashamed?). Near translations both in language and in context of these same phrases are found in the greater Persianate world: for example, in Iran, '*ʿayb ast!*' and '*khejālat nemīkashī?*'. Whether these similar shame discourses are mere analogies or bear actual cultural affinities seems a potential ground for comparative and transnational studies on the socio-cultural landscape of politically fractured Central Asia and the Turco-Persianate world.

Beyer's monograph is an excellent addition to the field of Kyrgyz, Central Asian and post-Soviet (though she may make an argument against this term) studies, as well as to studies of the broader Islamicate and Turco-Persianate world. With her analyses of *salt*, Beyer illustrates a crucial aspect of Kyrgyz life and the force through which this custom accompanies all her informants, dictates their behaviour and permits their rationalization of self and history. For

scholars of Central Asia, Beyer's work puts forth interesting comparisons with other nation-states and sets the stage for furthering anthropological, historical and political–scientific scholarship beyond frameworks that have shaped many scholars' research thus far.

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