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Incarnating Water in Central Asia: Hydro-Relations Along a Transboundary River

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork as well as collaborative events with artists and policy makers in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, I demonstrate how water concepts and forms of interaction are anchored in the particular water incarnations of springs, lakes, glaciers and big rivers. As main water arteries for the Aral Sea, the Naryn and Syr Darya Rivers are managed between shifting alliances of the farming interests, International Non-governmental Organisation (INGO) bodies and national agencies of four riparian states. These Central Asian rivers have been subject to big dam-building programmes since the mid-Soviet period, while international companies now mine on the glaciers of the Naryn headwaters. I analyse socionatural water relations on a spectrum of three 'incarnations': first, river water as an exploitable resource; second, enspirited springs and lakes; and third, glaciers as indexes of human wrongdoing. While the multiplicity of water relations has been documented in many parts of the world, the concept of water incarnations highlights their topographical anchoring. This Central Asian case further shows how this anchoring can support claims of national entitlement. Finally, this paper argues that the situated heterogeneity of water relations can make it difficult to connect them to more sustainable water relationships in the region.

KEYWORDS: Transboundary agreements, modern water, commons, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, springs, sacred sites, glaciers, Aral Sea

INTRODUCTION

Adamga kerek suu degen, adamzat zhashait da suu menen…

(People need water, humankind lives through water…)

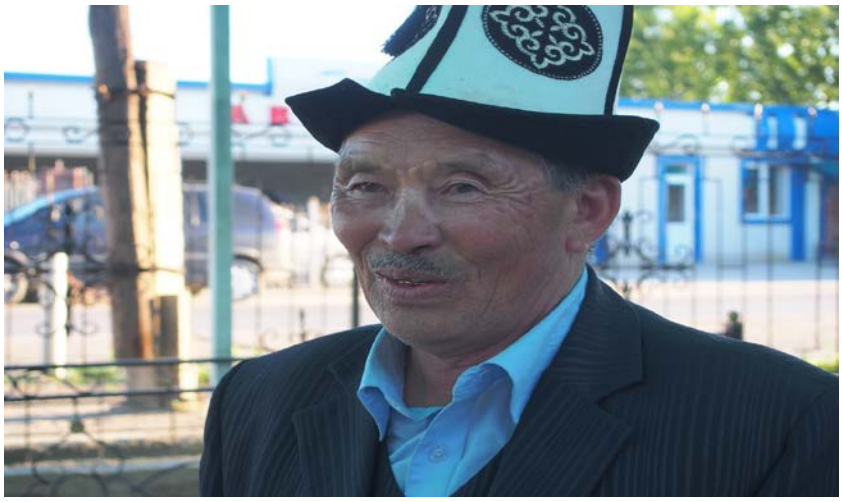
My dear kin, let's sing with our mellifluous voices about generous waters!
There's no life in this universe without water, let's unite and safeguard it.
Water ensures purity and hygiene [tazalyk], we always lived with water,
We should not let the springs disappear, from today let's clean them up.

Drinking water from summer pasture springs, your body and soul are rejuvenated!
There are many sparkling springs on summer pastures,
Glacial waters melt and join in a powerful stream,
These waters mix and pour into the stream of the Naryn River.

Through gorges and mountains, the Old Naryn flows loudly.
Hitting rocks, its foam leaps in the air.
Look how it shows off its power and then flows onwards, wow!
Giving breath to everyday existence, water is the source of life.

If we respect water, it will please God.
Let's listen to our elders, passing us their heritage.
Let's always, ooh, respect water,
And then let's sit down and relax, ha![1]

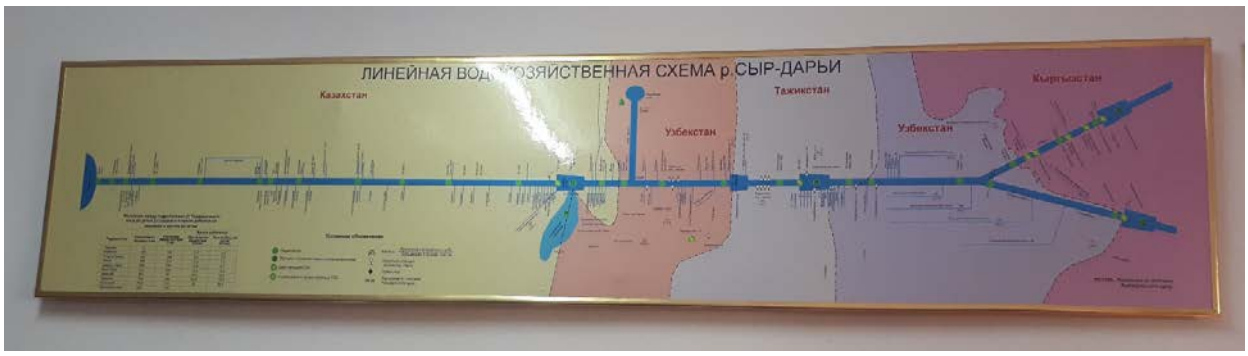
Figure 1. Tinarbek Kerimbekov performing *Akkan Suu*.



Source: Photo by the author (2018).

Tinarbek Kerimbekov sang this powerful ballad to a team of artists and researchers studying the social life of the Naryn and Syr Darya during a 2018 interdisciplinary workshop on these rivers. Indeed, he expressly composed this ballad to welcome us to Shamaldy-Sai, a dam-workers town on the Naryn in southern Kyrgyzstan. The performance took place some 2000 kilometres upstream of a very different river representation, in western Kazakhstan.

Figure 2. Lower Syr Darya water management chart, Baskara Dam offices, Kazalinsk District, Kazakhstan.



Source: Photo by the author (2018).

[1] Extract from Tinarbek Kerimbekov's ballad *Akkan Suu* (*Flowing Water*), translated by Aibek Samakov and the author. Tinarbek *Ata* is an *akyn,* a bard who performed this song for sound artist Peter Cusack. His music can be heard in a collection of water-themed recordings from Central Asia (Cusack, 2019).

A schematic map (Figure 2) of the Syr Darya hangs in the corridor of the Baskara Dam offices, which are located near the northern end of the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan. We met with the managers of the dam system during a dialogic workshop with water policy makers and farmers in 2018. Despite their completely different genres of representation, both Tinarbek Ata's[2] song and the Baskara map are snapshots of powerful river imaginaries, each with their own purpose. Both are examples of water representations that circulate widely in Central Asia. Tinarbek Ata lives in a dam-workers' town where similar charts can be encountered regularly and are displayed with pride as the foundation of local wealth and 'civilisation'. At the same time, the Kazakh-speaking Baskara Dam managers would find both the genre and meaning of Tinarbek's Kyrgyz song intelligible and familiar from civic celebrations. And yet, Tinarbek's invocation of respecting water in the form of 'sparkling springs' at summer pastures and his references to the Naryn's impressive gorges are a far cry from the engineering view of controlling the water supply for wide swathes of irrigated agriculture, as displayed in the chart. We thus find river residents familiar with, and often drawing on, a wide spectrum of ways of talking about and relating to rivers and other kinds of water bodies.

Such multiplicity in water relations has been well documented in other parts of the world.[3] In this paper I take two analytical approaches. First, I document a specific spectrum of water relations and concepts, highlighting three dominant modalities of treating water, 1) as a resource, 2) as variously enspirited, and 3) as an index of human wrongdoing. I further argue that moments of enacting these modalities are not just in line with the position of particular stakeholders; rather, these ways of understanding water are centred on particular water bodies, including large rivers, springs, lakes and glaciers. Many Central Asians are aware of, and use, all these modalities; however, they are not easily transposed between water bodies, or universalised.

