Combating Stillness: Marginalization, Social Relatedness and Economic Maneuvering in Kosh-Agach, Altai

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Master’s thesis
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May 2017
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http://www.duo.uio.no/

Print: Reposentralen, University of Oslo
Abstract

This thesis is based on a novel ethnographic fieldwork in the district of Kosh-Agach, Altai Republic, Russia. It considers how the different ethnic groups in this area: the indigenous Telengits, the Kazakhs having origins in Kazakhstan, and the Russian temporary workers. The Telengit especially deal with the feeling of abandonment by the state, a circumstance that has created ‘stillness’, a term that encompasses audible, developmental and motional aspects.

Kosh-Agach is placed both in the context of Siberia, an area considered by the hyper-centralized Russia as peripheral, and tries to grasp how the people here combat this centralisation. It is with a great deal of flexibility and pragmatism that they manoeuvre their everyday lives. Through extensive social, economic and moral networks the inhabitants of Kosh-Agach distribute the stress of marginalization. These networks have roots both in Soviet ideology and the economic crisis during the 1990s.

The sharing of sacred land in this context creates tensions between the Telengits and the Kazakh population. These groups share many traditional cultural elements, and this thesis shows how they balance their alterity and sameness, while sharing the persisting stillness. The local Russians, both temporary and permanent also share the land, but the state agents practice in Kosh-Agach, located in a border area, is one of power and dominance. This thesis show how the Russian border and the agents that control and reproduce it, complicate the lives of Telengits and their relation to spirits in the land.

For the Telengits the land and spirits are one, and it is their destined duty to provide worship and care to this unity. This thesis explore how the flexibility of spirits creates a plasticity to worship and led the Telengits to combine practises to create effect – the true goal of worship.

Keywords: Russia, Altai, Telengits, Kazakhs, indigeneity, abandonment, stillness, margins, pragmatism, state, moralities, networks, identities, development, land, borders
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Benedikte Lindskog for her enduring support, knowledge and time – without you I would never have known about Altai, I would never have met the amazing people in this thesis, and I would be an experience poorer. I value your kindness, humour, warmth and excellent mind. Thank you, for teaching me how to be a good anthropologist.

I am grateful to the department of social anthropology at University of Oslo both for their teachings and for the much-needed economic support. Also imperative for the project, thanks to Gorno-Altaysk State University and all their wonderful helpers - Natalia Aleksandrovna Iurkova, Surna Barisovna Sarbashevna and Tatiana Alpyjevna.

To my fellow master students who have been excellent support both academically and emotionally, thank you. Thanks to Magnus and Stina for their feedback and help, and thanks to Lena for being so wonderfully human; honest and kind. To my friends in Kosh-Agach, thank you for your striking openness towards this strange, foreign person – you have taught me about the strengths of relationships. And thanks to all my friends and family – your love and support has meant the world to me.
To my mother Annelise, my sister Aurora and my father Allan; thank you for being patient when almost every conversation for the last two years have led to me saying “You know, there is this really interesting thing that I experienced in Altai…” Thank you for pushing me to do what feels right and comforting me when I make mistakes. Æ elske dokker.

Lastly, and with immense gratitude and love, I would like to thank the two pillars of this thesis, Ene and Elena (I apologize for not using your real names). You have changed me to my core, you have taught me about love, companionship, patience and balance. You were my home in Altai and you still, in a way, are today. I hope you are satisfied with the conclusion in this thesis, and how you are portrayed. Any negative or unfair portrayal was not intended and is entirely my own fault.

Быйан болын, менинг нёкёрлёрим!
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Introduction: A people in the margins - ethics and method

Elena, my Telengit interpreter and friend, was walking slowly by the small stream taking in all the sights and sounds. In front went Bolat, a young Kazakh man with a kind and joking nature, his friend Ayukhan, also a young Kazakh man, and Oksana, a Russian woman in her thirties. As we approached the forested hillside we heard shouting coming from the left side of the trees. “Get away! This is my forest, you are not allowed to be here.” A small, middle-aged woman was yelling at us from her small house among the trees. The boys laughed at her, but Elena answered calmly “This can not be your forest, no one can own the forest.” The woman muttered to herself, clearly not pleased, but retracted still. “What a crazy woman”, said Elena. “Who is she to think she can own this land?” Getting close to the hill, the boys stopped to urinate and smoke and the rest of us started to climb the stony slope. When we arrived at the top, we sat down to enjoy the view. Elena walked a little bit of, seating herself under a tree and talking softly. I observed her, noticing the calmness she seemed to feel and the softness of her actions. She took a small white shell she had hanging from her iPhone and placed it by the foot of the tree. I looked around. The boys were playing around, trying to camouflage themselves among the rocky surface of the hill, and Oksana had climbed higher to sit by herself. It was silent, and I watched the sun hanging low on the horizon. Elena came over and I asked her what she had been doing. “I gave my white shell to the spirit of this place, thanking him for a lovely day.” “How nice”, I replied, and we sat together in silence. When we returned to the stream we all gathered water from it in bottles we had brought. “This is the healthiest water”, said Bolat. “It’s good for you!” The girls decorated the car with flowers we had picked, and we drove home playing music while posting pictures from the trip of Instagram.

