

## Fashioning the nation: gender and politics of dress in contemporary Kyrgyzstan

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This article investigates gendered nationalist ideologies and their attendant myths and narratives in present-day Kyrgyzstan through an investigation of clothing items and practices. Clothes “speak volumes,” revealing tensions between gendered narratives of nationhood and various interpretations of what “proper” Kyrgyz femininities and masculinities should be. Clothing thus becomes both a sign and a site of the politics of identity, inscribing power relations and individual strategies of Kyrgyz men and women onto their bodies. Individual clothing choices and strategies take place within the general context of discursive struggles over what authentic and appropriate representations of Kyrgyzness should be. Thus, such clothing items as *ak kalpak* (conical felt hats) and the practice of Muslim women covering their head (*hijab*) acquire social and political meanings that stand for wider processes of identity contestations in the country.

**Keywords:** dress; Kyrgyzstan; gender; nationalism; discourse

### Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is often analyzed in terms of the transitions it has been undergoing since it gained independence in 1991. Two ubiquitous trends have been noted by observers as characterizing Central Asian state’s politics since the 1990s – the “nationalizing policies” undertaken by the elites (Brubaker 1996; Bohr 1998) and the re-traditionalization of society (Tabyshalieva 2000; Werner 2009). Both of these trends are enacted, lived, and understood in the realm of everyday practices, representations, and discourses, whereby ethnonational and gender identities and regimes are routinely (re)produced through banal signifiers that make both gender and nationalism appear natural, common sense, and taken for granted. This paper takes a look at how these identities are lived and made meaningful by examining clothing practices in relation to gender and nationalism.

Clothing items and practices are saturated with meanings, often politically charged. As the social fabric of the post-Soviet Central Asian state transformed, so did the appearances of the citizens inhabiting it. A socialist economy of shortages and the neglect of consumer needs in the Soviet Union lead to the emergence of shadow markets for consumer goods and made the act of acquiring and wearing imported foreign clothes a deeply political practice.<sup>1</sup> Katherine Verdery argues that buying a pair of blue jeans on the black market for an exorbitant price was an act of defiance, “a way of constituting your selfhood against a deeply unpopular regime” (Verdery 1996, 34). As clothes imported from foreign countries

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(mostly China, India, and Turkey) became available and affordable for most of the population in the 1980–1990s, new fashions were adopted through exposure to global media, international travel, and through citizens reflecting on their changed social, religious, and economic status. From the variety of available goods and styles, the people of Kyrgyzstan have adopted a diverse range of fashions. One observes people dressed in “European,” “fusion,” and “counter-culture” styles on the streets of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, as well as – over the past two decades – increasing numbers of men and women adopting a distinctly Muslim style of dress. Moreover, many Kyrgyz people show pride in their ethnicity by wearing items of clothing – such as the *ak kalpak* (conical felt hats) among men, and the *kemsel* or *kamzur* (embroidered velvet long vests) and *jooluk* (kerchief) tied up at the nape of the neck among women – in everyday life and by wearing full “national costume” outfits at festivals and life-cycle celebrations.<sup>2</sup> Younger men express patriotism by dressing in T-shirts, baseball caps, and other accessories bearing national symbols, thus reconciling a desire for a modern look with the appropriate Kyrgyz masculinity. This article argues that while dress and clothing are central to the performance of both gender and national identities in contemporary Kyrgyz society, these identities are performed in a diversity of ways, which are at times highly politicized and contested.

### **Gender, nationalism, and the politics of dress in Soviet Central Asia**

Dress was a cornerstone of Soviet policy of “women’s liberation” in Central Asia in which an uncompromising unveiling campaign symbolized the new political order and status of women. The Soviet project was complex and at times contradictory, combining within itself both radically emancipatory and oppressive elements. Deniz Kandiyoti in her analysis of Soviet gender politics points out this contradictory nature of the emancipatory policies in Soviet Central Asia, referring to it as a “Soviet paradox” (Kandiyoti 2007). The Soviet model of paternalistic liberation of women in Central Asia produced, on the one hand, high literacy rates and public discourse valorizing women’s presence in the work force and the public sphere, while on the other hand the economic and demographic policies in the region had the unintended consequences of encouraging high fertility rates and the preservation of large multigenerational family structures, and as a result failed to transform gendered divisions of labor within the families, as well as in the labor market (Kandiyoti 2007, 607).

Gender policies of the Soviet period varied over time and in relation to the local contexts. The early period of Sovietization of Central Asia was characterized by the radical emancipatory logic of freeing the local women, seen as the most oppressed segment of the population – expressing both the anticolonial and modernizing agenda of the young Soviet states. The Soviet brand of women’s liberation sought to free women from the “slavery of the kitchen” with a view to allowing them to join the workforce. To this end, the young socialist state sought to create nurseries, kindergartens, kitchen-factories, and other services aimed at the socialization and communization of domestic reproductive labor, albeit with limited success due to the shortage of resources (Mamedov and Shatalova 2014). In the 1920s, progressive laws were adopted with regard to marriage and divorce, equalizing the civil, economic, and political rights of men and women, and decriminalizing homosexuality. These revolutionary developments were rolled back with the dawn of the Stalinist patriarchy, heralded by the removal of abortion from the list of free medical procedures in 1931 and its subsequent ban, along with other pro-natal demographic policies. However, the specific local conditions in the new republics of the Soviet “Orient” called for a differentiated approach. Thus the so-called *hujum* (“assault”) – a campaign against

the patriarchal institutions of *pardah* (seclusion of women), child marriage, bride price, bride abduction, and veiling – was launched. It signified the struggle with all that was perceived as “backward” and oppressive in the region.

Concurrently with the *hujum* and the anti-religious campaign, the new Soviet state undertook a major reshaping of the region in a process that is commonly referred to as the “national territorial delimitation” whereby the political, administrative, and economic boundaries in the region were reorganized following a mainly ethnonationalist logic seeking to grant the formerly oppressed peoples of the Russian empire self-determination and ease their integration into the Soviet state as equals in status to other Union republics (Martin 2001). With the creation of the new states in the period between 1924 and 1938 the entire content of the national culture, including language, history, folklore, dance, and “national dress” was creatively curated by specialists-intellectuals, “specifically trained and employed to produce national cultures” (Slezkine 1994, 438). Ethnographers collected folklore and material culture artifacts, linguists standardized and alphabetized the local vernacular languages, emphasizing the differences between the dialects and ridding them of foreign elements. The content of these reified ethnic traditions was carefully separated from the global Muslim heritage (since Islam was considered backward and fanatical) and what were deemed more “authentic” national cultural repertoires were compiled.