Tanya Richardson (2014: 5) has warned that,

> if we assume in advance what water is and what its properties are, we can see neither how it comes to be connective or disconnected, fluid or stagnant, singularised or multiple, nor the practices and relations that make it exist in one way and not another.

Other analysts have pointed to the culturally and historically contingent assumptions about water, which are as embedded in scientific approaches (including the language of anglophone social sciences), as in the design of water governance (Féaux de la Croix, 2011; Hamlin, 2000; Helmreich, 2011). Asking "What is Water?", Jamie Linton has described a particularly dominant 'modern' singular notion of abstract water as the resource 'H_2O', and has contrasted this to concepts of 'waters' in the plural, which are often seen as more agentive substances (Linton, 2010: 13-15).[4] At the same time, Linton points to consequential differences in how even this supposedly neutral and unified H_2O is grasped by stakeholders like Israeli farmers and aquifer managers (Linton, 2006: 389-90). In another case, Gabrielle Bouleau (2014) highlights the indeterminacy of particular actor-and-object constellations, such as lobbying anglers, and chemists studying the Rhone; here, the allied versions of framing the problem and framing the nature of the river have eventually resulted in a cleaner watercourse. In the case of the Seine, by contrast, Bouleau (ibid) shows how a very different constellation of actors, interests and river concepts affected the shape and

[2] In Kyrgyz, the literal meaning of 'Ata' is father, but the term is also used generally as an honorific term for older men.

[3] For an overview see Ballestero (2019); other substantial studies include Hastrup and Hastrup (2015), Orlove and Caton (2010), and Wagner (2013). The focus here is on sweet water; marine anthropology and social studies have a large playing field of their own.

[4] See also Smith (2014) for a critique of Linton's assertion that modern water managers deny the agency of water.

qualities of the river.[5] These analyses emphasis interest- and goal-oriented conceptions of water among different sets of people.

In this paper, I go beyond portraying the coexistence of water concepts and their strong association with different use-forms and stakeholder positions. Though this kind of stakeholder mapping can also be done along Central Asian rivers, I wish to emphasise a shared, overarching principle: the anchoring of specific water relations in particular water bodies such as the springs, lakes, glaciers and irrigation canals to which these rivers are connected. I distinguish three widespread modalities of relating to 'incarnations' of water: large river (Water Incarnate I), healing source (Water Incarnate II), and glacier (Water Incarnate III).[6] Describing these socionatural forms as incarnations helps keep in view their embodied and topographically distributed nature. The religious (though not purely Christian) connotations of the term incarnation also allow us to think of water as an ideal abstraction, one that manifests as both absolutely concrete and very variable in its forms. Here, I call attention to the lived 'gaps' between water incarnations as a way to reflect on existing water relations and to imagine alternative, more environmentally just lives for the Naryn, the Syr Darya, and their dependents.[7] In the last section of the paper, I showcase two such imaginaries that are drawn from a travelling river exhibition, co-produced by our research team, river residents, and local artists.

This argument is based on my own extensive ethnographic fieldwork along the Naryn river course between 2014 and 2018, and on a smaller range of archival and media analyses; I also make use of the data collected by our river research group, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. I learned much from events we staged with policy makers and scientists, and with artists like Tinarbek Ata. These events were hosted by a small Uzbek-Kyrgyz-German research team that had undertaken a study entitled "*The Social Life of a River*", which was focused on the Naryn and Syr Darya Rivers.[8] We undertook ethnographic research at 5 field sites along 3000 kilometres of river; the study spanned the full range of environments, including glaciers and upland pastures, intensive oasis agriculture, venerably old and industrial cities, and semi-deserts. Engaging in an unconventional cooperation – in an era of strong tensions between the governments using this transboundary river – we sought to document the livelihoods and elements of cultural production associated with the Naryn and Syr Darya, from dams to melon farming (Féaux de la Croix, 2017, forthcoming). Taking a transdisciplinary approach, our goal was to use these ethnographic portraits as frames for establishing broader communication among river users and a more wide-ranging reflection on their relationships with this water artery.[9] Rather than employing a classic model of research, next to ethnographic fieldwork we used elements such as a travelling river exhibition and transdisciplinary workshops on site as arenas of co-learning. As discussed in the final section of the paper,

[5] Budds (2009) similarly documents the effects of river ontologies on hydrogeological assessments and thus on regional water allocations.

[6] This spectrum is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight widely recognisable features of relating to water in the region.

[7] While some anthropologists may cast these as multiple overlapping ontologies (Yates et al., 2017), I find the term ontology unhelpful here; it implies an all-encompassing, holistic and internally coherent sense of the world that anthropologists now hesitate to attribute to a culture. At the same time, 'ontological difference' seems to suggest a kind of incommensurability which, despite profound heterogeneity, I do not see at play here. I have therefore chosen a more modest vocabulary of 'concepts' and 'relations'.

[8] The project entitled, "*The Social Life of a River: Environmental Histories, Social Worlds and Conflict Resolution Along the Naryn-Syr Darya*" was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and ran from 2015 to 2021.

[9] This collaboration went beyond interdisciplinarity; transdisciplinary modes of research strove to work with non-academic/research collaborators on an equal footing, at least during specific parts of the research cycle. On transdisciplinary approaches see Hirsch Hadorn et al. (2008), and on related forms of collaborative ethnographic fieldwork see Estalella and Sánchez Criado (2018).

these productions feed into our growing understanding of river relations and encourage the germination of forms of river activism (Ashirov et al., 2019).

Tinarbek Ata's ballad brings together several genres of relating to water; they range on a spectrum from treating water as an exploitable resource, to water as a powerful, enspirited and potentially dangerous entity. As in this song, each of these genres invokes registers of feeling that feed into water-use expectations, behaviour, and governance rationales. The focus in this article is not primarily on emotions that are governed in the Foucauldian sense; rather, it focuses on public feelings that govern how the river is perceived, interacted with, and used. I am inspired to trace the emotive experiences of water bodies by examinations of public emotion and its connection to decision-making, as in Martha Nussbaum's work on legal processes (Nussbaum, 2015) or Hannah Knox's work on 'affective infrastructures' (2017).[10] Farhana Sultana (2011: 164), more specifically addresses emotions in relation to water access and degradation. She argues that:

> while environments and landscapes can produce varied emotional geographies (…), what has not been adequately studied is how environmental degradation and resource crises can produce differentiated emotions that influence the very ways that resources are accessed, used, and controlled.

As we will see, in the case of the Naryn and Syr Darya Rivers, these feelings and the associated forms of relating to, using, or treating water are closely tied to particular types of water bodies. In this paper, I start by scanning this bumpy, overlapping spectrum of emotions and relations in the form of a 'rational planning' river; I then turn to the rather more enspirited water bodies. I here particularly emphasise the emotive components of these relations, not only in productions such as the rousing ballad with which this article began, but equally in versions such as the Baskara River map that claim scientific or 'neutral' status as a representation. Finally, I discuss the relationship of these different water concepts to people's sense of ownership, often expressed in a national idiom. I begin the exploration of water incarnations with a version the reader will likely find familiar, aligned as it is with regional policy making and with ideas imported through the English of international organisations and donors.