It was from this hiking trip and onwards that I truly got to understand how different groups of people in Kosh-Agach district related to land, the stillness and the worship. Contrasting the hiking trip to the drive home and the different ways my acquaintances behaved toward land, made it seem to me that there were contrasting, yet overlapping modes of relating to the land and its spirits. A person could both of sacrifice and worship the spirits, and “rock out” to loud music in the back of a cool car moving through the sacred land. You could urinate and smoke in the forest, and later collect water and mentioning the purity of nature.
This thesis is about a proud people with a long history and a strong fighting spirit. From my very first encounter with Telengits, which was through the texts of Agnieszka Halemba (2004, 2006, 2008) I have had insatiable interests in their life and land. When I left for fieldwork my original plan was to study how the Telengits experienced traditional healing with regards to the land and spirits. I realized halfway into my time in Kosh-Agach that what I had initially set out to explore were of little relevance to those people I engaged with and other aspects of their social, moral and economic lives had come more to the forefront through my engaging with people and through interviews I had conducted. Deciding to steer my focus in a different topical direction left me at the time somehow desperate. In retrospect I see that the desperation was not needed. The themes presented in the example above and that I will discuss in the following chapters, were such a daily accordance that it took me some time to realize that this was something I could explore further and in fact write about.

**Access, entry and constructing a field**

On invitation from the local university Gorno-Altaysk State University (GASU), I was lucky to receive a place to stay temporarily in student dormitories during my initial weeks in Altai. They provided me with useful contacts and arranged for me to stay in the home of my Kokoryan host, Ene. Furthermore they provided assistance in paperwork as well as helped to arrange interviews I had with leaders in the Telengit community in Gorno-Altaysk¹ and the leader of the Museum of Gorno-Altaysk. They also set me up with a personally adapted and rather intense Russian language course during my stay in Gorno-Altaysk.

My original plan had included a move from the district Kosh-Agach to Ulagan, another district northwest of Kosh-Agach halfway into fieldwork. After spending about 40 days with Ene, I realized, however, that the best plan would be to stay the whole period in Kosh-Agach district with her. This way I could get more time to build relationships, and get deeper into the social fabric of Kosh-Agach. With this I abandoned, to a certain degree, a comparative approach, and focused my scope truly on the Telengits of Kosh-Agach district. This focus has through the course of writing changed to include the data I had on the other ethnic groups in Kosh-Agach, and in

¹ The Altai Republic’s capital.
² Districts of the Altai Republic.
the end the focus is planted in the perspective of the Telengits, but with an analysis that considers the impact of an ethnically mixed context.

Altogether I spent about 1 month and 10 days in Gorno-Altaysk, 4 months in Kosh-Agach and a week in Moscow, leaving a total of about 5 and ½ months in Russia during the first half of the year 2016. As mentioned, it was not easy for me to figure out where and what my field was. Changing both my thematic and practical plans I had to reconsider both whom I should talk to and what about. Raymond Madden (2010, p. 38-39) writes: “Constructing a field site is an attempt to put boundaries around an ethnographer’s enquiries into a human group or institution”. I had to create and recreate these boundaries at several points during my fieldwork, and believe that I have landed upon a theme and a bounded site that makes sense.

My research ended up focusing on the post-socialist context of Kosh-Agach district and how people here combat and maneuver, what they perceive as the abandonment of the Russian state. Throughout this text I will explore how aspects of ‘marginality’ and ‘periphery’ shape the lives of people and how these create a condition I have called ‘stillness’. This condition, I suggest has to do both with the idea of Siberia as desolate and peripheral in modern day Russia, which leads to hyper-centralization, and with the fact that this is an area physically far removed and not easily accessed. In this context of stillness and deep sense of feeling abandoned by the state, people resort to a high degree of practicality and pragmatism that influence and shape their social, economic, moral and spiritual relations.

I consider this my fieldwork a novel one, and I believe that this thesis will serve as an ethnographic contribution to the field of Inner Asia and more specifically to Altai, which has not been extensively researched by anthropologists, thus far.