There is still an ongoing debate over whether the Soviet Union was a “breaker of nations” or rather a “nation-making state” (Slezkine 1994; Martin 2001; Hirsch 2000). Soviet “nationalities policies” were characterized by the tension between the “proletarian internationalism” ideology and the emphasis on ethnic titularity. The Soviet paradigm envisioned the eventual elimination of the salience of ethnicity in a Communist society. Nationalism was seen as a progressive stage of development associated with a higher formational level and therefore was promoted as an intermediate step toward socialism, despite it being a bourgeois ideology stemming from false consciousness. Thus, the USSR’s national republics were to be “national in form, but socialist in content.” However, after the Central Asian republics (somewhat reluctantly) acquired independence following the dissolution of the USSR, the “national form” with its repertoire of symbols and practices inherited from the Soviet past became *the* content of the sovereign statehood of the new states.

This does not mean that Central Asian nations and nationalisms are somehow more “artificial” than their more established and normativized European peers, but that very much like all other nations, Central Asian cultural identities are a result of myth-making, in which history is discursively transformed into nature; in other words, what is socially constructed and contingent appears as natural and eternal. The Soviet ethnographic tradition with its language of “ethnos,” “ethnonym,” and “ethnogenesis” has been re-appropriated in the post-Soviet period by politicians, journalists, and academics in order to legitimize the very existence of the new states in Central Asia by providing a “post-factum justification for the inevitability of ‘the empire’s disintegration’ and ‘acquisition of independence’” (Abashin 2007, 298).

In the post-independence period, with the transformation of Central Asian societies toward the “ideal” of the neo-liberal economy, the welfare state retreated and nationalist ideas and patriarchal values underwent a reconfiguration of their own. These processes cannot be simply explained as a return to the “traditional” pre-Soviet values. The gendered effects of the Soviet nationalities and economic policies along with the dynamics of the post-Soviet incorporation of the new state into the global markets, the growing class divide, and gendered divisions of labor – bolstered by the ideas of “proper” Kyrgyz masculinity and femininity – are reflected in the way people dress in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. This contribution examines the intersection of nationalism, gender, and clothing by

investigating the discourses and practices produced around clothing in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. In doing so, I turn to discourses and practices produced by the media, fashion designers and bloggers, business people, and residents of Bishkek, whom I interviewed when visiting and living in Bishkek during the period between spring 2012 and winter 2013.

### Women's bodies, clothes, and contemporary Kyrgyz nationalism

The relationship between nationalism and gender has not escaped the attention of scholars, particularly the feminist writers who criticized theorists of nationalism for failing to recognize the gendered nature of the phenomenon (Mosse 1985; Enloe 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997). These narratives tend to ignore or sideline women by de-valoring or silencing their role in the struggles for independence or militant conflicts, only allowing them to play the role of helpless “women and children” (Enloe 1989) or explaining away the women who engage in political violence as “mothers, monsters, and whores” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 29–50). Nira Yuval-Davis’s analysis, which connects nation and gender, clarified the role that women play as markers of (ethno)national difference and embodiments of the nation’s present and future in terms of both biological and cultural reproduction. She classifies modern nation-states into three main categories – *Volknation*, *Kulturnation*, and *Staatnation* – according to their “myth of origin,” namely shared blood, common culture, and citizenship based on shared values, respectively (Yuval-Davis 1997, 12). These categories are also inherently gendered. The first type of state – *Volknation* – sees womenfolk as responsible for the biological reproduction of the nation, where preserving the purity of a nation is imagined as primordial and essential. Within this gendered regime of power, the control over the sexuality and reproductive functions of women acquires special significance. Within the *Kulturnation* model women are represented as bearers of ethnonational culture which implies their unique and irreplaceable role in bringing up the next generation in the spirit of national culture. Once again women serve as embodiments of national borders and personifications of national difference, often standing in for the whole nation as a metonymical sign or an allegory (Mother Russia, Britannia, Germania, Marianne). The *Staatnation* becomes apparent when dealing with the matters of citizenship in this globalized world of mass migration (Yuval-Davis 1997, 21–25).

The Kyrgyzstani conception of nation combines ethnic, cultural, and state-centric visions, and all three models figure prominently in the public discourse and policies of the state in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. These gendered forms of nationalist politics often manifest themselves in heated debates about women’s proper attire and comportment. When such discussions take place women are represented as in Cynthia Enloe’s terms: (1) valuable possessions of the nation; (2) “nationalist wombs” tasked with reproduction and multiplication of the national “gene pool” (or, in a commonly used Russian term in post-Soviet space “*genofond natsii*,” which translates roughly as the “genome fund of the nation”); (3) symbols of national dignity and honor; and (4) child-like vulnerable creatures susceptible to defilement, exploitation, manipulation, and assimilation into another culture (Enloe 1990, 54).

All these aspects of gendered nationalism were at play in the public discourse following a series of incidents, in which female Kyrgyz migrants in Russia were subjected to horrific abuse and violence by groups of young male Kyrgyz migrant workers calling themselves “patriots,” who were “disciplining and punishing” Kyrgyz women for associating with non-Kyrgyz men.<sup>3</sup> Phone camera footage of the incidents was circulated via mobile phones within the networks of migrant workers of Kyrgyz descent in Moscow. At least

five videos appeared online beginning in March 2012 with recordings of Kyrgyz men putting young female compatriots “on trial” for what they perceive as inappropriate and unpatriotic behavior. Women in the videos appear extremely frightened and are stripped naked, and forced to say their name, place of origin, and address. The victims are shown being tortured, beaten up, threatened with electrocution and a knife, and subjected to extreme humiliation. In some cases the victims of these crimes reported rape (Klevtsova 2012). In one instance a young woman is beaten to death. The stripping of the women of their clothes and making them reveal their identity is used as a shaming tactic, denying the victims humanity, dignity, and the status of a fellow compatriot, of a respectable Kyrgyz woman and of a *Muslimah* (a Muslim woman) (Ibraeva, Moldosheva, and Ablezova 2015). Ibraeva, Moldosheva, and Ablezova write that the young men, who identify themselves as “patriots,” justify their violence “by telling the victims that they are fighting for the honor of the nation and that is why they are supported by the whole Kyrgyz people” (2015, 3–26). Although the videos sparked a controversy in Russia and in Kyrgyzstan, many did sympathize with the “patriots’” motives (the need to punish inappropriate or “loose” behavior of women, “protect their honor”) even if they objected to their chosen methods of punishment. Thus, acts of vigilante lynching gained a meaning as “patriotic, truly masculine and ethnic” (Ibraeva, Moldosheva, and Ablezova 2015, 5).

