

[Auf]Lösungen

Dekoloniale Begegnungen



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The Dilemma of the Mankurt

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Decoloniality — a novel concept emerging in Central Asia. While it already holds symbolic significance for a world seeking to dismantle hierarchical structures, we are only beginning to grasp its true essence.

Decoloniality is not yet firmly established as a canon, a discipline, or an independent idea. It remains a nascent current, met with a formidable opposing force from colonial powers and corporations. Nevertheless, its course is irreversible and its transparency undeniable. In due time, it will surge forth as a roaring river.

Decoloniality is the process of reclaiming one's agency and dignity. Essentially, it embodies the dilemma of the mankurt¹. Can the mankurt, in his plight, reclaim the memories of his past and rediscover his authentic self? Or will he forever be reduced to a mere object, a slave under the dominion of a master who mercilessly strips away his very essence? Undoubtedly, the master provides sustenance to the mankurt, cunningly fostering a sense of indebtedness for the food procured by the mankurt himself, for the shelter bestowed upon him. The master's manipulation extends even to the sacred bond with the mankurt's mother, a violation of the deepest magnitude. His own mother! Will the mankurt find the strength to emancipate himself? Will the sacred grounds of "Ene Beyit", the resting place of his mother, endure? The mother, the primal source of identity, embodiment, and the natural world.

Nature, as the mother, transcends being a mere object of exploitation within the material realm of capital and hierarchies.

Nature, as the mother, embodies the essence of Homeland, akin to "Umai Ene" — the revered mother deer within Kyrgyz mythology and the sacred realm.

It is not by chance that in Kyrgyzstan, the primary memorial complex is named "Ata-Beyit" (Grave of the Fathers), which once again evokes the metaphors of Aitmatov that have materialized in reality. "Ata-Beyit" represents the first openly acknowledged site within the former USSR territory, commemorating the collective murders of citizens during the repressive period of 1937, commonly known as the "Red/Stalinist Terror."

Historical Perspective

Defending one's subjectivity is an organic characteristic of every organism. It entails standing up for oneself, one's space, and one's very essence. However, as we exist within the realm of a Darwinian logic of social consumption, we witness the perpetual reproduction of hierarchies — a process in which some consume others, assimilating their essence for personal gain. The manifestations of this social consumption take diverse forms, ranging from assimilation and subjugation to the formation of symbolic hierarchies.

Linear and vertical hierarchies are ubiquitous, characterized by a top tier comprising those at the apex and everyone else below. Those situated lower in the hierarchy possess diminishing resources, which are often extracted to sustain the top. Concurrently, efforts are made to justify this state of affairs. A foundational element is the internalization of the widely accepted "hierarchy frame" within the consciousness of all strata. This type of unequal socialization persists and is fueled by various "rational" and "irrational motivations," fortifying the top while eroding or marginalizing those who have not, or cannot, ascend to the upper echelons.

The justification for such a form of "salvation" is presented by a new, supposedly superior "civilization," whose grandeur is predicated on serving the future or a certain blueprint that guides and leads "everyone" toward a "better fate," whether it be through modernization, communism, or an abstract and elusive "utopia." This was the case in the USSR. Today, discussions persist regarding whether it was an empire, a colonial policy, or both. There are sufficient arguments both in favor and against, encompassing resource extraction, hierarchical socio-political structures, the presence of "peripheral protests," and more. From my perspective, these partial assessments and dimensions are primarily indicative of and influenced by the standpoint of the center. It is understandable that there is always a greater abundance of information about metropolises — data, archives, the voices of the elite expressed within monopolistic systems of knowledge, perpetuated in the reproduction of education, science, worldviews, and the corresponding ideological constructs.

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to take a moment and examine the USSR separately, particularly in light of the narrative surrounding "imported knowledge" or the

“discussions/discourse of young people educated in the West” who extend these perspectives to a contented and appreciative Central Asia. «There were no uprisings or protests; there exists only gratitude and a suffocating nostalgia»—a recurring narrative perpetuated by television for a century. “Why awaken trouble?”—urge the representatives of the dominant framework in Soviet studies; everything is so comprehensible within that context. Why bother with these delicate yet ambitious topics: colonization, imperialism, racism, discrimination? Why disrupt the established/stable political correctness of the prevailing “world order”...

But then war in Ukraine happened. More precisely, the war that shattered the façade and laid bare all the hidden ambiguities. It was like the voice of a child asking uncomfortable questions about the genuineness and solidity of this world, or rather its top — “But the king is naked?!”