WATER INCARNATE I: A BIG TRANSBOUNDARY RIVER

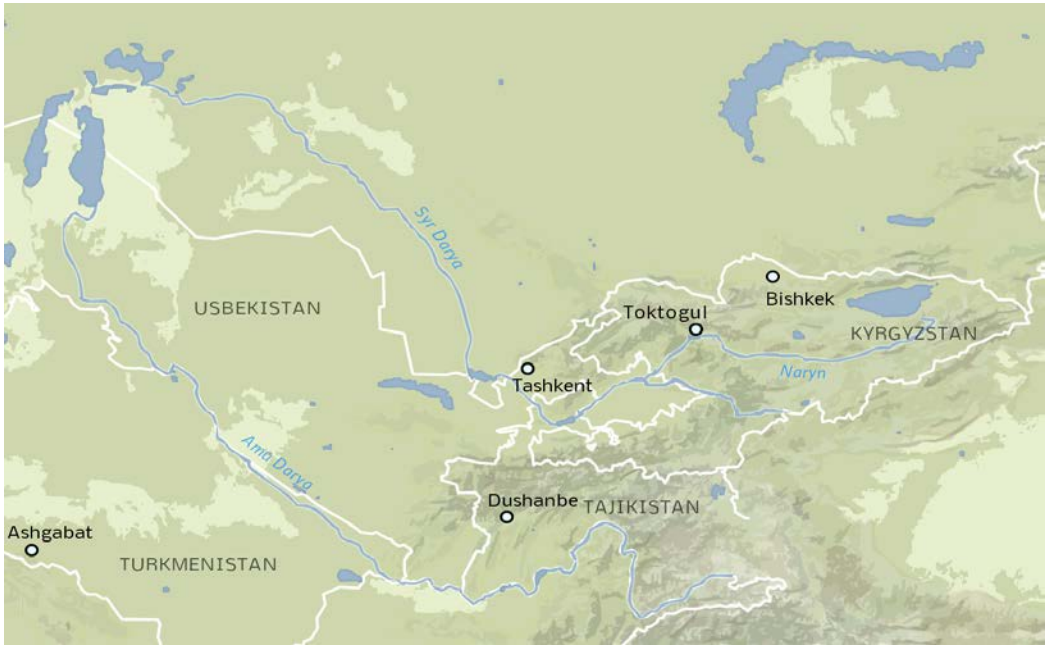
In 2018, a dozen Kyrgyzstani and Kazakhstani local-level water managers met at a workshop organised in the Syr Darya delta by our team. As our minibus sped across the steppes over a thousand kilometres downriver from the riparian homes of the Kazakh officials who rode with us, they complained bitterly. Although they lived close to the Kyrgyzstani border and many had relatives in Kyrgyzstan, they grimly lamented the perpetual failure (as they saw it) of their Kyrgyzstani partners upriver to pass on the agreed annual water allocations. These upriver Kazakhstani managers were, in turn, meeting melon and rice farmers in the Syr Darya delta who were at the receiving end of unpredictable, meagre Syr Darya River water that was laden with agricultural effluent and high salt content. To water managers at the southern end of Kazakhstan, the river's water quality was not a major concern; where it reached the delta further north, however, farmers were much more concerned and were restricted in their crop-growing options by the quality of water they received. We found that among participants of this workshop, as in other regional contexts, the river was mainly treated as a resource in a zero-sum game; claims to river rights were accompanied by long-standing feelings of resentment and blame directed upriver (cf. Bichsel, 2009). These sentiments reflected the failed vision of a fully integrated river water distribution system as

[10] As with water as singular or plural, there is a vibrant debate over the nature of feelings. Since this article deals with a range of publicly articulated sentiments encompassing anger, pride and awe, I define emotion as named, culturally variable feelings (Wulff, 2007); these are often distinguished from more direct physical and potentially unconscious affect. There is no exact translation for either of these concepts in Central Asian languages such as Kyrgyz, *sezim* being the closest equivalent to the word 'feeling'.

it is depicted in the Baskara Dam chart.[11] Resentments directed upriver were a response to what were felt to be unmet expectations of responsibility from fellow stakeholders. François Molle has traced the ascendance of such river basin thinking and its adaptation to different ideas of governance, to the distribution (or abdication) of responsibility and decision-making in a number of ways (Molle, 2009). The predominant story about the Naryn and Syr Darya basin is then a rather familiar political-managerial one, whereby the river is sectioned into territorial units which pursue – but do not achieve – an ideal of integration.

Official narratives about the rivers of Central Asia treat them as the main channels of a water basin; in the case of the Syr Darya, this basin is estimated to be 782,612 square kilometres (km^2), covering densely populated and irrigated areas such as the Ferghana Valley (Sehring and Diebold, 2012: 9-10). This ancient oasis is now divided between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; Tinarbek Ata sang his ballad in Shamaldy-Sai, on the very edge of the Kyrgyzstani portion of the valley. Bending north out of the Ferghana depression, the Syr Darya then traverses a sizeable portion of Uzbekistan and western Kazakhstan before reaching the dwindling Aral Sea. Together with the Amu Darya basin, which runs roughly parallel to it but further south, the Syr Darya accounts for 90% of Central Asia's river water; of this, 75% is channelled to irrigate wheat, rice, cotton, and a rich variety of fruits and vegetables (International Crisis Group, 2014: 2). These rivers also host most of the region's hydropower stations in their highlands and are the source of household water for up to half the region's population.[12]

Figure 3. Map of the Naryn-Syr Darya.



Source: Map by Michael Féaux de la Croix (2017).

[11] This section is not intended as a full analysis of water politics in the region; for more detail, see Menga (2018), Wegerich et al. (2012), and Zinzani (2015).

[12] This is a very rough, conservative estimate because data is collected differently in each country and is only partially made public.

In this semi-arid region, irrigation is a truly ancient technique; as with most large rivers in the world, however, in the last century, the Syr Darya experienced a vast proliferation of regulation and channelling mechanisms.[13] In spreading five river-site ethnographies across the catchment, we chose to extend our data gathering up the Naryn tributary of the Syr Darya. A substantial river in its own right, the Naryn traverses much of mountainous Kyrgyzstan, connecting glacier fields to Tinarbek Ata's home in the Ferghana Valley.[14] A chain of dams on the Naryn provides up to 90 percent of the electricity for the country's 5.2 million people.

This river has a problem. In fact, it has several, but I here tell the problematic as conveyed in reams of reporting by organisations such as the International Crisis Group (International Crisis Group, 2014). Virtually the sole problem that is discussed at the regional level is the impasse between two opposing priorities, 1) how much summer irrigation water farmers in each country require to grow their crops, and 2) how much water is stored for generating hydropower in winter; other needs such as those of replenishing the Aral Sea are squeezed out between these two imperatives. As in the US and other industrialising countries, during the post-war period Soviet agricultural scientists were aware that the vast expansion of irrigation would have an enormous impact on natural water bodies such as the Aral Sea. As in other areas of the world, dealing with this 'collateral' was confidently deferred to future decades on the assumption that large-scale technological solutions would mitigate the costs (Micklin, 2010). Thus, throughout the Soviet period, Moscow government ministries engineered a system for neighbouring republics to link up and expand their distribution networks for water and energy, with exchange agreements based on seasonal needs. In the 1980s glasnost era, regime critique was fed by public knowledge of the catastrophic consequences for human livelihoods and health of the deterioration of the Aral Sea (including a collapsed fishing industry), which joined outrage over Chernobyl. Since independence in the early 1990s, the high-intensity use agreements for the Syr Darya basin have disintegrated. Despite attempts to maintain water distribution agreements and revive the exchange of resources, there is much annual acrimony, with many oasis farmers and their governments looking upriver bitterly as upriver actors such as dam managers accumulate summer water for winter electricity needs. Uzbekistan's first president was particularly prone to sabre-rattling over water issues with neighbours, but since his death in 2016, regional water tensions have eased somewhat. Events such as the recent dam break in Uzbekistan, however, can cause further strain in river relations: after heavy rains in May 2020, a substantial new reservoir in Uzbekistan's portion of the Syr Darya broke its banks and destroyed thousands of homes and hectares of tilled land, including in adjacent Kazakhstan.[15]

International organisations have long advocated Integrated Water Resource Management and have pushed implementation of the many interstate agreements on water allocation and river use as a solution. This regional approach to water distribution is paired with the promotion of a participatory and user-based Water User Association (WUA) blueprint at the local level.[16] Climate change has heightened

[13] Although this is a semi-arid region, water scarcity is not experienced as severely as in the Arab Peninsula; it also varies widely according to season, population and terrain. As is so often the case with perceived resource dearth, we find water scarcity to be a result of political mechanisms and to be more a question of distribution than absolute scarcity (Murzakulova, 2017).