**Method**

My method put in simple terms consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. These made up the core of my research and had a twofold aspect. There was the participant observation and interviews I could do on my own, such as conversations with English teachers, my interpreter Elena, certain conversations with my host Ene, and most observations of everyday life. On the other hand, there was the participant observation and interviews where I was dependent on Elena’s help. These consisted mostly of interviews, observations of situations with a lot of dialogue, and longer informal conversations.
My life in Kokorya and Kosh-Agach was completely submerged in the local life. I had little opportunity for complete withdrawal, nor did I want to. I aspired to “deep hanging out”, an approach of immersion coined by Clifford Geertz (1998). Joining Ene in her everyday life was central to my method and, I believe such a methodological focus has served me well. I can envision a full day, week or month in her life and in the life of the other inhabitants of Kosh-Agach, and this I believe gives me a good base for my arguments. I do not pretend to know these people’s full lives, nor their secrets or inner life, but I do know how they acted out their social life during some months in 2016. And this is the strength of participant observation and ethnography, as Madden (2010, p.16) writes:

“Ethnography is a qualitative social science practice that seeks to understand human groups (or societies, or cultures, or institutions) by having the researcher in the same social space as the participants in the study”.

During my stay it tried my very best to truly find myself in this shared “social space”, and participated to my best ability like a sister, a friend and a daughter. This was a choice not fully mine, as this was the role prescribed to me both by Ene and by Elena – my two most important people in field. The reason for aspiring to this “submerged” way of study was also like Judith Okely (2012, p. 77) points out: “Participant observation involves more than co-residence, verbal interaction and observation; it also involves knowledge through the body, through all the senses”.

My proposed study was one that relied heavily on phenomenological knowledge as method and trying to find a little bit of that in my everyday research I wanted to use my body to the fullest extent. One of the most interesting bodily experiences was one that shapes the whole predicament for this thesis; it was one of stillness. Sitting hours on end in Kokorya without anything happening was a stark contrast to the life I had experienced in Gorno-Altaysk, and for a long time I felt that Ene and I were sitting around waiting for something that never happened. This feeling is one that is woven throughout this text.

Another point by Okely (2012, p. 81), concerns visibility: “Anthropologists cannot become entirely invisible, although their presence may eventually be taken for granted” but I do not pretend to have reached this level of blending in. I was, I believe very visible during all of my fieldwork and this was due to several reason; the
duration of my stay, the fact that I researched with an interpreter, and because of my physical appearance. People could spot me from long distances and frequently did. When I walked in the center of Kosh-Agach, even after months, I would get people looking at me like I was an elephant walking down the road. This, I believe gave me both advantages and hindrances. Advantages because some people would be interested, striking up a conversation or contacting Elena about our work. Hindrances because the association with me could for some make them vulnerable, compromising their status, and leave them to being questioned by others about what they were talking to me about. I tried to the best of my ability to interview people in locales where they were comfortable, and respected any request to keep conversations secret.

Elena – my guide

The road to Kosh-Agach district was winding and long framed with high mountains and the Katun River charging through the land. Cattle, horses, goats, and sheep wandered freely and often had to be chased off the road by honking until the animal moved. The first time I saw this I was convinced that the cattle had escaped and I was surprised that we did nothing to herd them back home. There I was, sitting in the minibus that, two times a day, took Altaians, Telengits, Russians, Kazakhs, tourists, and that day, anthropologists, to the southernmost part of the Altai Republic. It was crowded, though I seemed to be the only one who was bothered. The woman next to me had been sleeping for the last two hours, partly on me, so I was careful not to move too much (not that I really could, there was not enough space). We drove over a hump and finally she woke up. As we passed the sign showing me that we had reached Koch-Agach district the people on the bus seemed to notice that I was still there. I had not gotten off to travel to the more “touristy” places like Ust-Kan or Ongudai. The driver, who had insisted that I sit in the front to “take pictures and look at the beautiful sights”, asked me what I was planning to do. I told him in my very bad Russian that I was from Norway, that I wanted to study Telengit tradition and culture, and that I was going to live in Kokorya. The whole bus was listening. The woman next to me asked me “Do you know Elena?” “No” I said. “Give me your phone number, I will get you in touch with her. She speaks a lot of languages, Japanese, English and Spanish.” I thought to myself that this might be an interesting experience.

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2 Districts of the Altai Republic.
person to meet, but I was sceptical, as I had realized that to “speak a lot of languages” in Russian context can mean anything (and most likely, nothing). But still, I gave away my number, hoping for the best. A couple of days later my phone rang and a woman with perfect English presented herself as Elena. She became my interpreter and closest confidant. During my stay in Kosh-Agach district she guided me through villages, friendships, meetings with shamans and other people who were willing to talk to me. All of this has become essential to the following text. What also was essential was her companionship and without her I would have had a very different experience during fieldwork.