Most actions and movements against colonization also harbor this intention — the intention of a direct child, disrupting the established “order of things,” challenging the prescribed norms from above, often resulting in their suppression. Any resistance to the hierarchical normativity is always a protest.

This is a challenge that often entails risks and subsequent threats and sanctions. Therefore, I do not share the optimism regarding the establishment of a mapping of such initiatives in Central Asia and in countries that are experiencing war or any forms of resistance against colonization. That is why “successful practices of decolonization” are often involuntary and subject to mobility. Even if it is simply a conversation about oneself. Even if it is a lullaby in one’s own language. Even just a single word. For instance, “ESIMDE” (I remember).

Kyrgyzstan is often described as:

- the recipient of civilization brought by others.
- a “dark nation” that was granted literacy and education.
- the ones who were saved from a nomadic, barbaric lifestyle and introduced to sedentary living and culture...

In essence, they civilized and emancipated us. And now, in contrast to the prevailing perception and expectations of the submissive and grateful “Eastern Woman” we are behaving in ways that are deemed inappropriate.

But was it truly the case? Was the population always joyous and compliant towards the metropolis? How do they perceive themselves in the past and envision their future? What lies ahead?

The true history of Central Asia, particularly Kyrgyzstan, within the context of the USSR, commences with a defining border — a conflict that originated during the era of the previous Russian Empire. At that time, the focus was on mobilization — the recruitment of men from the “outskirts of the Russian Empire” for rear work during the height of the First World War, specifically in 1916. This mass protest later evolved into an armed uprising and its brutal suppression. Consequently, a significant portion of the population from the territories of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan fled to China. Even to this day, these events are regarded as a collective national trauma, known in historical context as Urkun (exodus), for the Kyrgyz people and other affected communities.

Urkun — the first significant and widespread protest occurred within the confines of Tsarist Russia, specifically against the state policy of mobilizing the male population for war. It began on the territory of Tajikistan (Khujand) and subsequently spread across the entire region of Central Asia, encompassing Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Despite the fact that during the earlier Soviet era, mentions of Urkun were quite accurate, highlighting it as a contrast between the old empire and the new Soviet state, later it was presented as the pinnacle of class struggle in Central Asia between the impoverished (dekhans, a type of peasantry) and the bourgeoisie represented by the bays and manaps, who were viewed as the social manifestation of capitalism. Eventually, it was omitted from the people’s history.

Why was it omitted?

It is precisely the omission of Urkun from official history, coupled with the preserved collective memory, that elevates this event as an anti-colonial symbol. People remember it, and it is transmitted through personal, familial, and lineage histories.

During the period of the “Soviet stagnation” in the 1970s and the “perestroika” in the late 1980s, the memory of the 1916 events — Urkun — became one of the first to emerge on the lists of the unfolding “blank pages of history.” The mention of the “class background” was no longer brought up, as the absurdity of such a concept for early 20th-century Central Asia became apparent.

In the late 1980s, as the “national liberation movement²” gained momentum in Kyrgyzstan, the first protest actions emerged, along with communities advocating for the independence of Kyrgyzstan, the preservation of their language and culture, and the recognition and understanding of the significant “forgotten past.” During this period, the narrative of the 1916 events became a pivotal symbol of decolonization. It became the impetus for the large-scale commemorative tour called “Omur Kochu” (Journey of Life)

in 1991. Hundreds of people from across Kyrgyzstan walked along the historic roads of 1916 for several days. They placed memorial stones, recited prayers, and honored the deceased. Those who reached the highest mountainous sections of the passes, where many people perished from hunger, cold, and violence at the hands of cartels, collected the remains of the deceased to reinter them while offering prayers.

It is not surprising that exactly 100 years later, in a different state — the Kyrgyz Republic, in 2016, the official authorities established a memorial at the “Ata-Beyit” complex (Grave of the Fathers) dedicated to Urkun. This was rather a compelled and compromising step in response to the people’s collective memory. The deference shown by Kyrgyz elites loyal to the Russian authorities prevented the complete truth and dramatic nature of Urkun from being portrayed. This is evident in the reliefs that represent only one side of the conflict, which does not correspond to the complexity of real life. Consequently, they leave many questions unanswered to this day.

The Soviet period in the history of Kyrgyzstan, primarily portrayed in Soviet sources, is presented as triumphant and awe-inspiring. It highlights achievements in all spheres, from agriculture and industrialization to literacy and culture. The narrative of the past that portrays modernity and industrial growth as a singular aspect of reality is indeed abundant. However, we will not explore this aspect for a simple reason — it is the dominant and nearly exclusive representation found in almost all Soviet sources.