[14] Grasped this way, the Naryn-Syr Darya extends for roughly 3000 kilometres (depending on how you calculate the bends), making it the second-largest river in Central Asia. Our river concept thus does not include other large tributaries or the irrigation network interacting with it.

[15] Significantly, post-disaster analysis focused largely on accusations of corruption and shoddy building, rather than on the more general question of whether large reservoirs and the principle of intensive irrigation is the future for Central Asia's river use and water distribution (see, for example, Living Asia, 2020).

[16] Examples of such approaches include the Integrated Water Resources Management in Ferghana Valley (2001-2012) project and the Central Asia Water and Energy Program (CAWEP). Commentators such as David Mosse (2003) have long critiqued the hegemony of the WUA idea. In Central Asia, the Water Users Association framework does not always create truly participant-based and inclusive management approaches. In contexts such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, WUAs have become an additional

the sense of impending scarcity and has made drip irrigation look attractive; it has not, however, effectively pushed government or agricultural actors to think beyond this expensive technological fix and towards, for example, less-thirsty crops. Tangible progress in these kinds of cooperative arrangements are limited to small catchments between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and to preserving a small portion of the Aral sea on Kazakhstani territory. Thus, in the early 2000s, the World Bank and the Kazakhstani government created a long embankment and dam at the mouth of the Syr Darya which shored up a smaller lake of 3300 km^2. Though such corralling of water has speeded up the disappearance of the rest of the Aral Sea, this smaller ecosystem has experienced a surprisingly fast revival, restoring a (mostly illegal) small-scale fishing economy.

In re-presenting this narrative, I have mimicked the managerial, top-down, regional-scale and reductionist view of the Syr Darya which we find on the walls of the Baskara offices (Figure 2). In this way of framing the problematic, the Naryn and Syr Darya Rivers turn into (ideally) steady blue, neatly boundaried quasi-canals.[17] The dam-based limited solution to the Aral disaster fits and reproduces the sociality of management hierarchies in the regional elite who have particular political prerogatives and tools at their disposal. As Linton (2010) points out, however, even within the framework of 'modern' water, there are multiple other river problematics and hydrosocial relationships. I will highlight some of these citizen concerns, which were not a primary concern for the water managers at our Aral delta event.

As I noted in the case of Tinarbek Ata's dam-workers' town, many much-less-privileged riparian residents who do not make decisions in government offices also participate in 'resource thinking' around the Naryn and Syr Darya. The river is most often envisioned and handled as a volume of water and an exploitable, finite resource (Féaux de la Croix and Gullette, forthcoming), one that mainly invokes governing emotions related to possession. The Baskara chart's blue lines thus do not inform us about the limited capacities to 'fill' or control how much water arrives. The lines also ignore the high sediment load and residues from agriculture, habitation and industry that accumulate along the river flow and often make it a shade of olive green rather than the standard blue. Data on the 'chemical river' (as in Bouleau's version of the Rhône, 2014) are rarely systematically gathered and are most often treated as embarrassing and potentially expensive state secrets (Törnqvist et al., 2011). Nevertheless, as we saw in the case of Syr Darya delta farmers, citizens along the watercourse often have a keen interest in chemical analyses, knowing that heavy metals, pesticides and waterborne diseases affect a large proportion of drinking water sources (Bekturganov et al., 2016). Alongside the appreciation for untreated springs, there is also widespread demand for 'clean water' (that is, piped water to households). Many citizens pay attention to what progress is being made on ambitious government programmes for universal coverage (Orunbekov, 2020). So, for example, the town of Naryn, in the highlands of eastern Kyrgyzstan, is the first major settlement on this river; city administrators have worked hard with INGOs to supply the majority of its 40,000 householders with safe piped water,[18] but, meanwhile, a decade of upgrading has not yet

governmental micromanagement tool which often, in effect, cuts out the rural poor and prioritises 'productive' farms (Kim, 2018). Used in that manner, there is little indication that WUAs promote the water efficiency that is hoped for by advocating organisations such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). In Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, WUAs are minimally controlled; often those who hold informal jurisdiction over water-related matters simply go through the motions of formalisation, with better and worse results.

[17] Migrating birds may now stop at the shallow and saline Arnasai depression west of Tashkent, rather than the Aral Sea. The new lake (not yet on every map) is in part fed by winter flooding from the Syr Darya and in part by high groundwater levels that are fed by water filtering out from very leaky irrigation canals.

[18] This programme often means a tap in the courtyard rather than a sophisticated water supply in the house. The Naryn water infrastructure also supports 27,000 head of livestock in their semi-urban winter stables.

touched the dilapidated wastewater disposal system, which does very little to sanitise the water pouring back into the river.[19]

Tinarbek Ata declaims that, "[t]here's no life in this universe without water, let's unite and safeguard it (…). Water ensures purity and hygiene (…). We should not let the springs disappear – from today let's clean them up". In his call to protect this river and to safeguard water in general, Tinarbek Ata is obliquely pointing to misuse and neglect of the kind detailed above.[20] The bard is also invoking a notion of the river as more than a tap that feeds irrigation and hydropower systems with water whose origin and further destination are irrelevant. I next turn to such a version of water, beyond objectification as mute matter and natural resource, that is intelligible to all kinds of Central Asians.

WATER INCARNATE II: 'MORE AND LESS' SACRED, HEALING SPRINGS AND LAKES

As in many a model, the Baskara Dam scheme does not include the sources of river water; they are invisible because they are irrelevant to the purpose of this map, which is the responsibility to manage water distribution in this particular area. In Tinarbek Ata's song, however, these sources are clearly named and described generically: "There are many sparkling springs on summer pastures/ Glacial waters melt and join in a powerful stream/ These waters mix and pour into the stream of the Naryn River". Tinarbek Ata, in praising water as he does here, is drawing on a rich seam of Central Asian cultural production that ranges from classic ballads to pop videos and advertising; indeed, the title *Flowing Water* references the famous song *Akkan Suu*, by Jengijok, a 19th century bard. It is unsurprising that Kyrgyz-language arts, like many other languages and forms of cultural production, highlight water qualities and imagery; there are, however, specifics to the conventions of depicting and praising water in Kyrgyz that come to bear on distinguishing water incarnations. In Tinarbek Ata's lyrics, we encounter water as a generalised substance that should be actively respected ("there's no life in this universe without water") and also as a wild and uncontrolled river. Tinarbek Ata mentions neither the slow-moving water of the dam reservoir that he lives next to nor the irrigation canals that this 'wild' river feeds. His river is not the pacified blue line on the technocratic office chart; instead, it is a loud, awe-inspiring power, fed by springs and glacial melt pouring off high mountains. I will explore the glaciers further below, but for now, let me focus on the 'sparkling springs' that Tinarbek Ata invokes.