The perpetrators’ confidence in the righteousness of their actions was confirmed by their impunity – a lack of proper investigation and persecution on the part of both Russian and Kyrgyz authorities. In fact, the blame was shifted entirely onto the victims, as one reaction to the incidents eloquently demonstrates. In March 2013, Yrgal Kydyralieva, a female member of parliament representing the Social-Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, proposed a draft law prohibiting unmarried women below the age of 22 to leave Kyrgyzstan. As Yrgal explained to the press, “such a proposal was voiced in order to save the future of Kyrgyzstan and due to the existing migration problems” (Regnum 2012). She said,

My goal is to limit the risks for Kyrgyz girls, so that they are not subjected to humiliation and abuse, so that their rights are respected. We are trying to shield them from psychological and physical harm, to defend their honor and dignity according to Kyrgyz traditions (Regnum 2012).

This implies that the honor of Kyrgyz women of reproductive age needs to be “protected” by paternalistic measures that would restrict them from traveling abroad, unless they are married. In one of her interviews Kydyralieva asserted that since women “give birth to the nation,” they are also the “bearers of the nation’s honor” (Sultanbekova 2013). This view limits the subjectivities of women by assuming that they “belong” to the nation and to Kyrgyz men as reproductive machines.

Kydyralieva’s proposal was met with a wave of protests by legal and civil rights organizations, which opposed the initiative as anti-constitutional. As a result, it was not passed. Yet it is indicative of the rise of paternalistic policies and attitudes in the country. Multiple policy proposals designed to control female sexuality and protect the “purity” of Kyrgyz women have been promoted within Kyrgyzstan and in the diaspora. This control over women’s bodies often takes shape through the imposition of certain formal and informal dress codes. In one instance a nationalist and religious politician Tursunbai Bakir uulu (Ar-Namys [Dignity] party) complained that female employees of the Jokorgu Kenesh (Kyrgyz parliament) in miniskirts were distracting him from important legislative work, and advocated imposing a strict dress code for female workers of the Kyrgyz parliament. A local feminist initiative, Bishkek Feminist Collective SQ, responded with a photo-flash-mob called “What is Bakir uulu doing under my skirt???” on social media (Facebook and



Twitter), mocking the parliamentarian's sexist comments (Bishkek Feminist Collective SQ 2012). This case is illustrative of heated debates that are taking place within the society at the intersection of gender, nationalism, and what is considered proper dress and behavior for women. Women's variously clothed bodies become the field upon which meanings are ascribed and political struggles are played out.

### **Cut from the same cloth: nationalism and dress**

It is widely recognized that clothes “speak volumes” and reveal a great deal about the wearer's identities, be they related to gender, class, ethnicity, or political affiliations. Fred Davis writes that because “clothing comprises what is most closely attached to the corporeal self ... it quite naturally acquires a special capacity to ‘say things about the self’ therefore serving as a “visual metaphor for identity” (1992, 25). Among scholars of fashion there are still disagreements regarding the degree to which fashion can be considered a language. Some took the analogy very far indeed (Lurie 1981), even attempting a systematic application of Saussure's structural linguistics to fashion (Barthes 2005), while others agree that the fashion rhetoric is at best “impoverished” (Svendson 2006), characterized by inherent ambiguity (Wilson 2011), context dependency, high social variability in the signifier–signified relationship, at best approximating a “quasi-code” with very “low semanticity” (Davis 1992, 8). In this paper, rather than attempting an application of Saussurian semiotics to the “language of clothes,” I refer to Barthes's concept of “myth” as explored in his *Mythologies* ([1957]1991) to reveal the mechanisms by means of which the representations of “Kyrgyznness” – via “Kyrgyz femininity” and “Kyrgyz masculinity” – are produced discursively in clothing practices and associated speech. Myth is defined as “depoliticized speech” (Barthes 1991, 142), which asserts that what is contingent and political is eternal and inevitable and is “experienced as the evident laws of natural order” (139). According to Barthes, myth may be strong or weak (143) and things as well as images and speech can become the subject of such discourse analysis (107). By looking at particular instances of mutually reinforcing nationalist and gender myths through clothing items and practices, one glimpses the uneasy negotiations over the right and authority to speak on the behalf of the “people.”

This part of the article focuses on two manifestations of ethnic performances in present-day Kyrgyzstan: popular stylized “ethnic” wear and nationalistically branded merchandise (e.g. T-shirts and baseball hats with nationalist slogans, depictions of the national flag, and other ethnic symbols). Both of these practices of performing ethnicity are illustrative of the attempts to make “Kyrgyznness” accessible via a proxy of material objects that could quite literally be “put on” in daily reproduction of ethnic and gender identities.

Such performances presume that there is such a thing as a common Kyrgyz identity and that there exists a common understanding of what “national dress” is – an assumption that is tested by daily negotiations of these notions. Thus, for instance, on 19 March 2012, a directive was issued to all local government offices in the city of Jalal-Abad obliging all employees to wear “national dress” to work on Fridays. When some employees did not comply with the “dress-up Kyrgyz Fridays” initiative, they were harshly reprimanded by their superiors. The directive was signed and approved by the mayor of Jalal-Abad city, Bakyt Adylov. However, the initiative came from an employee of the mayor's office, Upol Asanalieva, who commented on the new regulation:

In this way, they [the government agencies' employees] try to show the uniqueness and the meaning of national [ethnic] dress, which is our heritage from our ancestors. We are trying

to popularize ethnic dress among the population. This initiative is supported by the public, the whole republic, the authorities ... They all thank us ... (Donis 2012)

It is never explained, however, what exactly is meant by the “national dress” in this directive, because it is presumed to be self-evident. Moreover, it was assumed that every civil servant had such clothing readily available in their wardrobe. The failure of the state employees to comply, thus may be due to the fact that state employees did not possess the right clothing or by reluctance to wear it to work because of a widely held understanding that such mode of dress is inappropriate and unprofessional as business attire.

The full “ethnic” national costume is usually worn for special occasions akin to “carnivalesque” performances. However, there is one item in all Kyrgyz male wardrobes which is highly visible in everyday clothing and is commonly combined with European-style business suits, blue jeans, and tracksuits alike. The *ak kalpak* (white conical hat), popularized during the Soviet Union, has become a symbol of Kyrgyz masculinity in recent years, celebrated on a special day as part of an unofficial festival. The authors of the idea intended to institutionalize the holiday which celebrates what they consider a symbol of authentic Kyrgyzness (Time.kg 2012). In 2011, a well-known film director, Ryspek Jabirov, announced that an unofficial festival celebrating the Kyrgyz *ak kalpak* will be held on 5 March each year. Jabirov, who came up with the idea of the holiday said:

On this day, in all regions of the republic citizens will wear our national headwear – *ak kalpak*. In the capital there will be festivities held in front of the State History Museum; we’ll organize a concert and hold a fair of Kyrgyz *kalpaks*. We wish for our youth to honor [not forget] their national traditions.