Let us now endeavor to examine the reverse side — the hidden underbelly, often obscured or overlooked by default — in order to comprehend and calculate the costs of modernization. It is precisely what has constituted the true essence of Kyrgyz and broader society, which for a long time was concealed or restricted. For example, everything connected to national capital — language, culture, and other expressions — curtailed by various obstacles, such as the punitive measures against “bourgeois nationalism.” Throughout the Soviet era, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, a significant number of active and passionate individuals were subjected to repression under this article.

Similar constraints can include various frames deliberately constructed by Soviet propaganda, which contribute to shaping the perception of the past, individual events, and processes.

For example, an artificial phenomenon such as “basmachestvo” can be mentioned — a generalized and demonized portrayal of anti-Soviet movements in Central Asia from 1917 to the 1940s. In this construct, the “basmach” was depicted as a negative character — an armed, masculine Asian figure (“basmach,” “kurbashi”), a ruthless bandit, and his unruly gang. This collective image was actively circulated in Soviet visual arts and cinema. Consequently, Soviet anti-basmachi propaganda gave birth to an entire genre of “Easterns,” emulating American Westerns, where the bloodthirsty Asian aborigine was depicted dressed in either a Fergana robe or an English trench coat (symbolizing an alternative colonial policy and competing intelligence in Central Asia).

Moreover, it is important to note that the anti-Soviet protests in the region were far from uniform. They involved not only representatives of the Asian population but also individuals from other ethnicities, including Slavs, and were not limited to Muslims alone. These groups were fragmented, consisting of people who fought against the new Soviet authority for diverse reasons. Nonetheless, the image of “basmachestvo” played a significant role in Soviet culture and was extensively propagated.

It is noteworthy that even in present times, any endeavor to delve into these movements faces opposition from pro-nostalgic circles, who vehemently oppose any analysis of this phenomenon, labeling it as an attempt to vindicate criminals and terrorists. They associate any contemplation on this matter with the rehabilitation of the “Banderites” movement in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the tide of these processes is already inexorable. Notably, in Uzbekistan, the rehabilitation of specific “Basmachi” individuals is officially recognized, as declared by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan himself³. Comparable processes unfold at varying paces across different Central Asian nations, but irrespective of the disparities, they are already in motion, forging ahead irreversibly.

“Basmachestvo” is an intriguing phenomenon, both in its construction and promotion through Soviet propaganda at the time, and in how it is deconstructed and unraveled today in Central Asian countries. In our research platform “Esimde” (I Remember), we conducted a couple of studies on this topic. The first one examined the “Depiction of Basmachi in Soviet Visual Arts,” benefitting from the extensive collection of the G. Aitiev Museum of Fine Arts, the foremost museum in Kyrgyzstan located in Bishkek, which houses an array of expansive battle-themed artworks. Additionally, our second study focused on the “Portrayal of Basmachi in Soviet Cinema,” which also led us to fascinating discoveries. Unlike the concealed and demonized portrayal of the “Banderites,” which was largely kept silent, the image of the Basmachi was actively and vibrantly disseminated by Soviet propaganda.

Various practices, which can be viewed through a decolonial lens, were, as our research demonstrates, not uncommon in Soviet and post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, despite the limited and often suppressed information about them. However, these topics were strictly off-limits not only for academic investigations but even for casual “kitchen conversations” — a term used to describe “undesirable discussions” among freedom-minded individuals in the intimate spaces of their homes. There were numerous practices: dissidence, which was only acknowledged in reference to the Soviet “center”; frequent and, in fact, widespread uprisings; the implementation of articles in the Soviet Criminal Code pertaining to “bourgeois nationalism” and the ensuing repressive measures; instances of inequality and discrimination; individuals who dared to raise questions about these issues; and those whose voices were silenced but remained embedded in the collective memory, transmitted through oral narratives. I will delve into these aspects in greater detail.

The process of decoloniality, as a means of comprehension, commenced long before the USSR entered and consolidated its presence, including in Central Asia. References to resistance and the “voluntary incorporation” into the Russian Empire have been preserved in Kyrgyz “oral history” (distinct from literature and art, which were only shaped and made accessible to Asian peoples during the Soviet era). This particular facet of oral tradition serves as an ethnographic window into the vast cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz people, and various other ethnic communities. Notably, even the extraordinary and intricately layered epic legacies, such as “Manas” and other epics, has been overlooked and subject to obstruction and stylization. Within the broader spectrum, there were akyns (singers) who were co-opted as advocates for the new colonial authority and ideology, alongside “zamanists” (contemporaries) whose role was to extol the virtues of the same power.