Elena was a younger woman, and worked in Kosh-Agach as an English teacher. She had studied abroad in Europe before, and knew several languages. She was, in the general view of others in Kosh-Agach, very different, both visually and in her opinions. She had a short haircut, something highly discouraged among younger unmarried women, and she was quite tall. She was strikingly beautiful with a big smile and a mild demeanour. She was kind to everyone we met and charmed most with her humour. Because of her personality, knowledge and patience my fieldwork was made easier, and she has had a tremendous impact on my approach and I hope that her voice resonates in this text as well as my own.

Ene – my guardian
Getting of the above-mentioned minibus that same day, I was greeted by two small Telengit women. They grabbed me, and my bags, which I tried to insist on carry myself, and took me to a taxi. In the taxi full of people, bags, food shopping, and children we drove to the village Kokorya and straight to Ene’s house. She came out of her big gate and hugged me saying in halting English “I am Ene! Welcome!” Ene was an elderly woman, with a big belly and that special soft skin that older people get. She had worked and lived in Kokorya her whole life. “I have worked 40 years”, she would say, and I later realised that it was quite a special achievement to have such a long career. She did not speak English, but we communicated in Russian and with the help from an English-Russian dictionary she had borrowed from the local library. She was incredibly caring, cooking meals several times a day, feeding me until my belly hurt and always leaving me to myself when I needed to write or just surf on my computer. She would remind me several times a day to drink and eat and she would always ask me what I had seen in my dreams, especially if I had seen my mother. Ene described
her motivation for this care with the fact that her own daughter had during her education spent six months in China, and Ene said “My child was cared for, now I care for you”.

Living with Ene gave me an advantage in that her networks were extensive and I could fit neatly into a role of her guest/daughter. She was fiercely protective of me; once confronting a man she suspected had yelled bad things at me on the street, another time buying me medicine and arranging for me to be checked by a doctor when I had what I would categorize as a common cold. She forgave my mistakes, such as when I over the course of several weeks threw used toilet paper into the oven in the kitchen. The oven, I later realized, was the home of a spirit, who should be treated with the upmost reverence. The fact that Ene was a respected citizen of Kokorya and Kosh-Agach gave me some security in meeting strangers. Saying I lived with her in Kokorya placed me both physically and socially in the land of Kosh-Agach district.

Language

While in Norway I had attended several language courses in Russian, but my actual knowledge of the language when arriving in the Altai Republic was limited. Through GASU I had a personalized speed course that helped a lot, but I quickly realized that my language skills were not good enough to do fieldwork independently. This, I still consider my biggest weakness in the field and means that most of the empirical material presented here has come through my interpreter Elena. Throughout my time in Kosh-Agach I had constant talks with her about what the project was about, what my thoughts were and how to proceed forward. She herself had studied ethnography at a Russian university and was familiar with the method and the general concept. I believe that this constant communication between us helped in the interpretation of both of questions and answers and for their content and meaning to be as clear and helpful as possible. My option would have been to not include Elena in the direction of my study and while this might have had its benefits, I believe including her as a research partner and interpreter had vastly greater benefits.

Taking my language limitations into regard I also contacted several English teachers in Kosh-Agach district and got to interview a few of them. Often I would be asked to participate in an English lesson, usually with the older students to help them
practice and to be a foreign guest. These visits were interesting, and helped me form connections to both adult teachers and to the younger population of the district.

Although I had planned for the Russian language to surround me, it came only secondary to Altaian. I was prepared for this to a certain degree, but had decided that I would rather try to learn Russian reasonably well, instead of using my mental energy on learning Altaian and Russian semi-simultaneously, and ending up with a poor mastering of both. Having Elena halted my Russian practice, but enabled me to pick up a little Altaian which, I must admit was mostly used to my own entertainment; seeing the faces of Altaians when a foreigner greeted them in their own language was extremely satisfying. These phrases also gave me a little acknowledgement among the Kokoryans and served as a confirmation that I was there to learn about them and not Russians or Kazakhs. Not understanding Altaian was one of my biggest weaknesses during fieldwork, meaning that I could not pick up on small everyday conversations on a bus or in the grocery store, but also that I could not understand the exact formulation of a phrase or a statement.

Still, there is something to be said of having an interpreter who was totally submerged in the studied field, one who herself had studied Telengit tradition, who I got along with well and who spoke perfect English. I believe, that under the circumstances, I could not have asked for a better solution to my shortcomings.