In a sense, any spring bubbling up out of the ground is something of a miracle, especially so perhaps in a region with sparse rainfall. Humans have long known that, as a rule of thumb, these are the cleanest water sources. Before the mass sedentarisation of semi-mobile Kyrgyz pastoralists, the wealthiest herders occupied both the most luxuriant highland pastures as well as the pristine water sources that went with them (Bunn, 2013: 126); these are exactly the summer pastures that Tinarbek Ata evokes. In other words, access to springs, especially mountain springs, is part and parcel of a pastoral notion of the good life. This imagery remains very precious to many Kyrgyz speakers and is understood not only as a source of wealth, but also of health, visual and visceral joy. Travelling across the country, it is common to see people stop at particularly beneficial water sources at the side of the road and have a quick drink, wash their faces, and fill up some bottles. It is not unusual to hear people discuss the quality of water from these special sites or their everyday water supply, with a sophisticated vocabulary of taste, colour and reputed effects. Water in these contexts is understood as a receptive, responsive medium that can act as a conduit e.g. for prayer if you speak over the water and then drink it (Bunn, 2013: 134). In everyday

[19] Regular measurements of river water are only partially accessible to local water engineers; the available data's claim to good water quality is explained through the 'self-cleaning' properties of well-oxygenated water. There are many factors in measuring water quality that could explain such a result, which I have yet to fully explore with hydrologists. The results of a separate water monitoring by the mining company Kumtor (which uses large amounts of sodium cyanide on the glaciated headwaters) claim to be reassuring, but the results are not made public.

[20] This kind of invocation without direct blame is characteristic of the way Kyrgyz bards, as bearers of moral authority, speak to their audiences (cf. also Féaux de la Croix, 2016); they may, however, target individual politicians much more directly and harshly.

practices, water can thus be a transmitter of well-being, not only in supplying the physical body with H_2O, but also by purifying the outer body by washing and the inner body by drinking. Similar to the containers of *zamzam* water that pilgrims bring back from the hajj, springs are frequently reported to heal and cleanse.

Springs are also prominent, almost-ubiquitous features at sacred sites of pilgrimage known as *mazars*. Thousands of such mazar sites have been recorded across the Kyrgyz Republic and they are generally a widespread feature of Central Asia (Aitpaeva et al., 2007). People encounter many springs at these sites, but they also find other elements such as rocks, trees, or visions of animals such as white camel-foals which are considered 'owner/guardians' of the site. This powerful liveliness of springs and their attendant 'beings' are not found to the same extent in the everyday landscape. As in other areas of the world, exactly how these spaces and powers work, and whether these water bodies are themselves persons in a full sense, is often not neatly defined, nor is it of primary importance to pilgrims (Aitpaeva, forthcoming). Indeed, the ambiguous unknown may be part of the mystique of these powerful places and elements, leaving the field open to individual interpretation. As with folk religious practices elsewhere, these places are both widely revered and critiqued by doctrinal scholars of, in this case, Islam.

Below the blood-red sandstone cliffs of Jeti Oguz ('Nine Bulls') lies a sanatoria complex; once a jewel in the crown of the Soviet worker-state, the dilapidated accommodation, bathing pool and park are still sought out by citizens with chronic ailments and fatigue. The chemical breakdown of these lukewarm mineral springs is proudly posted at the entrance and visitors can book a full medical spa regime. The Jeti Oguz sanatorium is in fact one of many mazars that were repurposed in Soviet times as secular sanatoria, playing a part both in anti-religious policies and in Soviet Union-wide healthcare and workers' reward systems. Though pilgrimage was much disapproved of and at times could be outright dangerous, many people continued their visits secretly, sometimes shifting to sacred sites not engulfed by the biomedical system. People still often make use of both of these curative approaches, more openly now than in the Soviet period. Perhaps, because of the risks of speaking about highly censored practices during the seventy years of the Soviet era, many Central Asians do not explicitly pit these ways of valuing springs against each other; instead, they pragmatically make use of both as they see fit. As in other contexts where religion is being debated, we find chemical analyses of these springs being brought into the argument when their efficacy is being 'proven', and rejected when the beneficial effects of the springs are being argued against.[21] Whether these springs are considered merely healthy or have much broader powers is both a matter of individual judgment and of context. Locals might simply decide to build a proper casement for a much-used spring, or it could develop into a full-blown pilgrimage site with an origin story, specialised ritual services, and attendants.

Although Kyrgyzstan has a plethora of such mountain and other springs (holy or not) and small watercourses, there are few lakes; it is lakes, however, rather than rivers, that are also frequently called *yyk* (sacred) and treated with particular reverence. Sary Chelek is one such yyk lake and is also a nature reserve set between almost sheer, steeply wooded mountainsides. Along its shoreline of shrubs and gnarled pines, pilgrims rub shoulders with sport anglers seeking a quiet spot, raucous picnic gatherings, and beekeepers. Meanwhile Issyk-Kul, the largest of such yyk lakes, draws beach tourists in droves, with substantial chunks of its long shores now valuable, partially privatised real estate. Such 'debasing' of this yyk water body is met with very mixed feelings by local residents; on the one hand, they feel the need to make a living, but, on the other hand, many people worry about the chemical and ritual pollution of the lake. Large dam reservoirs such as the one next to Shamaldy-Sai, however, are not treated as lakes in the full sense nor are they considered in any way sacred. While local and international tourism thrives at 'proper' lakes – in glens with rushing river courses, at spring-blessed high pastures, at mazars and sanatoria – leisure visits to the Naryn reservoirs or main river itself are much more limited. Like areas

[21] For a striking case of this pattern in southern Tajikistan see Ahlin (2018: 361-2).

adjacent to canals, they are used for lack of a better alternative; they provide a place for evening strolls in Shamaldy-Sai's baking hot summer.

In sum, in this second frame of valuing water – that of enspirited springs and lakes – we find a cluster of strong tropes that are linked to a broader, but usually unarticulated, cosmology. The first of these tropes is the appreciation and use of water as a conductive medium which carries a healing or harmful 'load' for body and soul. The second is the association of particular kinds of water bodies with beings that 'own' them and direct their efficacy. The water bodies of Kyrgyzstan are treated with gradations of respect for sacred places, a respect practised much more consistently at the many small mazars than at 'holy' lakes, any old spring or water course. The Soviet-era mineral baths that were constructed on top of mazars can be seen as an effort to both harness and tame the agentive powers of such healing water. This was, in effect, an attempt to turn sacred incarnations of water into 'modern' water, in Linton's (2010) terms. I now turn to a third water incarnation that figures in both cultural production and politics in Kyrgyzstan: glaciers.

WATER INCARNATE III: GLACIERS AS INDEXES OF HUMAN WRONGDOING

The air is perfumed with Kymyz,
Surrounded by a belt of white glaciers,
Naryn is my golden cradle
Abundance drips from the moon and the sun.
Its people revere their fathers' holy customs,
These people are kind, honourable, hospitable and happy.[22]

In this refrain to Naryn's city anthem, the glaciers are mentioned as a backdrop for life in the highland valley. With 103 km^2 of glaciated territory, Kyrgyzstan's borders encompass the majority of the permanent ice fields in the Tien Shan range. Sometimes called a mountain's *kalpak* (an elegant hat worn by Kyrgyz men), until recently glaciers did not feature much in public debates; as in the Naryn hymn above, they have functioned mainly as territorial 'scenery'. Though many people might feel that, like mountains, glaciers are special places that should be protected in some way, the kind of agentive powers associated with yyk waters have not historically been attributed to ice fields; they are not considered to be in the same category as more-and-less holy springs or lakes. More recently, however, this background role of glaciers has changed under the influence of climate change discourses. International donor organisations such as the UNDP or FAO have widely advertised this concern; both government agencies and local NGOs have formatted programmes to tap into climate adaptation or mitigation funds and, indeed, some people have begun to adapt their expectations and practices as a consequence (on the case of Tajikistan, see Christmann and Aw-Hassan, 2015). Evidence of warming and shifting weather patterns from the Tian Shan is indeed worrying; intermittent, but increasingly intense, monitoring of glacier movements over the last 150 years has demonstrated accelerated shrinking; this became particularly evident in the second half of the 20th century, with the Tian Shan losing around 20% of its glaciation in the last 50 years (Hagg and Bolch, 2016). Unusual and extreme weather patterns are now often interpreted with reference to climate change, including by farmers concerned with adequate and timely precipitation, residents who are worried about floods, and travellers alarmed by the potentially increased risk of avalanches and mudslides. Not everyone is convinced about the anthropogenic nature of climate change; as on other topics, there is not always trust in government and INGO motives for propagating