The entirety of history, culture, and literature was “pulled” into the realm of Soviet modernity, extolling all its ideologized attributes — the Soviet, communist, and achievement-oriented facets. By appropriating the entire national cultural heritage, it was harnessed to serve the monopolistic interpretation of the Soviet authorities, which was disseminated through the realms of education and academia. However, it was only within closed circles that those who remembered and were willing to discuss these matters could preserve the meanings and engage in debates initiated by “zamanists” — thinkers who keenly observed the new tendencies of the time and the societal transformations.

Decolonial — centrifugal forces have always been present. People have consistently contemplated the subjectivity of their nation or community, particularly those who remembered times of freedom. They actively engaged in efforts to reclaim that freedom. These activities were deliberately concealed or transformed into forms that mimicked “class struggle,” ethnography, festival-driven ethno-activism, and the like. Even traditional forms of discourse, such as aitysh (oral improvisational poetry contests), underwent modifications, as singers, storytellers, and manaschy (reciters of the national epic Manas) unexpectedly became propagators of the Soviet regime, exalting the ideals of communism, Lenin, Stalin, and others. Meanwhile, all dissenting voices faced obstruction and silence.

Independence did not miraculously descend upon us in 1991, as we are often made to believe. It was not solely the result of an official gathering in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha. The processes of decolonization and movements had already been initiated,

to different extents, long before. However, they were shrouded in secrecy. The Soviet Union was showing cracks, and centrifugal forces were propelling its disintegration. Every individual who dared to pose “inappropriate questions,” take to the streets, or sing songs in their mother tongue played a part in intensifying these processes.

Independence did not come out of thin air!

We are just unaware of all those who tirelessly propelled its wheels — inch by inch, with their fates and lives. The memory of all those who fought for and safeguarded their culture, whose voices were unheard to us, but nevertheless existed — they have preserved their essence for us.

Independence did not descend from the heavens. We deserved it.

In the year 2022, a book titled “The Book About How We Journey Towards Freedom” was published by Esimde⁴. This collaborative effort by 13 authors describes the practices of decolonization in various spheres. It is presented as a process titled “Civil Activism in Kyrgyzstan: Country, Events, People.” In reality, these practices revolve around the defense of oneself, one’s rights, and the assertion of agency across different domains. Topics covered range from the history of the women’s movement in Kyrgyzstan to environmental initiatives opposing the state-corporate interests in uranium extraction. The book also delves into labor migrant activism in Russia, manifestations of activism in contemporary culture and art through forms such as *akylman*, *chechen*, *sunchy*, and *onorpoz*. It further explores the defense of rights in Islamic activism and memory activism.

Decolonization is not a clearly defined, rigid formula. It encompasses various equivalents and terms. For instance, humanism or democracy with a focus on human rights. The fundamental aspect of the decolonization process is the dismantling of hierarchies, ensuring equal rights for all.

Dignity stands as yet another moral synonym for decolonization. Its significance is not to be taken lightly, as it is entrenched as a fundamental value and an integral component within the constitutions of democratic nations and codes of conduct. Of special significance is the Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, crafted and endorsed by individuals acting on behalf of nations that had endured the tribulations of two world wars, the Holocaust, concentration camps, as well as acts of violence and degradation. This paramount and foundational document represents the collective agreement between individuals and states on matters of decolonization, the equality of the unequal and diverse, and the unequivocal right to dignity and cultural expression.

The Experience and Practices of Kyrgyzstan

Defending one's right to have a voice, embrace their identity, preserve memory, and more, constitutes a protest the prohibitive and stratified forces at play. In Kyrgyzstan, these dynamics manifest themselves with exceptional vigor, particularly within the political sphere. For a long time, Kyrgyzstan proudly wore the mantle of being the "bastion of democracy" in Central Asia, characterized by a relentless stream of protest actions and shifts in power. However, this once illustrious image has noticeably faded in recent years. The global waves of a "conservative backlash," which undermine significant strides towards freedom, also ripple through the Central Asian region. What remains in the wake of these surges are manifestations of authoritarianism, patriarchal tendencies, and resurgent religiosity, all plainly visible on the surface. These prevailing trends exert an influence on the dynamics of colonial networks, both those in a state of decay or undergoing reconstruction, as well as newly emerging corporate globalist projects. They serve to reinstate certain hierarchies and, through the dialectic process, give rise to new ones.

