

Nomadism



It was the Summer of 2022, and what had originally started as a plan to visit a longtime friend in Astana, Kazakhstan, had devolved into an incredibly convoluted Central Asian road trip that would have me starting in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, following a rather complicated path I had set for myself that would have me ending in Astana at some point. 2022 for Kyrgyzstan, as it turned out, would see the country experience a bit of a tourism boom with the government promoting the country as “The land of the Nomads”. Needless to say, the slogan worked for me, and the morning after my arrival in Bishkek, I was zooming out of the capital in a shared taxi on my way to Kyzart, where I would begin my trek into the mountains.

Flash forward a couple of days later after hours of horseback riding and an incredibly sore behind, I found myself waking up at 5 am, slowly trudging to the top of a hill on the edge of Lake Song Kul hoping to catch a glimpse of a sunrise which may or may not materialize thanks to the cloud cover.

No such luck for me and I made the trek back to the yurt camp, where some of the Kyrgyz who were residing at the camp had already risen to start the essential duties involved in tending to their herd of cows.

“You see anything?”, asked Emil, the main herder and

father to the family hosting me at their yurt camp for the night. “Nope”. He laughed and with a smile reminded me of the conversation we had the night prior where he tried to talk me out of my foolish endeavor to wake up early to see a lakeside sunset. “Too many clouds, I told you so”.

Emil and his family, like many others across Kyrgyzstan, were semi-

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nomadic herders, following a long-established pattern of taking their herds into the mountains during the warmer summer months where the pastures were ripe for grazing and where the cattle, sheep, and horses could roam. They’d set up camp during the summer months and tend to the herd during this time. When the grazing season

was over, the flock was brought down from the mountains and Emil and his family would pack up their yurts and return down to their town where they resided the rest of the year. This cycle is repeated all across Kyrgyzstan, where other herders embarked on their seasonal migration tending to their herds during the summer.

This nomadic way of life has long formed the cornerstone of

Kyrgyz culture and is intricately woven into the fabric of their history and identity. Originating from the upper Yenisei River valley in central Siberia, the Kyrgyz were part of the Tiele tribes before coming under the rule of vari-

ous empires like the Göktürks, Uyghurs, and Mongols. Despite facing periods of domination, the Kyrgyz maintained their nomadic way of life. This nomadic heritage is intricately intertwined with the Epic of Manas, an oral epic celebrated as Kyrgyzstan’s national poem and origin story. The epic tells the story of the legendary hero,

Manas, and his endeavors in uniting the various nomadic warring tribes of his land, in doing so creating the Kyrgyz nation and defending it from invasion. In many ways, the Epic of Manas can be described as the soul of the nation, embodying many important cultural and personal traits, including perhaps most importantly, the independence and resilience of the people, particularly in the face of adversity. This can only further be demonstrated in the oral tradition this epic holds, being passed down from generation to generation.

As the Russian Empire expanded its territorial ambitions, it encountered the Kyrgyz people under what was then the Khanate of Kokand. The ensuing conflict led to the incorporation of Kyrgyz lands into the Russian Empire. Under Russian rule and with the advent of the Soviet Union further challenges and transformations were brought to the Kyrgyz and their culture. Nomadic practices were increasingly marginalized, as the Soviet government sought to centralize control over agricultural production and infrastructure as part of their broader agenda of social engineering viewing nomadic practices as backward and incompatible with 'progress'. Families were resettled into collective farms or kolkhozes, where they were expected to adopt a more sedentary way of life and engage in collective agricultural activities.

Pastoral nomadism, once the cornerstone of Kyrgyz life, faced systematic suppression as state-run collective farms replaced traditional grazing lands. Nevertheless, the nomadic spirit stubbornly persisted and in the 1980s the Kyrgyz democratic movement began to gather steam as the era of perestroika began to take hold. By 1990, the Kyrgyz had succeeded where few before had, becoming the first and only of the Central Asian Republics to vote their communist party out of power. Finally, in 1991 the modern Kyrgyz Republic reemerged and Kyrgyzstan was independent once more. Their flag rather fittingly featured 40 rays of sunshine, representing the 40 tribes united under Manas, and the Tunduk, the symbolic circular top of a traditional Kyrgyz yurt, an homage to the original nomadic way and a continued symbol of cultural perseverance.

Back to the present, I found myself talking to Emil while getting ready to leave the yurt camp and head down from the mountains once more back to Kyzart where I would get on a bus and head back to Bishkek. "Do you enjoy this?" I asked him. He shrugged and said, "Sure, it can be hard but it's very peaceful here, and it's what I've always done". Looking back I wish my Russian/Kyrgyz had been more conversational than it was at the time as I wished I could have

continued our conversation. Alas, not this time. I thanked him and his family for hosting me and headed back down from the mountains.

In a conversation I had with an Uzbek friend, we found ourselves once more on the topic of nomadism with the conversation shifting to Kyrgyzstan and the latest developments in the country. By this time in the fall of 2022, there had been a number of sporadic protests in the country, against a number of controversial government measures but broadly against what was seen as creeping authoritarianism. Reflecting on the situation, my friend offered her own insight. "I envy the Kyrgyz, they never really stand for these sorts of things and have always mobilized. I think it's the nomadic spirit and this broader idea of what it means to be proud and independent".

Will nomadism in Kyrgyzstan continue as a way of life in the future? Pragmatically for many, nomadism stems from necessity, it both being a source of economic sustenance as much as it is a way of life. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, nomadism survived 69 years of Soviet rule, another 41 under the Russian Empire, and has existed for millennia more before that. Something tells me this enduring spirit will persist nonetheless.

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