[22] Words by E. Ibraev, melody by T. Aktanov; translation by author and Baktygul Tulebaeva (Aktanov and Ibraev, n.d.).

such information. Indeed, some respondents in the Naryn Valley have quite different interpretations of the Aral Sea disaster and glacier melt than climatologists.[23]

There is an added edge to the concern about glaciers in Kyrgyzstan in that many suspect the Kumtor gold mine, operating on the glaciated headwaters of the Naryn, of causing glacier melt. Indeed, aerial photographs of dark waste rock and the large sodium cyanide tailing pond on the Davidov Glacier have been widely circulated online. Already seriously damaged in 1998 by a large cyanide spill into local water supplies, this imagery further tarnishes the company's reputation. The accident sparked years of wrangling between activists, governments, and the Canadian Centerra Gold company over compensation (Leuze, 2014; Fumagalli, 2015). Since the Kyrgyzstani government is a large shareholder in the mine, there has also been much litigation over shares (currently around 10% of GDP) and legislation. A 2014 law protecting glaciers exempts precisely the two glaciers of the Kumtor concession from any use restrictions (Wooden, 2014). Although the large cyanide spill entered the basin of Lake Issyk-Kul rather than the Naryn water catchment, Naryn Valley residents are not at all certain that the water that Kumtor is releasing from their mining operations is of the required good quality. There is also a real fear that in a seismically active zone, the expanding glacier lake right above the mine could trigger a flood and a mass spill from the cyanide tailings.

At the same time, government websites highlight the mineral wealth of Kyrgyzstan as an opportunity for investors. In the media and at kitchen tables across the Kyrgyz Republic, this promotion of the area's unexploited treasure is often angrily compared to the dilapidated state of services and of infrastructures such as roads. There is widespread fear of foreigners – Canadian, yes, but especially Chinese firms – corralling mines and seizing wealth (see, for example, Bacchi, 2019; Asanov, 2018); as a consequence, even a German researcher's scholarly interest in water can spark suspicions of 'water-grabbing'. In disputes such as the Kumtor glacier concession, we find a conflicting mix of public sentiments (sometimes even conflicting in a single person). On the one hand, there is the urge to protect mountain minerals for national profit so as to be able to exploit them with greater Kyrgyzstani ownership and profit, and on the other hand, the urge to protect them completely from the damage and pollution of mining. Glaciers are thus a form of water that brings multiple concerns and actors together, with their position at the head of the territory making the impacts downriver starkly obvious.[24] In the case of misusing irrigation water or harming (quasi-)sacred sites, the concerns voiced by citizens are mostly about the present; glaciers, on the other hand, inspire sharp fears about the future effects of human wrongdoing.

HARNESSING WATER INCARNATIONS TO THE NATION

Considering the public concern for particular incarnations of water, it is not surprising that my own interest in water was often eagerly met. In early-stage conversations, my respondents frequently sang the praises of particular local sources as well as highlighting that, at a national level, "water is our wealth". One of my fieldwork periods in the Naryn highlands coincided with a phase of heightened tension with downstream countries, which was reported in the local media. In that way I found the retired hydrologist Venera Eje[25] thinking aloud about how to 'save' the water streaming out of the Tien Shan highlands for

[23] See Féaux de la Croix (forthcoming) for a more detailed discussion of the popular reception of climate change ideas on the Naryn. It should be noted that, unlike for the far south and far north of Central Asia, climate change models do not predict a significant reduction of rain or snowfall for this part of Kyrgyzstan; some farmers are nevertheless shifting to less-thirsty crops (Hill et al., 2017). Important early discussions in the fast-growing body of literature on the perception and understanding of weather and climate change can be found in Brace and Geoghegan (2011), Gagné et al. (2014), or Rudiak-Gould (2013).

[24] This multiple characteristic of environmental protest has been described as a process of productive 'friction' by Anna Tsing (2005).

[25] In the Kyrgyz language, the literal meaning of 'Eje' is female older relative, but it is also used as an honorific term for older women.

Kyrgyzstan alone. Venera Eje was indignant that water – which is framed as the country's 'gold' in the Naryn City anthem that was cited at the beginning of the previous section – should flow 'for free' into other countries.[26] On another occasion, as we walked down a dusty village street, my research assistant pointed to a damaged water pump spilling water, commenting that "this water is wasted, it is just going to Uzbekistan" (June 2016). Such strong versions of resource nationalism envision Kyrgyzstan as something like a 'water tower' – a term that is also favoured in reports on the region's water crisis.

Resource nationalism has most often been described as the rhetoric and actions of governments to safeguard resources for the nation-state (Ward, 2009). Venera Eje's indignation over improperly 'gifting' flowing water downriver was reciprocated in the form of downriver complaints about transboundary water agreements that were expressed among water managers at the Syr Darya delta workshop. The rhetorical and affective move of valuing specific landscape elements as the property of particular inhabitants is a very old, classic move of nation-state thinking; however, the special fit between particular landscapes and the people that inhabit them can also be harnessed for environmental concerns as a kind of call to stewardship, a link that is sometimes also mobilised against governments (Davidov, 2015; Ginn, 2008). The sense of possessiveness towards natural resources can also merge into other forms of emotive relationships such as protective pride and awe, as here in the campaign for glacier protection. In Kyrgyzstan, this is evident in articulated logics of water distribution as well as in concerns around Kumtor and other mines. It should be noted that, as with all the other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are ethnically heterogeneous states, with the Soviet legacy of a 'nominated' dominant ethnic group reverberating also in the question of access to natural resources. During the glasnost period, there were instances of 'cosmopolitan' forms of public calls to action that referenced a Soviet civic ideal, such as around the Aral Sea catastrophe (Schatz, 1999; Wheeler, 2016). On the other hand, glasnost protests against Tajikistan's ambitious Rogun Dam used indigeneity as an idiom and legitimating device (Suyarkulova, 2011).

The space between the idea of water as a national or local resource with attendant rights, and water as a more-and-less enspirited force, is in some respects filled by Tengrism (*Tengirchilik* in Kyrgyz, also *Tengrianstvo* in Russian). This is an intelligentsia movement promoting the veneration of the sky god Tengri and other enspirited 'natural' entities on the basis of ancient Kyrgyz or Kazakh practices. The movement brings together a sense of territorial ownership and stewardship which stems from a strong form of respect (Kyrgyz: *siila-*) for the forces that nourish a miraculous environment everywhere; particularly sites like Lake Issyk-Kul are considered by Tengrianists as the 'heart' or 'eye' of the world. As we have seen, the idea that this huge lake is sacred can make local residents uneasy with the flood of tourists from the capital and beyond. Both the Kyrgyzstani and Kazakhstani states draw, to a limited extent, on this repertoire of ideas about primeval ethnic nationhood, as they do on Islam as a unifying and legitimating cause. A few mazars deemed to be important graves of historical figures such as the Kyrgyz hero Manas have even had a state-sponsored makeover. In general, however, these are arenas where state actors pursue an uneasy, ambiguous relationship with sources of authority that constitute alternatives to the modern state; as a consequence, Tengrianist leaders have not succeeded in getting their movement recognised as a religion in these states. Unlike the case of Bolivia or the limited autonomy of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the Russian Federation, indigeneity and water-related practices that go with these ideas have not been strongly integrated into state policy.