Our mission is to uphold memory, to safeguard our structure of reproduction within language, culture, and art. Where can we achieve this? Through discussions, reflections, creativity, and activism. While we ponder deeply and endeavor to break the chains of past monopolies and hierarchies, ahead of us march the intuitivists — the visual artists. They possess an innate understanding of these processes, refusing to wait — they express and forge ahead.

This artistic expression is a way of manifesting oneself, as one who has been forgotten and unheard. It encapsulates the essence of the "dilemma of the mankurt." The whisper of this dilemma often remains unconscious, residing within dreams, awakening, and protest. It signifies a journey back to oneself, often guided by intuition, which is why the intuitivists take the lead.

It is fascinating to note that Kyrgyzstan, a country with a reputation for having some of the most politically, socially, and even environmentally engaged activists, showcases relatively modest involvement within the realm of decolonial artists. Primarily, the emphasis is placed on intuitive quests, which frequently result in impactful and compelling works.

The understanding of decolonization processes continues to evolve, yet a definitive language and apparatus have not yet been established. Each person develops their own language, their own representation of a decolonizing world, and their unique perspective on it. For example, this can be exemplified through Anatoliy Tsybukh's exhibition series, "**Dreams of the Mankurt**," originating from the city of Osh. Through this collection, the artist explores the concept of the "mankurt" as a symbol of a person lost in their quest for self-discovery, navigating through the shadows of both the past and the present.

When examining the ways in which individuals reframe their own narratives in light of the colonial past, particular attention is given to the **events of 1916 – the Urkun**. Artists capture subjects that are still spoken of in hushed tones, delving into themes, episodes, personal or family histories stemming from the most profound national trauma, whose scars continue to bleed even more fiercely than those of the ideologically charged Second World War. Despite the existence of official sites of remembrance, these artistic portrayals offer a parallel narrative, often presenting a more comprehensive picture that transcends the official narrative's limitations. Here, one can witness an abundance of details, faces, and symbolic elements.

It is important to highlight that these works are showcased in one of the halls at the private school "Bilimkana" in Bishkek. The authors of these works are Aiyp Alakunov and Bazarkul Kokoev. Furthermore, a young artist named Dastan Temirov shared a comprehensive series of his works on the Urkun with Esimde. These exhibitions served as poignant visual representations during the commemorative tour around Issyk-Kul, facilitating meaningful discussions surrounding the Urkun.

Understanding that this is not enough, activists emerge who diligently explore and bring relevance to the topic by merging a research component with activism, as is practiced in the field of memory studies and memory activities. Among the steadfast drivers in unearthing the theme of national trauma and colonial crimes stands Eleri Bitikci – a scholar, activist, and dedicated civic leader who orchestrates protests and employs non-conventional visual methods to captivate attention. One notable example is the reproduction of masks adorned with Edvard Munch's iconic painting, "The Scream," cleverly stylized to resemble yellow containers symbolizing uranium packaging, which were showcased during anti-uranium rallies in Bishkek. Eleri breathes new life into Kyrgyz philosophy, celebrating the inherent harmony with nature while tirelessly exploring and revitalizing narratives from the past as deeply personal experiences. For over a decade, he has immersed himself in the study and popularization of the Kyrgyz people's eco-centric worldview. By dismantling the hierarchy of civilizations that disparages nomadism as primitive, he advocates for his alternative perspective, known as "sedentarism," which challenges prevailing Orientalist notions.

Urkun has been the focal point of his research and promotion for an extended period of time. Thus, throughout the entire year of 2016, known as the centenary year of Urkun, Eleri adhered to a ritual. Every Thursday, he would visit the memorial stone dedicated to the events of 1916 in Bishkek, where he would recite prayers, place candles, and ignite them. Merging elements of both Muslim and Christian commemorative rituals for the deceased in 1916, he diligently carried out this act of remembrance without fail, regardless of the prevailing weather or season. The photographs documenting these weekly gatherings in 2016 were compiled into a cohesive square tableau, serving as a distinct installation commemorating the tragic events that unfolded a century ago.

Decolonialism, as a contemporary concept, often finds expression in works that address mass exploitation. For example, it explores the forced **labor migration** prevalent in countries where migrants are treated as “cheap labor,” with little concern shown by the host state, its bureaucracy, and even its social welfare and security institutions. There are numerous works dedicated to this topic, but one that has garnered significant attention is the collaboration between Zhazgul Madazimova and Valery Rupel in their work “Beyond the Red Line.” This poignant piece delves into the tragic fate of the migrant girls from Kyrgyzstan who perished in a factory fire, particularly those hailing from the economically deprived Batken region, which experiences a high rate of external migration.