At a press conference the film director and a satirist Boronchu Kudaibergenov said that they came up with the idea of the holiday after they noticed that in the past years *kalpak* is only worn at either weddings or funerals. “As patriots we do not impose, but suggest that we celebrate *ak kalpak*,” said Jabirov. The organizer also pointed out that some “mankurts”<sup>4</sup> wear *kalpaks* to bathhouses which shows profound lack of respect. *Kalpak* being a semi-sacred object due to its association with timeless cultural heritage is lauded for its alleged magical qualities:

Scientists and medics today assure us that *kalpak*-wearers have better metabolism, moreover, wearing *kalpak* slows down the decomposition processes, because its shape resembles that of a pyramid. Among the people it is believed that *kalpak* protects against the evil eye and black magic. Should you fall ill, you only need to sniff on your *kalpak* – and the ailment is gone! To this day they tell a true story that happened to the first president of the Kyrgyz Republic Askar Akaev, which occurred while he was flying to Osh city. Midflight the engines stopped working, but after a while started again. In an interview afterwards Akayev joked: “We were all wearing *ak kalpaks*!” (Bairamukova 2012)

*Kalpaks* are thus metonymic with Kyrgyz masculinity.<sup>5</sup> In the popular imagination *ak kalpak* is associated with an image of a brave *jigit* (a young horseman). One article praising the simple and elegant lines of the *kalpak* refers to it as a testament to a:

historically evolved artistic taste with roots that go back to the mists of time only known to archeologists,” which “created by the genius of people ... never changed its shape throughout centuries, signifying the heights of the mountains and the purity of the nation’s soul. (Bairamukova 2012)

In fact, the *ak kalpak* that we see on the heads of men in Kyrgyzstan is a stylized and rather recent design of only one of the many hats that were worn during the colonial period, from which the earliest data on Kyrgyz people’s dress date.<sup>6</sup> Even though the popularity of

the *kalpak* may appear as a return to tradition, in fact, in its present form, *ak kalpak* is a creation of Soviet designers.

During the Soviet period the ethnic crafts of Kyrgyz people were regulated by special agencies. In 1968, the Council of Ministers of the USSR passed a resolution “On the measures for further development of folk artisan crafts,” which established a set of organizations tasked with resurrection of traditional arts and crafts in the Union Republics. In March 1973, a new Central Artistic Experimental Laboratory, headed by an art historian, Yevgenii Sorokin, was created under Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Local Industry. The laboratory undertook expeditions to various areas of Kyrgyzstan in cooperation with the Union of the People’s Artisan Crafts, “Kyyal” (created in 1969), which collected over 200 samples from 50 folk craftspeople. Based on these samples collected during the 1970s the artists and masters of Kyyal created original artifacts using the local techniques of working with leather, weaving, and jewelry (Mal’chik 2005, 40–42).

Kyyal played the defining role in the design of the modern versions of the Kyrgyz *kalpak*. In the 1970s the Union designed six types of *kalpak*. The most common model was the one that was embroidered by a machine and carried only one type of ornament (*ilme*). Some models were hand finished and some were even embroidered by hand. Thanks to the artists of Kyyal, the *kalpak* assumed new modern forms that were more acceptable to the Soviet consumer. The *ak kalpak*, which became the specialty of Kyyal, was awarded the silver medal of the All-Union Exhibition of the People’s Achievements in 1977 (Mal’chik 2005, 42). The 1970s and 1980s, therefore, saw the beginning of the mass production of Kyrgyz *kalpaks* made of white felt by the Kyyal Union.

Today one finds *kalpaks* in the markets of Kyrgyzstan that follow the streamlined Soviet patterns, but are produced in China and made of artificial felt, lined with polyester, and embroidered by machines. Far from being the authentic headwear of the pre-colonial past, the *ak kalpak* was popularized and redesigned in a new form by specialized crafts unions based on research by Soviet ethnographers and the re-interpretation of traditional design by artists and then produced with the help of modern technologies for modern consumers. The re-imagining of the post-independence *kalpak* as a return to some unchanged past tradition is therefore based on an ahistorical conception of the Kyrgyz ethnic costume. Dress is therefore a means by which identity is performed mundanely or theatrically and affirmed daily or on special occasions. A return to (what is considered to be authentic) national dress is a form of masquerade and theatrical performance of identity reserved for festivals and life-cycle celebrations (Maynard 2004, 80), while the nationalistically branded merchandise is the manifestation of everyday nationalism (Kuryel 2011).

Many Kyrgyz women wear ensembles paying tribute to the traditional ethnic costume by combining an embroidered velvet vest worn over their dress with a kerchief tied at the nape of the neck. Middle-class and “creative-class” women may engage in more elaborate “costume play” on special occasions, such as weddings, stage performances, or while representing their country abroad. According to Dilbar Ashimbai, one of the most successful Kyrgyz couturiers, ethnic fashion was popularized in Kyrgyzstan by Roza Otunbaeva, the former interim government president, who wore ethnic dress when she served as an ambassador to the United Kingdom. After Otunbaeva became the interim leader following the 2010 April Revolution that ousted Kurmanbek Bakiev, female MPs flocked to Dilbar to imitate Madam President’s style. Another local fashion designer, Tatiana Vorotnikova, pointed out that ethnic fashion is in demand among the new cultural and political elites of Kyrgyzstan representing the nation abroad and on stage, as well as at celebrations like weddings or anniversaries:



There is a trend for “ethnic” fashion among the elites, VIPs, those people who are on stage [*estrada*], they are into it. Creative people also like to wear ethnic wear ... there is a synthesis of European, Russian and Eastern styles. ... those who want to stand out and represent our country abroad, actors, singers who go abroad after the Iron Curtain opened. Now we have many designers creating in ethnic style, even just judging from the fashion week. There was a time when this was not in demand. ... Now there is a tendency towards individuality and great respect for native ethnic dress. Nowadays, all festivals, family celebrations and anniversaries, are celebrated with women wearing national dress. (Tatiana Vorotnikova, personal interview, April 2012, Bishkek)

Ethnic-style costume and accessories are also becoming an international brand and “tourist chic” for consumption by foreigners (businesses such as Tumar, Kancha, and Obbo! are primarily targeting an international consumer).