**Ethics**

Doing fieldwork right is a tricky thing, and I am not quite sure what “right” even means. I believe that it is highly contextual and dependent of the people you study and study with. One of my main concerns was to not be “in the way” of my hosts, friends or acquaintances. This, it turned out was not very compatible with a time-limited fieldwork, and I realized after some time that doing participant observation was a lot of being “in the way”. Okely writes: “Ultimately, knowledge can be acquired through the total experience, not primarily through the role of detached questioner.” (2012, p. 80). This meant in this particular context, living in stillness, being cold, getting sunburned every other day during springtime, eating weird food, drinking a hefty amount of vodka, feeling the tension when the border control pulled the car over, participating in employment in Kosh-Agach, and participating in reciprocity between friends, clans and spirits. Being “in the way” ended up just being a participant – annoying at times, charming at others.
Everyone in this text has been given a new name, mostly because Kosh-Agach is so very small and my fieldwork was well known. The names they have been given are either Kazakh for the ones with Kazakh names, Russian for the ones with Russian, and Altaian for the ones with Altaian names. This was done to echo my actual fieldwork, and it shows how usual it is with Russian names. The only exception to this rule is Ene. “Ene” is not actually a name; it is a word, and it means “mother”. I felt that this was a loving gesture to the person who in many ways became my Altaian mother: Ene. I sent a notification form to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) before the start of my fieldwork, and they have approved my research.

By making the people I talked to harder to identify, I hope to give a little bit of protection, in case anyone were to get in trouble for their opinions, not that I believe any of the statements in this thesis to be very controversial. During my structured interviews I would always ask for permission to use the conversation in my research, which I received every time. Every now and then I would be told not to include something or someone, which naturally I respected. There was also information I have gotten that I have excluded for the protection of the person, and there are other parts that I have kept in the text, but obscured any identifying information. Incidents and events in the public life of Kosh-Agach district or the Altai Republic have been treated as just that, public.

Reciprocity
I tried my very best during my stay to make up for the time I took out of peoples everyday lives. To almost all interviews I would bring tea, biscuits and chocolate – a very common gift to give to a household. In other situations, there was money involved, such as paying for conducting some of the interviews with shamans, and money was also a part of my relation both with Bolat, my driver and Elena. I thought a great deal about how much I should pay, how this would affect the power relations between us and what that could mean for the information I would get from them. Elena was at first uncomfortable with accepting the money from me, but I decided not to pay her every time we worked together, but rather give her larger sums after some weeks of work, and to continually buy meals when we ate together. Whenever she expressed the want to pay for herself I agreed and would carry it in mind to pay for something, such as the taxi, on some other occasion.
With Ene it was different, the rent I was paying her went through the university and she did not want any extra payment. I tried my best to help around the house, but I think to some degree she found this more complicating that helping. She had after all been living on her own for over about over 5 years. I helped out with carrying shopping bags, paying for taxis if we needed one, helping carry buckets when the water truck arrived and I tried to be both a fun companion and non-invasive guest. At the end of my fieldwork, she had a relative come stay with us to upgrade her house, putting up isolation, a new metal covering on her house and new windows and frames. One day, as I got up to eat my breakfast, she handed me a note where she had written something in Russian. It said: “Because of you I can fix my house”. I hugged her, and we got a bit emotional. I thanked her for letting me stay and said I was so glad to have given back to her in some way. For both Ene and me the time we shared has resulted in material goods that will be of use in the future; for me it is this thesis, and for her it was the upgrade of her home.

**Theoretical framework**

I have tried to the best of my ability to avoid being dependent on a singular theoretical framework. Or, to put it differently, I have worked from the standpoint of letting the empirical facts determine the direction of my theoretical reflections in my analysis of the empirical material. I have sought to use theories eclectically in order to give credit to the ethnography that has emerged during my fieldwork.

In regards to comparable locales I have relied especially on the works of Halemba (2006, 2008, 2011), Caroline Humphrey (2002, 2015) and Benedikte Lindskog (2011). Their work from respectively Kosh-Agach, Buryatia in Russia and Mongolia was useful comparatively when trying to interpret my empirical data within a wider Inner Asia context. When addressing the study of the margins, I have used Deborah Poole and Veena Das’ three approaches (2004), and when analysing the economic and moral networks the works of Ruth Mandel and Humphrey (2002) on the post-socialist markets, Sergei Oushakine’s (2000) work on young people in Barnaul, and Joma Nazpary’s (2002) description of networks in Kazakhstan have been especially fruitful. Further, when approaching the sharing of land and stillness, how ethnic relations shape this sharing and how the different groups of Kosh-Agach relate to each other I have turned to the works of Fredrik Barth on ethnic boundaries (1969), Rupert Stasch’s (2009) work on alterity as relation among the Karowai, and
Chapter 1: Living in Stillness