The artwork itself speaks volumes, featuring charred dolls suspended on strings, symbolizing the collective destiny of those who were snatched away and consumed by the flames. The tragedy stemmed from the lack of bureaucratic documentation for the girls and safety measures at the Moscow factory. Furthermore, Zhazgul’s subsequent works on decolonization engage in a profound dialogue with her mother, addressing her own erased past, the present realities of migration, and the unspoken dynamics between mother and daughter — continuing the legacy of “old strategies and fears” or, conversely, challenging them through an exploration of her personal and familial history, as eloquently demonstrated by Zhazgul.

It is intriguing to explore the artistic pursuit of Munara Abdulkharova in her work “Jer Janyrganda” (When the Earth Renews). The artist incorporates traditional felt, a material deeply woven into the nomadic culture, in her creations. “Felt is the foundational material that was essential to my ancestors — it serves as the sole accessible medium, connecting generations and symbolizing rebirth,” she explains. By employing this traditional material and its unique texture, Munara embarks on a quest to find answers to profound questions: “Who were my ancestors? Why have certain fragments of knowledge been lost? Perhaps felt holds the key to unveiling the answers I seek.”

“My primary inspiration comes from my own culture: when I immerse myself in it, I feel like I am opening a treasure chest left by my ancestors, containing a wealth of philosophy and meaning embedded in our culture and traditions. I am also deeply inspired by women and their strength. Horses, too, continue to captivate my imagination — I have loved horses and taigans⁵ (a Kyrgyz breed of dogs) since my early childhood,” explains Altynai Osmoeva, a renowned artist, as she reveals the driving force behind her creative endeavors. Her exhibitions, including “Grace-Giving Yurt” (Arte Laguna Prize), as well as her curated exhibition “Girls of Tengri,” featuring the works of four artists from Kyrgyzstan: Darika Bakeeva, Asylkan Talip, Altynai Osmoeva, and Zhyldyz Bekova, all explore the quest for individuality and the essence of the rational and the irrational. Altynai’s visual language is expressive and accessible, captivating audiences both within and beyond the borders of Kyrgyzstan. Several of her works have even graced the pages of *Vogue* magazine.

Within the realm of decolonization, there is a distinct focus on the voices that we designate as unheard, often individuals whom society, due to various reasons, tends to overlook. This forms the core of Mukaram Toktogulova's research and the ensuing discussion in her study on women epic narrators of the Manas, Semetei, and other epics. Despite possessing a remarkable epic heritage, the contributions of women to its preservation and representation have been largely ignored. It has long been believed that the recitation of epics is a spiritual and physical necessity for its carriers, often leading to tales that span several days. However, this privilege has been exclusively granted to men, with the assumption that it is not inherent to women.

However, the memories of women narrators have remained in the collective consciousness of the people. Often, their fates were quite tragic, as they were expelled from their communities and forbidden to engage in narrating. The lives of these women from both the past and the present have become the subject of Mukaram's research. Through her work, she collects materials and sparks discussions, raising important questions: What are the underlying reasons for these experiences? Are they solely influenced by patriarchal views or by modifications imposed on the epic heritage?

This research has become a crucial dialogue on the role of women in the traditions and culture of the Kyrgyz people. For a long time, their history and culture were limited in their representation, often marginalized and confined to the superficial level of festival presentations within the context of class-socialist perspectives.

In this context, it is essential to mention the research and exhibition titled "**12**" that focuses on the women who have left their mark on the development of Kyrgyzstan, defying odds and working passionately. The "12" project invites us to initiate a conversation about the women who have contributed to the formation and advancement of both Soviet and contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Eleven of these women's stories are narrated by our contemporaries, including journalists, artists, and researchers. They explore the experiences of these women who lived in different times but overcame unprecedented challenges, repression, and discrimination, or traveled great distances for their chosen endeavors. These stories are brought together on a website where each textual exploration, skillfully curated by artist Rakhat Asangulova, comes to life in a virtual format at <http://esimde12.tilda.ws/women>.

Various initiatives and communities have played a significant role in the new visual representation. One of the pioneering initiatives is the **ArtEast School of Contemporary Art**, founded by Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev. This school has served as a platform that has given impetus to the formation of the initial artistic projects, discussions, and collaborations. The exploration of diverse topics has taken place, encompassing the understanding of the past and the shaping of the present, ranging from the impact of the "shuttle economy" on society to the study of bazaars, interventions in unexplored realms of ideas and different localities in Bishkek, and the emergence of new identities and theories.

