

that have the right shape from which to make stems and keels and timbers' (p. 133). This is an example of a page where the verbal and the visual complement one another especially well. At times one wishes for more information. For example, on page 137, we read the assertion that knot knowledge is being passed on, but we do not learn how this takes place. And all those interested in Newfoundland English would be interested to have been provided with extended examples of connected speech. But then again perhaps that would best be done by online audio files rather than in a book.

All in all, this is a book which does what it says on the cover – it presents local knowledge. This is what so many so-called ethnographic and anthropological studies fail to do, preferring to remain involved in meta-level discussions instead. While this book is unavoidably costly, given its heft (it weighs a kilo) and the number of full-colour reproductions it contains, in terms of accessibility it is worth noting that this wonderful Encyclopedia-project also has other forms – as unbound panels in boxes in community locations, and now also as a website: <http://encyclopediaoflocalknowledge.com/>.

Indeed, the current website indicates that a third chapter has been begun, dealing with the Conne River area in the south of the island. Long may this project continue to grow!

Jonathan Roper

KYRGYZTAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEGAL ANTHROPOLOGY



Judith Beyer. *The Force of Custom: Law and the Ordering of Everyday Life in Kyrgyzstan*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. 272 pp.

Judith Beyer is a professor of anthropology at the University of Konstanz, Germany, and has been engaged with legal anthropology for many years. The book under review is based on her doctoral dissertation and some of the readers might know her work through publications in journals like *Ethnos* or *POLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*.

The central topic of the book is legal and moral ordering of the everyday in the villages of Aral and Engels, former centres of collective farms in Talas province, Kyrgyzstan, the negotiations of proper behaviour, resolution of disputes, and expression of loyalty and solidarity. For the Kyrgyz (and to be exact, also for the neighbouring Kazakhs) this complex set of unwritten norms is known as *salt*. Everyone who has conducted some sort of fieldwork in the region knows that it is difficult if not impossible to separate the ethnic and the Muslimness when it comes to identity. Therefore, when talking about the moral order, one cannot ignore the impact of Islam but also the rhetoric leaning on Islam. It is puzzling that in many cases it is hard to understand

whether Islamic customs and norms shape the everyday or the language of Islam there justifies the existing norms and customs. The picture is complicated even more by the fact that even in the existing norms and perceptions of the local moral order there is no clear consensus on right and wrong.

Central Asian social life is very ritualised and, as the book helps us to understand, most of these aspects – the sitting order at table, who offers a hand for handshake, how people organise their festive events, how to behave in these events, and so forth – are part of the *salt*. Beyer has conducted an impressive amount of fieldwork stretching over ten years, from 2005 to 2015, in two villages – Aral and Engels – of one of the most remote and isolated regions of north-western Kyrgyzstan. To some extent the story she tells is typical for many regions of the former Soviet Union – after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had subsidised and centrally governed agriculture with its collective and state farms, people were left on their own. The land and the cattle were distributed in the villages and lack of knowledge, opportunities, and finances let people survive merely on a more or less subsistence level. More than often the state also withdrew other institutions – remote villages became isolated due the decrease of the public transport, local administrations barely coped with their primary obligations (support of schools and children’s day care, maintaining public roads in a state of certain usability) and had very little resources for anything else. Often, the Soviet moral order with its policing and courts faded away or was relocated to the cities, i.e., became unreachable. This vacuum was filled with the *salt*, the local moral order to maintain the integrity of the community.

One of the main lines throughout the book is the state’s relationship with a community that leans heavily on *salt* in its internal business. Here we can observe different transformations of how state institutions and officials establish their link with the people in the village but also what is the perception of the state (state as an idea, p. 60) among the local people and what they expect from the state. Typical for the post-Soviet Central Asian periphery, the state is often presented as a ‘Potemkin state’ (p. 81), where the presence of the state structures is rather visual (piling up insignia, p. 81) than fulfilling its functions.

Beyer has, over a long period, studied the aksakal courts or the state-sponsored and institutionalised courts of the Muslim elders. The tensions between the aksakals, between the court and the state, and between the community and the court, is another central topic of the book. As usual, it comes down to local clan politics. The author shows how the clan solidarity and cooperation transform over time and are related to local demographics and economy. Here, community rituals are taken as an example. When years ago some lineages used to feast together then now, when the population has grown, they celebrate certain holidays separately.

A very important contribution to our understanding of the Central Asian societies is the interplay with Islam. The author says correctly that “religious practices are part of getting old” (p. 103). In Central Asian states Muslim practices are indeed related to age and status. This so-called civic Islam is an integral part of the everyday life and serves as justification for the existing power hierarchies and gender order. In some cases, it can also have a conservative edge creating certain inertia. A big problem in the region is more or less compulsory gifts one should make in order to show respect. This is widely known that the price as well as the number of gifts has been growing

constantly so that the state (this is the case in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) has been interfering by limiting the number of guests in weddings or final sums of money spent for the celebration. This is indeed a big economic problem as people are burdened with debts to buy gifts or organise a festive event, the so-called *toi*. In the last three chapters before the conclusion, Beyer tackles this issue, demonstrating how people maintain the customs they would actually like to abandon, what are the economic causes of such indebtedness, and why they do not overcome the reluctance to spend increasingly bigger parts of their incomes on such rituals.

This book is theoretically well founded but not overkill. It means that the style is not typically dry with lots of references but easily readable where the story to be told has the priority. The author has conducted meticulous research and demonstrates that she indeed knows much about details. This book should be of interest not only to the scholars of the region but to a wide range of people interested in the anthropology of the state, legal anthropology or post-Socialist societies. In some sense this is a “thick description” combined with understandable language we so often miss in the academic writing.

Aimar Ventsel