The Telengits

The Telengits are an indigenous people living in the southernmost part of the Altai Republic in Russia, most of them in either in the district of Ulagan or the district of Kosh-Agach, both located in the southeast region of the republic. The Russian census from 2010[^3] counted 3,648 Telengits in the Altai Republic, but from my fieldwork, I am quite sure that these numbers were incorrect. In Kokorya, a village in Kosh-Agach district, alone there are about 1,000 people, and they are talked about and talk of themselves as Telengits. Halemba (2006) critiques the 2002 census, arguing that these numbers might vary depending on how the question of ethnic belonging was asked, by whom and in what language. The point being that in a more “Altaian” setting they would be more inclined to highlight the difference between for example a Tölös[^4] and a Telengit, but in a Russian setting they would merely define themselves as Altaians. She also shows that calling oneself “Altaian” instead of “Telengit” may be linked to “Altaian national patriotism” (Halemba 2006, p. 21.22). I will throughout this thesis use both these terms, but when using the term ‘Altaian’ I indicate all the inhabitants in Altai who trace their ancestry to this area, excluding white Russians and Kazakhs, groups that will be discussed in a later chapter.

The Telengits have since 2000 been on the list of “Small-numbered Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation”, and this grants them certain economic benefits. To be on this list the group must live in their traditional area, live in a traditional way, not exceed 50,000 members and must self-identify as Telengit. Other small groups in Russia are presently seeking this membership hoping it will better their economic situation. The general view of the people I met, however, was that it did not necessarily improve their lives. Many expressed concern that the economic grants did not reach the people in need and rather fell into the pockets of people in more powerful positions.

The Telengits are a proud people with Turkic heritage. In the southeastern areas people were traditionally nomadic, living in yurts and owning livestock. Most Telengits today are settled and work either with livestock, their own or their extended

[^4]: A different indigenous group living in the Altai Republic.
families. Many women work in schools, kindergartens and in health clinics or schools. Among the people I met were teachers, beauticians, livestock owners, librarians, drivers, social workers, etc. In small villages you will find more people who own livestock and have more “traditional” professions, and in bigger towns like Kosh-Agach there were more government and service jobs.

Clan system

The Telengits, like many Turkic peoples, are divided into clans, called ‘söök’ with each person belonging to one specific söök. The word ‘söök’ is Altaian and means ‘bone’. These clans are patrilineal and are constitutive of one’s identity and belonging. These clans also have specific symbols and animals connected to them. Like the clan Kypchak, where the animal associated is a wolf and the symbol is a mouthpiece (as used on horses). Further, this clan is divided into several “branches”, probably originating in patrilineal linages, with an origin myth showing that the different branches of the clan came from a father dividing up a horse and giving the pieces to his sons. Each part of the horse became a branch of the clan. My interpreter Elena’s branch, for example, was associated with the neck of a horse. Sööks are important, this was clear to me from the beginning of my stay. It indicated whom you were related to and whom you could marry, but also what kind of people you might not be likely to get along with too well. Elena told me that certain stereotypes were associated with different clans: some were lazy, some were cheap, and others were hardy. Your clan is part of your identity in many ways, and a Telengit would always be conscious about his or her own clan and try to establish the clans of others.

Ene, my host in Kokorya, may serve as an example of the importance of establishing clan belonging; I would often walk with Ene to one of the local food shop. She knew the woman working there and they would sit talking while I joined. One time there was a little girl there with her father and Ene asked this little girl three questions: how old she was, what her name was, and what söök she belonged to. I later asked Ene about sööks and how it worked. She told me what I had already heard, that you are born into your fathers söök and you must marry with a different söök than your own. I asked her what her children’s söök was; she told me that they were “Almat”. I then asked her what söök her grandchildren were. She answered “Almat”. I stopped for a bit, thinking how this could be. “Was their father also Almat?” I asked. “Yes” she answered. I knew this would probably be quite problematic, but I also
knew that this was becoming more and more normal. I had previously interviewed Tanya, a Telengit teacher about her life and she had told me about sööks. She had a son with a non-Telengit man (they were no longer together and she did not tell me his identity) and she had started to worry about how she would “classify” her son and how she would explain to him how he fitted, or did not fit, into this system of clans.

Every clan has a clan leader called jaizang⁵, but when asking Elena who the jaizang of her söök was she did not know. She told me about the jaizang of all the Telengits, how he had political power and often they are the ones to ask a biler kizhi⁶ to join a ritual or a celebration. These leaders may have been more powerful before the Soviet, but I suspect that this changed, especially during the Stalinistic period. To my knowledge, the real power of a clan leader was limited and that most of the time his position served as more of a symbolic leadership.