The *ArtEast School* has served as a catalyst for the development of diverse projects, extending far beyond the borders of Kyrgyzstan. Among them, the ***Bishkek School of Contemporary Art (BishCI)***, founded by Diana Ukhina and Alima Tokmergenova, stands out as an exemplary project that explores memory and the past. Their important undertaking, “Artistic Practices of Kyrgyz Women: The Soviet Period,” holds a significant place within their body of work. “For me, research and art are immersive experiences — a means to delve into self-discovery and reconstruct imagination. It is also my right to have a voice. A pivotal moment for me was the censorship of *Feminale* in 2019. It further stimulated my commitment to working on gender-related issues. I have the right to address patriarchal structures that have existed and continue to exist, and I aim to raise these concerns through my work, even if they are not immediately evident,” shares Diana during her presentation at the “Bridges of Memory” conference.

Diana Rakhmanova, the founder of the cultural center “Kuduk,” delves into the themes of memory and decolonization. As a citizen of Tajikistan, she examines the subject of the civil war in Tajikistan, exploring its causes and consequences. Her research encompasses the voices of individuals who have lived through the war, their personal stories, and the coping mechanisms they have employed. Additionally, “Kuduk” focuses on the topic of migration, which is a pressing issue in all Central Asian countries.

When discussing visual works related to decolonization, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant contributions of theater. Explorations of identity and subjectivity are prevalent in the works of Kyrgyzstan’s theater directors. Two noteworthy works from a highly creative and independent theater collective, ***Creative Group 705*** (*Творческая группа 705*), deserve recognition.

It is the play “War’s Unwomanly Face,” based on the book by Svetlana Alexievich. It delves into a complex subject that challenges the post-Soviet society’s perception of war, revealing the truth about the experiences of women during wartime. It strips away the sacrosanct view of war as mere victory and heroism, exposing the pain and tragedy embedded in a woman’s role in war. The play was directed by [Chagaldak Zamirbekov](#) and [Darina Manasbek](#) in collaboration with fourth-year students. As a spectator, I must admit that, considering the weightiness of the topic and the limitations of the intimate theater space located in the basement of a typical Soviet-era apartment building, I was initially surprised and skeptical about such a young theater group tackling such a profound subject. However, the production proved to be a success. The narratives were conveyed in three languages — Kyrgyz, Russian, and Belarusian — as the heroines shared their personal stories. As an experienced viewer, I was compelled to undergo a range of emotions, from pain and horror to tenderness and primordial fear — reflecting the very experiences that women in war have endured and continue to endure.

Another play from this theater is the monodrama "Voice" ("Un" in Kyrgyz), which serves as a reflection on life in the new reality, drawing inspiration from the musings of the Ukrainian poet Mykola, whose voice echoes from the city of Kherson today. In turn, Kherson becomes the place of exile for another character, Bakir, who was among the Kyrgyz people deported and sent there during the 1930s as part of the repressions. Two stories, set in the same city but different eras — what unites them? In the play, these stories intertwine through the voice of Zere, a renowned actress, singer, and civil activist from Kyrgyzstan, who frequently explores borderland themes of decolonization in her artistic work. The production was directed by Shamil Dyikanbaev, with Darina Manasbek as the artist and Begimai Raimbekova as the choreographer.

When reflecting on decolonization, the question of ethnicity and its revival often emerges. These works are frequently criticized for self-orientalism, exoticism, and an excessive focus on ethnography. However, it is important to consider that during the imperial period, culture itself becomes the object of appropriation and regulation, being either marginalized or assimilated to align with the dominant culture, often associated with the culture of the metropolis. In this process, important meanings, elements, and original aesthetics are often lost.

It is intriguing that Gamal Bokonbaev, one of Kyrgyzstan's most assertive art scholars, who possesses a comprehensive knowledge and interpretation of the works of numerous artists from Soviet and contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, refers to this process of appropriation and stagnation as "philharmonization." This term describes the establishment of a unified state aesthetic standard by monopolistic cultural and artistic institutions, often represented by philharmonic orchestras (state or national). Any deviation from this "standard" is criticized, particularly when it involves aspects rooted in the "indigenous traditional culture" of local communities. The hierarchy of values, aesthetics, and other factors is guided by the political power structure or imperialism. As a result, those who do not appreciate "high art," such as ballet and opera, are often dismissed as "uncultured" or "uneducated," lacking a sense of beauty.