In sum, we see multiple conflicting cross-currents within and between the utilitarian and spiritual versions of water bodies in Kyrgyzstan. As a result, citizens regularly draw selectively on each of these registers when advocating use rights, nature protection, or healing practices; however, the framework that dominates ways of interacting with the Naryn and Syr Darya, as opposed to lakes and springs,

[26] I would like to thank one of my reviewers for pointing out to me the promotion of this view by the prominent politician Usubaliev (1998); interlocutors indeed often remembered Usubaliev for 'saving' Sary Chelek and other lakes from being tapped or drained for irrigation downriver during the Soviet period.

remains resource-oriented thinking. Tinarbek Ata does not sing the praises of the dam reservoir in his backyard, although there is in fact a corpus of art dedicated to dams in the context of celebrating Soviet achievements; dams in this vein are routinely framed as a human victory over the 'wild' river that Tinarbek Ata focuses on (Féaux de la Croix, 2016; Roberts, forthcoming). In sum, water concepts and ideals of use are unevenly distributed across the topography and are anchored in different instantiations of water, whether in irrigation canals, river reservoirs, highland springs, free-flowing rivers, lakes or mazars.

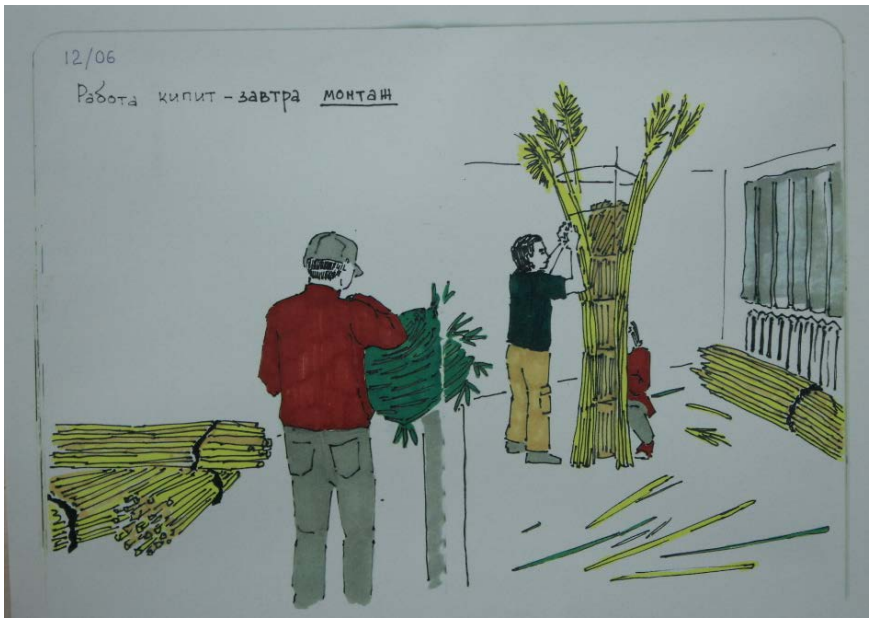
PLAYING A SPECTRUM OF WATER INCARNATIONS AND ENTITLEMENTS

In the reviewed snapshots of water relations along a 3000 km stretch of river reaching from the Aral Sea to the Kumtor glacier mine, we have encountered water relations that are heterogeneous, but which follow a range of positional and topographic scripts rather than being highly individualised. We have encountered water concepts and relations that are drawn from a range of economic, linguistic and historical practices which include both the Soviet experience and Islam. The melon and rice farmers of the Syr Darya delta are perfectly adept at discussing the river with the visiting water managers in terms of it being a neutral volume of water. At the same time, during the spring *tasattyq* (call for rain) ritual, these delta farmers pray for more rain to form in the sky and feed the river. On these occasions, in a sense, clouds are treated as sacred water sources (Aibek Samakov, personal communication).

Similarly, there is no one single frame for Kyrgyz speakers to follow in shaping their actions around springs and lakes; heterogeneous relations can be mapped on a spectrum of specific water incarnations. On one end of the spectrum, water is a mute object and natural resource that people seek to exploit maximally – particularly through hydropower and irrigation – drawing from large watercourses such as the Naryn and Syr Darya. On the other end of the spectrum, we find the enspirited, fully sacred water bodies at mazar pilgrimage sites such as Sary Chelek. In between, we find lakes and springs that can be treated as health-giving in the biomedical sense, (for example at the sanatoria and at tourist resorts on Lake Issyk-Kul), but which can also be treated as 'a little bit' or fully sacred. We have seen that the framework of the 'nation' can be flexibly invoked to include a smaller or larger group in beneficial practices or entitlements; one could also describe this pattern as one of scaled commoning, where smaller and larger groups of people and non-human persons are included in the view. This scaling operates in the case of the Kumtor glacier mine controversy, where claims are scaled so as to divide the spoils of exploiting natural resources. Though glaciers are not considered sacred in the sense of mazars or even lakes, demonstrators for glacier protection can use the 'national' frame to argue for their protection – rather than exploitation – as special sites. In the example of the Baskara hydrological model, local water managers struggle with how to draw the lines of rights and responsibilities and, at the level of transboundary water agreements, to match these up with nation-state boundaries. As the situation of delta farmers shows, however, these dependencies and administrative distinctions are also at play between upriver and downriver regions within Kazakhstan.

In June 2019, our river research team invited a group of Central Asian artists to explore and playfully articulate the effect of these water framings and what aspects of riparian life they make visible or invisible. Aibek Samakov, for example, discovered the importance of harvesting common reed to local people’s livelihoods in the Syr Darya delta. Though many Kazakhs think of reed as a primitive and undesirable material, here summer reed is used for livestock fodder and winter reed is used for building houses and fences. Management maps of the Syr Darya do not show the swathes of reed beds along this river stretch, which wax and wane with water levels. The exhibition team decided to highlight the place of reeds in Kazakhstani livelihoods. They thus built a reed model of the Baiterek Tower, a famous monument in the new Kazakhstani capital, to suggest an alternative focus of pride.

Figure 5. Building the reed Baiterek: drawing by Deniz Nazarova, installation by Zulya Esentaeva, Dinara Kanybek kyzy, Narynbek Kazybekov, Aibek Samakov. 2019.