For an average local consumer, however, simple merchandise with national symbols (such as the flag, map, or other prints) is the most affordable method of wearing one’s ethnicity on their sleeve. If all clothing is a means of communication, then T-shirts and baseball caps are a very simple means of getting one’s message across. T-shirts with nationalist slogans, the Kyrgyz national flag, and other symbols are worn mostly by men and are even designed in the cuts, colors, and sizes meant to designate masculinity. Some are explicitly gendered reading “Derzkiy Kyrgyz” (Cocky Kyrgyz), “Kyrgyz jigit” (Kyrgyz lad), or “Kyrgyz bala” (Kyrgyz boy). Stefan Kirmse in his study of male youth culture in southern Kyrgyzstan notes that:

By adopting certain cultural practices, from “national” sports such as *kurosh* to forced bride kidnapping, young Kyrgyz could affirm their identities as both “Kyrgyz” and “men.” In fact, post-Soviet society as a whole is marked by a “celebration of masculinity” ... In Kyrgyzstan, various conservative gender ideologies – capitalism, local nationalism, Islamism and even “global” youth cultures like hip-hop – call on boys to be tough. A local *jigit* (boy, lad) is supposed to display “laddish” behavior. Specific forms of gendered violence against women are rampant: domestic violence is widely tolerated ... ; and bride kidnapping has become a “primary act defining cultural identity and manhood ...” (Kirmse 2010, 394)

Using the metaphor of a “marketplace of styles and identities,” Kirmse describes the bricolage of local, national, and transnational images, fantasies, consumption practices, and objects helping shape identities of young Kyrgyz men, noting, however, the choices that are made in these marketplaces are constrained by structural factors and complex negotiations in which the youth engage, weighing and balancing their social, economic, ethnic, religious, and gender roles and positions (Kirmse 2010, 390). Such complex negotiations are also well illustrated by contestations of the true significance of veiling and Muslim dress practices, discussed below.

### **Veiling controversy and modern Kyrgyz femininity**

A Muslim woman’s veil is perhaps the single most politicized item of clothing in the modern age (Billaud 2009). In both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries the body of a woman wearing a head-covering or a full-body veil is the site of political struggles. In Central Asia, like in other Muslim-majority regions of the world, over the last century women were encouraged or forced to veil, unveil, and re-veil depending on the changes taking place in their societies and the attitudes toward gender relations, religion, health, and economics, among many other things. In fact, a relatively new practice of wearing *chachvon* and *paranji* (horsehair-and-cotton veil) among urban Muslim women was so iconic that it came to stand for the nation, quite literally, serving as an identifying feature of an “Uzbek” woman for the Soviet authorities (Northrop 2004, 46–52).

Works by Massell (1974), Northrop (2004), Kamp (2006), and Edgar (2003, 2006) informed by archival research tell us the story of veiling and unveiling in Central Asia. According to Massell, the Soviet revolution that started off as the project of class emancipation took the form of women's liberation in Central Asia. In other words, in the absence of a genuine proletariat, he argues, women became its "surrogate" (1974). A campaign of *hujum* or "assault" on the traditional way of life (*byt*) was launched in 1927 on 8 March (International Women's Day), which sought to end the oppression of women of the East, in particular the practices of veiling and seclusion. *Hujum* was targeting the patriarchal practices that came to represent everything that was "primitive, dirty and oppressive" in Central Asia and was to be eliminated so that progress, modernity, and civilization would come to the region (Northrop 2004, 34).

Over the following years, women were encouraged to discard the veil in public spaces and burn the *paranji* and *chachvon* thus challenging the patriarchal oppression and signifying their conversion to the Soviet way of life. This assault on the veil and the traditional way of life it represented encountered strong resistance from both men and women, contributing to the increased insecurity for both those supporting and opposing the policies of *hujum* (Kennedy-Pipe 2004). Thus, for instance, it was reported that on 8 March 1929 in Osh Oblast of the Kyrgyz SSR 9000 women cast off their veils and burnt them, yet the next day many re-veiled again. There were more violent expressions of resistance to the reform that targeted women who took a particularly active role by joining Zhensovet (Women's Council), local and regional councils, or working as directors of women's clubs and libraries. Within the first two years of *hujum*, in Uzbekistan alone, more than 2500 women were killed because of their activism (Alimova 2008, 259).

According to Northrop, the fact that the relatively new practice of wearing a heavy veil (*paranji* and *chachvon*) became the focus of *hujum* inscribed it as a "national emblem" (2004, 14). *Paranji* was a new fashion that was limited to wealthy families in the southern cities of the region and which dates back to the period of colonial conquest by tsarist Russia in the 1870s (Northrop 2004, 42–44). It is believed that the new fashion of wearing the *paranji* and *chachvon* came as a reaction to the presence of colonizers and unveiled European women that came with the conquering troops, while before the Russian expansion, high-society ladies in Tashkent and other large cities of southern Central Asia demonstrated their good character and family status by wearing a variety of veils called *mursak* that covered most of the body but left the face uncovered (Northrop 2004, 44).

Despite the fact that heavy veiling was virtually non-existent among the nomadic peoples and in remote, rural areas, especially among the poor, social conventions of dress were practiced that required covering of the whole body and dictated various other norms of propriety to women. Therefore, despite the common narrative to the contrary (so-called "nomadic exceptionalism," the view that maintains that nomadic women were less oppressed than other Muslim women), the absence of female veiling and seclusion practices among the nomads cannot be equated with the equality of women in nomadic societies (Northrop 2004, 134). Nomadic women were also subjected to codes of honor and modesty that regulated their conduct. For instance, complex rules of avoidance and silence (based on notions of shame and respect for seniority) in the presence of a young bride's in-laws and drawing the head kerchief over one's mouth (*yashmak*) were practiced among the Turkmens. Indeed, as Adrienne Edgar writes, the Turkmen Zhenotdel (Women's Department) tried to use *yashmak* as the functional substitute for the veil of Uzbek and Tajik women in their propaganda work, albeit unsuccessfully (Edgar 2003, 137). Women in mountainous regions did not veil and were responsible for a lot of work in and outside the house, making a significant economic contribution, while being deprived

of basic property, political, and civil rights (Kennedy-Pipe 2004, 94). Activists therefore concentrated on various aspects of educating women, including them in the workforce, and altering family laws regulating marriage, divorce, childbirth, and child rearing (Shchurko 2014).

Despite initial bitter opposition and resistance to the gender reform, the post-war period saw a general shift toward acceptance of Soviet rules and norms and a gradual social change within Central Asian societies. There were certain setbacks to the original emancipatory agenda during the late 1930s and the post-war period brought about the “double burden” for Soviet women who, after completing a day-shift of paid work, had to do all the house chores – the “second shift” of unpaid reproductive labor. Nonetheless, by the 1980s, women were widely engaged in the economic, political, and cultural life of the Soviet Union. Universal literacy rates for women were achieved and healthcare and child-care provisions were vastly improved compared to the situation in the 1920s. There were of course regional discrepancies and structural inequalities across ethnic groups.