Indeed, the influence of colonialism and cultural hegemony extends to various spheres, including gastronomy. In our research at Esimde, we encountered documents in the regional archives of the country that revealed sanctions imposed during the early years of Soviet power on those who produced traditional beverages like shoro or maksym, labeling them as "bourgeois drinks." Within this process of appropriation, many gastronomic recipes were lost, including unique ones that had been part of the culinary and even medicinal traditions of the people for centuries.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the business projects in Kyrgyzstan that have revitalized and promoted traditional production while actively searching for lost recipes. Let's highlight two pioneering examples: the "Shoro" company and the

ethnographic complex “Supara.” Interestingly, these ventures are connected as part of the same family business. Their founder, Tabyldy Egemberdiev, is a renowned publicist, leader of the activist post-colonial (or, in another older language, “national-liberation”) movement in the early 1990s, and a successful entrepreneur who has demonstrated remarkable success not only in the business field but also in the revival of traditional recipes.

The first notable endeavor focuses on the production of traditional beverages such as shoro, maksym, chalap, and others. These drinks were once considered marginal and exclusively prepared in private kitchens within ethnic circles. The second project, “Supara,” the name means the traditional mobile leather cloth used by nomads. Today, “Supara” has evolved into an ethnographic complex that incorporates tourism and gastronomy, reviving and preserving traditional techniques that were often forgotten.

Both of these brands, or more specifically, the individuals behind them, have played a significant role in Kyrgyzstan. Unfortunately, the renowned figure Tabyldy Egemberdiev has passed away, leaving a remarkable legacy. However, his spouse, Zhanyl Turganbaeva, has taken the reins and continues to lead and revitalize the business. She is dedicated to upholding the fundamental principles of decolonization in her work. This commitment is evident in the presence of a museum within the complex, as well as the organization of discussions and various events initiated by Zhanyl. To learn more about their activities, you can visit their website: www.supara.kg.

In recent years, several research and creative centers have been emerging in Kyrgyzstan with a focus on “returning to the roots” by reviving traditional clothing and exploring various aspects of the culture and daily life of the diverse ethnic groups residing in the country.

The realm of lost aesthetics extends far beyond mere culture and art; it represents enigmatic survival mechanisms that elucidate and resurrect the tapestry of a bygone era. Take, for instance, the captivating endeavors of Emil Tilekov, a curious explorer of Kyrgyz costume and traditions. His ventures into colorized historical photographs of Kyrgyzstan have bestowed upon us the opportunity to reconstruct a vivid tableau of the past — a glimpse into the very essence of our heritage, where every intricate facet finds purpose. This remarkable project stands as but one manifestation of his tireless efforts to rekindle our self-awareness (link to the project: <https://www.facebook.com/tv1kgBishkek/videos/592946171847384/>)

Countless other diverse initiatives, too, abound, restoring and disseminating the manifold cultural and artistic expressions of the Kyrgyz people. Such endeavors flourish in abundance. Although the shackles of restriction and conformity have been cast off in the wake of independence, the specter of “cultural appropriation” lingers on, epitomized by the pervasive forces of globalization and homogenization within mass culture. Nevertheless, when confronted with choice and armed with

the wisdom of centuries-old techniques, traditional elements emerge as formidable contenders, as exemplified by the global triumph of our resplendent chapans and coveted felt creations, gracing both international runways and marketplaces. Above all, this choice remains an intrinsic reflection of our own volition — a testament to our inherent agency.

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- ¹ “Mankurt” is a metaphorical character from Chingiz Aitmatov’s novel “The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years.” It depicts an individual who has been captured and subjected to intricate torture, resulting in their transformation into a soulless enslaved being. Completely obedient to their master, they are stripped of all recollection of their former existence.
 - ² The term “decolonization” has become widely used in everyday language since 2022. Prior to that, different analogies were employed. One of the most common ones was the term “national liberation movement/struggle.” However, its dual nature, embodying both revolutionary elements and protest against the state and dominant ethnic group, makes it somewhat inconvenient and imprecise. Nevertheless, during the 1990s, a period marked by movements for independence and essentially a decolonial movement, this designation was widely utilized.
 - ³ Mirzиеev recognized the leaders of the Basmachi as champions of Uzbekistan’s independence. Media Zone. Central Asia. <https://mediazona.ca/news/2021/08/31/basmachi>
 - ⁴ “Esimde” (which means “I remember” in Kyrgyz and Turkic languages) is a platform for research and discussion. www.esimde.org
 - ⁵ The Taigan, also referred to as the Kyrgyz greyhound, is an [aboriginal dog](#) breed belonging to the ancient group of Central Asian sighthounds. It has developed and flourished in the challenging mountainous areas of [Kyrgyzstan](#), predominantly within the [Tian Shan](#) region.