Women’s role in the clan system

Although the clan system makes the Telengits appear to be patrilineal in every aspect, there are moderations to this idea. For Telengits a woman is the centre of the house, the whole family is built around her. She does offerings every month to the spirit of the fire. This spirit is located in a wood-burning oven, which most Telengit houses have. She prays to this spirit and offers to it artys, dried twig from juniper. The father of a family in Kokorya told me that after a woman dies, the family stops giving offerings, “the family is no more, without the woman there is nothing,” he said. This quote, I suggest, show both that women’s ritual and spiritual work affects the existence and durability of the family, and that the patriarchal aspects of Altaian clans are fluid, and adaptable. The mother/wife is central and serves as the be-all and end-all of a family. Elena, in many conversations about men and women, highlighted the importance of balance between possibly contrasting “spirits”, indicating the different tempers of women and men. This perspective is also found in Altaian cosmology where the need for balance between both genders is portrayed as important to the sustainability of life itself. Examples of this can be found in how the yurt, the traditional house of Telengits, is parted in two sides, a male and a female and how the

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⁵ In other texts referred to as a ’zaisan’.

⁶ Means a ”knowing person”, a person with ritual knowledge.
male spirit of a sacred land exists side-by-side a female spirit of a river flowing through this very land, as with the sacred land of Ere Chuy and the Chng river

**Kosh-Agach**

“Chui steppe is a unique natural area, an unusually exciting and exotic for the European traveller in terms of landscape, flora and fauna.

This slightly undulating plain, located at an altitude of 1700-1900 meters above sea level, is surrounded by mountain ranges covered with eternal snows.

Here reigns harsh climate (permafrost reaches 15-90 m into the ground), dry and windless. The river Chuya cuts the steppe. The vegetation in the desert is almost absent, only occasionally visible prickly shrubs and bushes of wormwood.

Imagine Chui steppe - "end of the world" (Kosh-Agach means "good-bye, the tree", that is, the last tree in front of the desert), the place where civilization (relative civilization...) gives way to a deserted wilderness. Travel to Chui steppe - a journey into the unknown, to the exotic, to the "edge of the world".”

This is how the area of Kosh-Agach and the steppe is described on a Russian tourist webpage that has offices located in Altai Krai, a neighbouring raion to Altai Republic. Presented as an area at “the edge of the world”, wild and harsh, it seems almost like you are leaving everything known behind.

Kosh-Agach is both a district and a village. The whole district is 19,845 square km, and is the only district in the Altai Republic that has borders to Kazakhstan, China, and Mongolia and is also the only place in Russia where all these borders meet. The area is also one of the few in the republic that has a rather large share of Kazakh inhabitants. Altogether in the republic there were in 2010 counted

8 A raion is an administrative unit.
12,524 Kazakhs, with many of them living in Kosh-Agach. This is also the only district that has “pure” Kazakh villages. There is sort of a running joke in the republic that Kosh-Agach has become a Kazakh area, but at the same time it is viewed as the stronghold of Telengits and of traditional knowledge. In the city centre you can find a bazaar, two schools, several cafes, and a newer, very small shopping mall. I spent many days in Kosh-Agach, this being the village were Elena lived and also the district centre. Therefore, Kosh-Agach serves as the main-stage for much of the empirical findings presented in this thesis.

Ere Chuy

Ere Chuy is the sacred home of the Telengits, and it is not as much a specific area as it is a “notional area” (Halemba 2006, p. 42). Its borders are fuzzy and heavily debated, and there are rules to be followed when you are there, as documented by Halemba (2006). Its notional quality was evident when I on several occasions asked the Telengits I knew where Ere Chuy started and began. The questions almost seemed unnecessary, and where people placed the borders would vary. Physically, Ere Chuy is on a plateau reaching as high as 2000 meters over sea level, and it is located in the district of Koch-Agach. For the Telengits this place has its own spirit, of a male energy, that guards and controls the land. Ere Chuy also contains many other spirits, such as the female spirit of the Chng river. Ere Chuy is sacred land. It has powers that need to be respected. It can welcome you or it can reject you, if you leave it can make you sick and unfortunate. As a shaman told me: “If you do bad things while you are in this land, Ere Chuy will punish you when you leave. You will feel sick and unhappy.” Examples of this were plentiful, as a mother of a family in Kokorya told me:

“The spirits are offended by them and they punish them. A few years ago a Russian family travelled here and they took pictures in bikinis (indicated that these photos were of an erotic nature) by the arshan suu (sacred spring), later they were killed in a car crash”.

For the Telengits, the tourist and other people unfamiliar with the rules of sacred land had it coming. Offending a spirit was a morally wrong and it had its repercussions.