In late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods, a search for a more authentic national identity has meant a promotion of patriarchal norms in the public and political spheres and in religion. Exposure to information, goods, and ideas from other Muslim-majority countries has brought about a sense of shared identity and new fashions. Many women have since chosen to start wearing clothing that adheres to the Muslim dress conventions as they are defined in other Muslim countries or communities. A variety of styles have been adopted by religious men and women across the region. The influence of globalization and consumption of mass media products, such as Brazilian and Turkish soap operas, have been shown to impact attitudes to Islam and Muslim fashion among Kyrgyzstanis through a fictionalized depiction of Muslim lives elsewhere (McBrien 2007). Many women took fashion inspiration and validation from seeing beautifully dressed *hijabi* characters in their favorite shows; head kerchief designs, fabrics, various fashion goods, and shops were named after Jade and Latifa – two leading characters in the Brazilian soap opera called *Clone*. Exposure to such imageries and narratives of other Muslim modernities initiated negotiations over the meanings and uses of *hijab* in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

The new forms of patriarchy in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan are not a return to the pre-existing arrangements, but rather a logical development of affairs given the disintegration of a socialist paternalist system that provided women with access to resources such as welfare, education, and healthcare. Once the state was no longer willing or able to provide such support and validation for women’s presence in the public sphere, new arrangements for organizing the gendered division of labor had to be re-negotiated. The impact of socioeconomic transformations on marriage strategies, household finances, and child-rearing practices has led to ideological, political, and personal struggles.

During the 1990s, many women in Central Asia had to take up jobs in sectors that could be considered as compromising to their respectability – most notably, as shuttle and market traders. In order to appease their families’ and societal concerns regarding their respectability, many working women adopted strategies – such as traveling with female companions or male relatives – that would allow them to maintain their income while remaining “good wives” in the eyes of their neighbors (Werner in Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004, 105–126). It could follow logically that some women would adopt *hijab*-wearing as a way of obtaining or enhancing their respectability.<sup>7</sup> However, the new practice of female head-covering, that did not adhere to what was considered the traditional national way (a kerchief tied at the nape of the neck rather than tightly under the chin), has been challenged as inauthentic, immoderate, and foreign (McBrien 2009; Louw 2013).

As women wearing various styles of *hijab* and veils became more numerous and visible on the streets of Bishkek after independence, many citizens and authorities reacted with irritation, and often the discomfort with this new practice was expressed in ethnic terms. The *hijabi* fashion, it was argued, is alien to the region and to its nomadic past. It was argued that Kyrgyz women never veiled and enjoyed greater freedom than their settled sisters. Many expressed skepticism of what they considered a fashion trend to don Middle Eastern-style *hijab*, finding it ridiculous and akin to a costumed role play, “the same as adopting an Indian sari” (Alyautdinov 2011, 34). Therefore, the attempts to defend *hijab* as an authentically Kyrgyz mode of dress led to comparisons between veiling and the pre-Soviet turban-like headdress worn by mature Kyrgyz women – *elechek*. One such attempt is a collage circulated through social media depicting women wearing *elechek* from different historical periods with a caption that read: “Our grandmothers dressed like this. Are you still saying that *hijab* is the national dress of the Arabs???”

The appeal to the secular notion of ethnicity as an argument against *hijab*-wearing is curious, given that the majority of Kyrgyz people are assumed to be Muslim and would self-identify as such by virtue of their ethnicity. This ethnicized understanding of Muslimness has roots in the history of tsarist colonization of the region as well as in the Soviet period, when “Muslim” along with “national” were the markers differentiating the Central Asian people from the “Europeans.”<sup>8</sup> Soviet Central Asians famously described themselves as “atheist Muslims,” who, though they might believe in God, would see those who display what is perceived as extreme piety – such as *hijabi*-style veiling – as morally suspect fanatics and “Wahhabis” (McBrien and Pelkmans 2008, 87). The practice of wearing a *hijab*-style veil has also been called into question not only as indicative of excessive religiosity and being unpatriotic, but also as unhealthy due to the low quality of the synthetic fabrics that most of the Muslim clothing imported from China is made of – which in the hot Central Asian summer leads to serious skin conditions. This conflation of morality, health, and cleanliness are the staples of nationalist discourse. Campbell writes that “the ability to represent things as alien, subversive, dirty, or sick” is central to the practices of self-reproduction (Campbell 1998, 3). Thus ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and gender come together into an at times uneasy conversation on the practice of veiling or wearing *hijab*.

In Kyrgyzstan, there is also a significant local textile sector that produces clothes for both the domestic market and for export. Since 2012, the Russian Drama Theater has hosted a Muslim Fashion Week in Bishkek, initiated in order to fill the obvious niche in the local market for fashionable Muslim apparel. When I attended the show in the spring of 2012, I noticed that many “ethnic-style” collections were transplanted from the “mainstream” Fashion Week organized earlier in the year by simply adding headscarves and additional garments providing modesty to the outfits. Throughout the show a pre-recorded announcement played between the collections reminding the audience that Muslims constitute 80% of Kyrgyzstan’s population and that adoption of Islamic dress means a return to the ancient traditions of the Kyrgyz people. Organizer Aijan Akilbekova emphasized that fashion can be compatible with life in Kyrgyzstan and with modesty:

Actually, it’s simply an example for our sisters to show how you can dress up according to our customs, traditions and without forgetting about the geographical conditions of our country. For example, we have a severe winter, we have a slushy autumn, we have spring, and we have summer. In our country we can’t wear one dress all year long. (Reuters 2013)

Islamic dress is thus justified and rationalized as being in line with local tradition and modernity, relevant, and suitable to the lives of Kyrgyzstanis today.

Governments in the region have reacted to this trend by official or unofficial bans on wearing of Islamic dress in public spaces, such as schools, state agencies, and universities. In the Central Asian context, however, it is specifically tying the headscarf in an “Arabic” or “Turkish” fashion (kerchief tied under the chin) and wearing of the floor-length loose gowns that is considered an alien fashion and therefore an unpatriotic and excessive mode of dress. Although there is no formal ban on *hijabi* dress in Kyrgyzstan, many local and school administrations as well as individual employers demand that their students and employees adhere to the secular dress code, thus forcing *hijabi* women to choose between their career and faith (Tursunov 2010). This problem is especially acute in the south of the country, where parents and school administrations battle over the appropriateness of *hijabi* dress for schoolgirls. In one case, described by the press after a meeting involving local imams, human rights defenders, parents, and teachers, a consensus was reached which allowed girls to tie their kerchiefs at the nape of their heads (the way that is considered local, traditional, and acceptable) but not under their chins (Eraliev 2014). The issue of whether *hijab* should be allowed in schools and other public institutions is regularly raised and discussed in parliament (Tynaeva 2015).