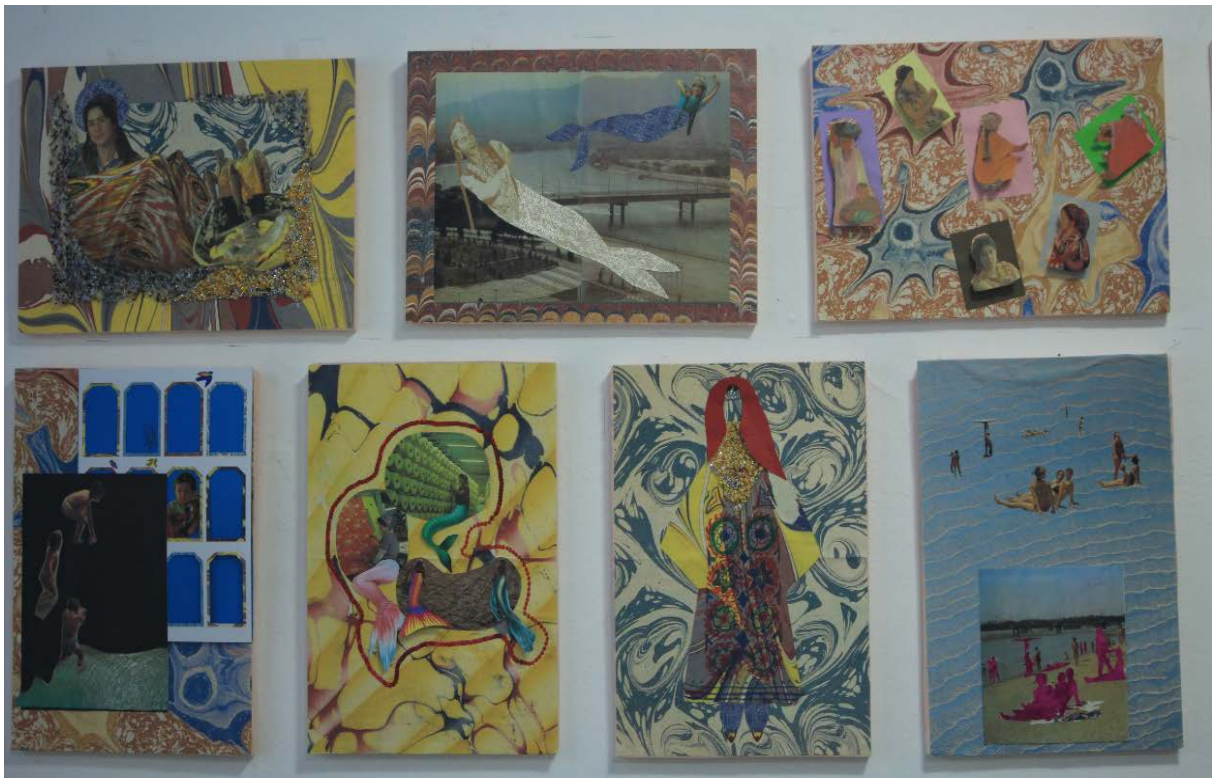


Another exhibition item was based on Mohira Suyarkulova's ethnography of living with the Syr Darya in the northern Tajik city of Khojand. In this piece, entitled *Access Denied*, the artistic team made use of Soviet-era albums to explore the changing presence and absence of women by the riverside. In contrast to the late Soviet period, women now seldom swim and are a rare sight on the city beach and on the beaches of the Kairakkum Dam reservoir; women are also absent from the teahouses, speakeasies and riverbank fishing spots. A renewed gendered in/ability to swim reflects structures of inequality that can be life-threatening. Combined with exceptionally high rates of domestic violence, this inability to swim makes the Syr Darya in Khojand the main site of suicides (Suyarkulova, 2020: 213). In consequence, to the vast majority of Khojand women this wild river is tragic and cruel, rather than being bountiful as it is in Tinarbek Ata's song. *Access Denied* draws on these experiences to imagine river relations as they perhaps once were, and might be again. The collage uses the local imagery of a mermaid-as-sex-worker to imagine riparian life otherwise; it backgrounds modern river development to celebrate the possibility of women who are at home in the water (Figure 5). These examples highlight aspects of water relations that are invisible both to the vision of the Syr Darya as an irrigation tap and to the celebratory mode of sacralising or nationalising water. Beyond describing these dominant incarnations and pointing to their strong localisation in specific kinds of water bodies, these transdisciplinary experiments draw out other existing (yet less visible) and potential dimensions of the river.

CONCLUSION: ANCHORING WATER CONCEPTS IN WATER BODIES

In grappling with the meaning of water for people, anthropologists like Veronica Strang have identified broad trends such as the view of water as a symbol of change, of life, and of power (Strang, 2005: 113). Others have highlighted how water control in the wrong hands can be threatening to less powerful groups (cf. Radonic and Jacob, this issue) or countries (cf. Hoag, 2014). This article distinguishes the kinds of change and the modes of enhancing or threatening life that are represented by Central Asian river, spring and glacier incarnations, and what keeps them distinct and apart. The exhibits we created for *Three River Stories* called attention to aspects of water relations that are rarely registered or included in the three frames of relating to water which I introduced ethnographically: 1) the river incarnation that is

Figure 5. Collage series: *Access Denied*.



Source: Nazik Abylgazieva, Zulya Esentaeva, Altyn Kapalova, Oksana Kapishnikova, Aidai Maksatbekova, Olcha Shchetinina, Lia Sozashvili, Mokhira Suyarkulova (2019); photo by Oksana Kapishnikova 2019.

primarily as a natural resource to be exploited by a certain group, 2) a more-and-less sacred and enspirited incarnation in springs and lakes, and 3) glaciers as objects of concern about human misdeeds. I argued that these frameworks can be flexibly engaged to some extent, for example in arguing for particular ways of treating the Davidov Glacier. All of these incarnations can be thought of as national treasures, sometimes to be protected, sometimes to be exploited. The varied water incarnations that people live through at the Aral Sea delta, in river towns and in the Tien Shan glacier disputes demonstrate how exploring basic assumptions about water allows us to see the effects of particular water concepts, as Richardson (2014) and Helmreich (2011) recommend. Kyrgyz- and Kazakh-speakers who were raised on the infrastructural legacy of the Soviet era, and who are now debating the plausibility of sacred mazar waters and seeking to recover or overcome a nomadic heritage, can draw on a particularly wide range of genres in relating to rivers and their companion lakes and springs. Surveying this broad spectrum of heterogeneity in the nature, roles and function of water, it becomes clear why water features are a much more prominent subject of conversation than I had ever experienced in Northern Europe. I chose the metaphor of incarnations in order to grasp the situated nature of these water concepts according to their embodiment as springs, lakes, glaciers, reservoirs and large watercourses. I have argued for the strong associations between water incarnations and their particular topography, for example, the practices and concepts of a mazar spring are not easily transposed to the Syr Darya River. This powerful association is not a case of environmental determinism; as a socionatural hybrid, water incarnations are as likely to metamorphose as any other element of human-life-in-the-world. What I would like to suggest, however, is a degree of distinction and stability that is anchored in historically shaped, experiential landscapes. Tinarbek Ata and Venera Eje both call attention to the value of water, but they would be very surprised by attempts to treat the Shamaldy-Sai reservoir as a holy lake or even a mazar water body with health-

giving properties. Conversely, in the current era, attempts to bottle the water of a mazar for sale would undoubtedly be met with outrage.

This pattern of distinguishing topographic objects (lakes, glaciers, big irrigation rivers) is accompanied by distinctions between groups (including non-humans) and scales of commoning of ownership or responsibility. I further suggest that conceptually 'cutting up' water bodies such as the Naryn and Syr Darya Rivers in this way has far-reaching consequences for their use. Venera Eje and Tinarbek Ata both articulated protective sentiments towards water bodies. The open question that raises tensions is: for whom exactly are these waters a 'gift'? Who should the water of the Naryn, the Syr Darya and their glaciated headwaters be protected by, and from? The Naryn hydrologist is not particularly concerned about river residents vulnerability to water scarcity or to downstream pollution, and indeed efforts to clean up water sources are not matched by management of wastewater in Naryn town, which is likely to have effects on Kyrgyzstani towns downriver such as Shamaldy-Sai. At the same time, it is clear that the residents of these towns, the local Kazakhstani water managers and the delta farmers, are largely isolated from each other by huge distances in terms of space, notions of belonging associated with nationhood, and governmental hierarchies. There is a dynamic of conceptually cutting up river relations along national and other group borders and segregating less-resource-oriented notions of water value from irrigation and dam use. This dynamic make the Naryn and Syr Darya into more than one object, just as these rivers are distinguished from other water incarnations. Such operations create a kind of heterogeneity that disconnects a range of riparian users and water bodies from each other and disables more sustainable water-mediated relationships in the region. It remains to be seen whether alternative representations of Naryn and Syr Darya life (such as public art featuring mermaids and reed towers) can create modest paths towards recognizing commonalities between multiple water incarnations, and multiple riparian life forms.

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