In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, negotiations of power relations between men and women have led to increasing patriarchal control over female bodies, sexualities, and mobility in the name of family honor and national pride. The notions of middle-class morals of respectability and nationalism are linked in the work of George L. Mosse (1985), who, in his analysis of modern European societies’ attitudes toward sexuality, notes the simultaneous emergence and mutual reinforcement of nationalism and the normativity of bourgeois respectability. The alliance between nationalism and respectability helped create a sense of eternity and stability amid the cataclysmic birth pains of modernity, imbuing the contingent and the political with an aura of naturalness and timelessness. Nationalist ideology builds on the heteronormative ideal of masculine power as a template for all hierarchies organizing politics. Discourses of shame and tradition are deployed in order to justify at times highly questionable practices and compel everyone’s submission and even willing participation in what is re-imagined as a national tradition, while those challenging it are viewed as “traitors to their ethnicity” (Werner 2009, 314).

### **A contemporary Kyrgyz *Muslimah*: the story of Jyldyz<sup>9</sup>**

Despite negative views toward Muslim dress still prevalent in society, one of my interlocutors – Jyldyz – views her choice to wear *hijab* as positive and finds in her new dress style a source of fashion inspiration and creativity. Jyldyz is a young, highly educated, and well-traveled professional Kyrgyz woman, a winner of a very competitive academic exchange scholarship, who graduated from one of the best universities in the country and studied abroad for her master’s degree. While wearing the latest trends and bright colors she manages to adhere to the strict dress code imposed by her employer (in the private sector). She also runs an online business selling accessories for *hijabi* women. When we first met up for a conversation in one of Bishkek’s trendy cafes, she was wearing wide slacks, a striped button-down suit shirt, and a scarf on her head styled as a turban. While we were speaking she easily switched between Russian and English sipping her mint lemonade.

Jyldyz only started wearing Islamic dress a year before we met. Unlike some other women, who decided to “cover themselves up” after getting married, Jyldyz was single at that point. Despite having graduated from a Turkish high school (one of the private schools funded and run by the followers of a reformist branch of Islam commonly referred



to as Fethullaci or Nurcu), Jyldyz's "conversion" took place at a relatively mature age. It was during her year abroad pursuing a master's degree that she started taking an interest in learning about and practicing Islam, and, later, dressing in accordance with her new-found faith. As she told me, the encounter with alternative models of Muslim living while abroad and especially meeting young educated and modern Muslim women from all over the world made it clear to her that being Muslim was not the equivalent to backwardness and fanaticism. One could be modern and Muslim. Being abroad allowed Jyldyz to explore the issues of religious identity and practice freely and without inhibitions. So she started praying and fasting during Ramadan. Changing the way she dressed was only a logical next step, although she did have her doubts.

At first she was concerned with how her family and people close to her would react to her new lifestyle and change in dress. The stereotypical association of *hijab* with backwardness, oppression of women, and excessive devotion to religion ("fanaticism") in Kyrgyzstan went against Jyldyz's self-conception as a young, modern, empowered, socially active, and "loud" individual. "It was very important for me not to lose myself, my personality," she told me. She feared that she would appear to be a radical. Eventually she decided that it was her duty as a *Muslimah* to present her religion in a positive way by making her appearance pleasant and attractive to those around her while remaining true to the requirements of modesty. Having a great understanding of current fashion trends and a refined taste, Jyldyz looks online for inspiration and information on fashionable Islamic dress. Overall, her clothes and their styling match the current global fashions, but are selected and combined in a way that meets the four basic criteria – the clothes should not be either tight or see-through; they should not expose any skin beyond the face, hands, and feet; and should not be too strongly perfumed.

Jyldyz's clothing choices are very self-conscious. She seeks to avoid repelling, scaring away, or alienating people from herself and from her religion. On the contrary, her wish is that people react to her clothing with interest, thus attracting them to the Islamic way of living. She hopes that some girls that see her will be inspired by her modest yet stylish dress to abandon the too-revealing fashions, the main objective of which, according to her, is to attract male attention. For Jyldyz, dress is an important way of expressing her individuality, which is why she chose to avoid the "Turkish" style that the majority of devout women in Bishkek wear. Through her clothing choices Jyldyz demonstrates that one can reconcile being modern, young, Kyrgyz, and moderate with being Muslim. Of course, being privileged by virtue of her class status and access to information, Jyldyz did not face the same dilemmas that other *hijabi* women in Kyrgyzstan face on a daily basis. Julie McBrien writes that unlike in other Muslim countries,

the newly veiled women in Kyrgyzstan are largely absent in Bishkek's universities and public places. Instead they are found in southern cities and towns predominantly populated by Uzbeks. They rarely have more than high school degrees and tend to be lower-middle class or lower class, in contrast to the middle-class ranks of piety movements elsewhere. (2009, S134)

Jyldyz is a great-great-granddaughter of the women who were liberated, at times against their will, by the Soviet emancipation campaign and who carried the double burden of work outside and inside their homes, bringing up children while laboring hard in the fields, in factories, in schools, and in hospitals. She was lucky to obtain a superb education and opportunities not afforded to many of her peers in the region, and she certainly enjoys the privileges of someone brought up in the capital and in a middle-class environment. Yet she chose to cover her head and dress in an Islamic fashion (albeit in its very modern, globalized interpretation) that for many is emblematic of the oppressed position

of women. On the contrary, she asserts herself as an empowered individual. Jyldyz was featured in the campaign by the Bishkek Feminist Initiative SQ, next to a slogan saying “I know my rights and obligations” with the tagline “Find out what I think, do not “wrap me up”! #askmuslimahkg” (Bishkek Feminist Initiative SQ 2013). She thus positions herself as an active member of society, a citizen with rights and responsibilities, who is not seeking seclusion, but wants to engage in a civic dialog. Jyldyz and many other women of the urban middle class want to practice their Islamic lifestyle in “good taste,” not in opposition to public sensibilities, and not simply by making their dress seem more acceptable, but positively indicating their claim to a higher social and moral status through their modest Muslim dress. Still, *hijabi* dress remains highly contested and not yet widely accepted as proper attire for Kyrgyz women. As such, the “covered up” style is a weak myth and largely fails in seamlessly weaving together symbolisms of “true” national and gender selves of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstanis.

## Conclusion

This article attempted an analysis of gendered nationalist myths in present-day Kyrgyzstan through the investigation of clothing items and practices. In this regard, clothes “speak volumes,” revealing tensions between gendered narratives of nationhood and various interpretations of what “proper” Kyrgyz femininities and masculinities should be. Clothing thus becomes both a sign and a site of the politics of identity, inscribing power relations and individual strategies of Kyrgyz men and women onto their bodies. Individual clothing choices and strategies take place within the general context of discursive struggles over what “authentic” and appropriate representations of Kyrgyzness should be. Thus, such clothing items as *ak kalpak* and the practice of Muslim women covering their heads (*hijab*) acquire social and political meanings that stand for wider processes of identity contestations in the country.

Admittedly, some myths are stronger than others. As per the definition of myth advanced by Barthes in his *Mythologies*, the more depoliticized, natural, eternal it seems, the more successful the narrative. *Ak kalpak* has come to represent Kyrgyz manhood, whereas the *hijabi* style of dress is highly politicized and often perceived as being at odds with proper Kyrgyz femininity due to its associations with external (Middle Eastern, Islamist, Wahhabi) and internal (Uzbek) others.

Today, Kyrgyzstan is not just a marketplace of styles and identities (Kirmse 2010), nor is it a huge fitting room where various new lifestyles, ideas, and clothes are tried on. A more fitting metaphor is that of a textiles factory or a sweatshop, where the available material is cut out according to the new patterns and new elements are being incorporated into the designs to make the final product appealing and current. Of course, there are models that have become modern classics and as such do not irk the sensibilities of the consumers. It is the newer cuts that might not sell well at the local market. Thus the pre-existing signifiers are worked into current myth-making, weaving together narratives of Kyrgyzness. Gendered conceptions of the national identity are actively reproduced in personal and public discourses, performances, and daily practices.

## Notes

1. Residents of Bishkek told me that Chuy Avenue (formerly Lenin Prospect in Frunze), which runs through the city center, was known as “Broadway” among the fashionable *stiliagi* crowd (comparable to today’s hipsters) in the 1960–1970s. These groups styled themselves in colorful clothes (procured on the black market of smuggled imported goods or custom made by local tailors and

shoemakers), according to their perceptions of what people wear in the “West,” while their appearance was subject to much ridicule in official discourse and ostracism by society as they were considered unpatriotic and they were decried as “petit bourgeois” for their interest in material things.

2. There is a difference between city and village in how clothing is acquired, styled, and worn. Louise Bechtold’s research into the practice of gift exchange in the rural ritual economy of south Kyrgyzstan, for instance, shows that most clothing is acquired through gift exchange, while *jooluk* functions as at once the smallest item for exchange in these transactions, as a means of showing respect to those of higher social standing, as well as a means for a bride’s integration into her new family. The various colors of *jooluk* signify different stages in a woman’s life (young bride, maturity, mourning). The *ak jooluk* (white headscarf) is used during bride abduction as the symbol of the girl’s acceptance of her fate and new status of a wife. Elder women of the abductor’s family persistently force the *jooluk* onto the abducted girl’s head until she accepts it (Bechtold 2015).
3. It is estimated that between 600,000 and 1 million Kyrgyz citizens regularly migrate to Russia for seasonal work for periods lasting between nine months and three years. Despite common assumptions that a typical migrant is a “young married male with secondary education,” the migrant work force of Central Asians in Russia is rapidly feminizing (Laruelle 2007, 106). According to various estimates, men comprise between 60% and 90% of Tajik and Uzbek migrant workers in Russia, while almost half of Kyrgyz labor migrants are female. The numbers of Uzbek and Tajik women traveling to work in Russia were increasing steadily until the economic crisis hit the region in 2008 (Marat 2009, 10).
4. The word *mankurt* first appeared in Chingiz Aitmatov’s novel *Burannyi polustanok* (A day lasts more than 100 years). A *mankurt* was a person who was captured by a tribe of Zhuan-zhuans and through extremely cruel manipulations was turned into a perfect slave. Such a slave “did not know who he was, where he came from, did not know his own name, did not remember his childhood, his father and mother – in one word, *mankurt* did not know his own humanity” (Aitmatov 1988, 126). The theme of *mankurtism* is a recurrent and very powerful one in the official and popular nationalist discourses of all of the Central Asian states.
5. Historians of Kyrgyz costume date the *ak kalpak*’s appearance in the region to the thirteenth century. *Kalpaks* are made from four wedge-shaped parts that are wider at the brim of the hat. The brim can be lifted and lowered to protect the eyes against the elements. The top is decorated with a tassel. *Kalpaks* had different designs. Those of the aristocracy had a tall crown, and the brim was lined with black velvet. Poor Kyrgyz men lined their *kalpaks* with satin, while children’s *kalpaks* were decorated with red velvet or other red material. One type of *kalpak* – *ay kalpak* – did not have a slit brim (Mal’chik 2005).
6. Some scholars of dress have doubted that there ever existed a fully uncontaminated “authenticity” either in peasant or tribal dress (Taylor 2002, 201–205). Rather, I would argue that any dress with pretensions of “authenticity” is inevitably a simulation. According to Liudmila Stavkaia, a professor of history at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University, what is considered the traditional “ethnic” Kyrgyz dress today is actually based on a stylized theatrical costume created for early Kyrgyz opera and ballet performances in the 1930s (Interview with Dr Liudmila Georgievna Stavkaia, 4 April 2012, KRSU campus, Bishkek).
7. The link between norms of propriety prescribed for women and the system of gendered power distribution in society is well established. Traditional practices of secluding higher class women (*purdah*) and veiling signified the privilege of their families showing that they could afford to withdraw women from nondomestic work, ensuring the “honor” of the family by controlling female sexuality (Kandiyoti 1988, 280). This is a part of what Deniz Kandiyoti refers to as the “patriarchal bargain” – men are supposed to provide protection in exchange for women’s submissiveness and propriety. This explains why, in the context of modern societies where classical patriarchy is disintegrating under the pressures of a global capitalist economy, some women who have been pushed to work outside of their homes would be interested in upholding their part of the bargain with the patriarchy if they believe that veiling is a sign of being a “good woman” and a path to economic, social, and physical security and respectability (Kandiyoti 1988, 283).
8. Similarly, the term “ethnic Muslim” seems to be in wide circulation within certain popular religious discourses, to denote any ethnicity that is assumed to be Muslim by default (for instance, Alyautdinov 2011).
9. The name has been changed for confidentiality reasons.

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