Ere Chuy is strewn with small villages, divided by vast steppes, rivers and mountains. From Kokorya and Kosh-Agach the area feels like standing inside a bowl, with mountains surrounding the steppe completely. During my stay I visited several villages and lived in Kokorya in the eastern part of Ere Chuy. Ere Chuy is part of the, also sacred and UNESCO protected, Ukok plateau. For Altaians places of altitude are more “clean” and sacred, this is also why mountains are important in Altaian cosmology. The three-peaked mountain Belukha that is located in the western part of the Ukok plateau is viewed as having a great deal of energies connected to it and serves as a symbol of Altaian identity and traditional belief. Ere Chuy is also said to be guarded by five sacred mountains. These mountains used to be Bogatyrs, primordial beings; large and white with great powers. It is also said that if Ere Chuy ever experience crisis, the Bogatyrs will awaken from their sleep and protect the land. This idea of mountains sleeping is something that is connected to the two Altaian celebrations which mark “the awakening and putting to sleep” of the spirit of Altai. This is celebrated every spring (awakening) and autumn (putting to sleep). I did not witness these celebrations while on fieldwork, but during a conference I was told that these are important traditional celebrations. I had heard from Elena, among others, that during winter the spirit of Altai and Ere Chuy was sleeping and was not active.

Although Ere Chuy is sacred, and the spirit is an entity that most Telengits behave toward in conscious and unconscious ways, not all people living in this area knows that it is sacred and that it has a name. This became evident to me one day when attending an “English Club”-event at one of the culture schools\(^{10}\) in Kosh-Agach. At the event there were only adults, Elena and our friends Galina and Darya were there, along with other acquaintances. The people present were a mix of Kazakhs, Telengits and Russians. The purpose was to practise English and this day specifically, to talk with me. After some time, we got talking about my study and I mentioned that I wanted to study the meaning of Ere Chuy for people living in it. My friend Galina, a Russian, asked, “What is Ere Chuy?” and one of the Telengit women gasped and laughed, “You don’t know?” To the Telengit woman it was unbelievable that someone living in Kosh-Agach would not know about Ere Chuy. She further said half-jokingly that Galina should leave Ere Chuy, for her own safety, indicating that

\(^{10}\) A school where parents pay for their children to learn for example: dancing, photography, singing, or languages.
she had angered the spirits of the land. The mood remained very happy and Galina was not offended, nor was the Telengit woman. This situation highlights the lack of knowledge of the Russian living in this area, and the feelings of the Telengits toward this ignorance. The comment also shows that to Telengits the lack of reverence towards sacred land and its spirits is something that can have consequences in reality. The idea that Galina would be in danger living in a scared area and not knowing about it was very real, in the mind of her Telengit friend.

**Kokorya**

Kokorya is a small village in the eastern part of Kosh-Agach district. It has a school, and a community centre where there often are held concerts, dance performances and contests. In the community centre there also is a small library, a post office and the village administration. The village has a stadium, several small grocery shops, an asphalt road and a kindergarten. To the north of the village runs the river Chng. This is said to have its “head”\(^\text{11}\) in Kokorya.

\(^\text{11}\) Head meaning, ”the beginning”.
The first couple of months in Kokorya I saw very little people, and for some time I hardly saw any men, leading me to think that the village consisted of mainly women. But as the weather heated up in April and May, the village was full of children, cows, dogs, men, and women. People here spend their days caring for and herding their livestock, caring for their children or extended families, visiting friends and generally living quite quiet lives. Many also work in Kosh-Agach and everyday around 9 o’clock a minibus take them, and others wanting to go there\textsuperscript{12}. The community centre is the heart of Kokorya. Here they have a big stage where touring musicians, dance troupes, and other artists come to perform. Mostly women and children attend these shows, but men show up sometimes too.

\textsuperscript{12} There are also many private cars that, when there is space, carries passengers for a small fee.
The village also has a small museum dedicated to Telengit culture and tradition. It has exhibitions of different clothing, artefacts such as leather pouches, whips, and metal horse equipment. There is also a big yurt, decorated in the traditional way. Russian tourist visits the museum now and then, and I could see from the logbook that there had been international visitors. People both at the museum and Ene highlighted this fact and seemed very proud that they had international recognition. The fact that people came from all over the world and visited the museum, made them important and confirmed that Telengit culture had value and a history worth remembering.

**History**

Before joining The Russian Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the area today known as the Republic of Altai was governed by both the Dzungar Khanate and the Manchu Qing Empire. Afraid of the Chinese, the clan chiefs, *jaizang*, asked to be absorbed into Russia, thus granting them rights to protection. There was planned colonization since 1873. The clans of the Altai were semi-autonomous during much of the eighteenth century, until the rule of the *jaizang* was made illegal in 1880. From around this time there were also a growing number of Russian traders and settlers, which led to both conflict and to development. By the beginning of the nineteenth century most Altaians were familiar with modern agricultural tools and techniques (Adle, Palat and Tabyshalieva 2005, p. 328-332)\(^\text{13}\), and religion also played a part in the spread of this method of farming.

**Religious beliefs in the Republic of Altai**

It was also during this time that a messianic religious movement called ‘Burkhanism’ started to spread in Altai. Burkhanism is a movement started in 1904 by Altaian herder Chet Chelpanov. The claims are that either he or his adoptive daughter had seen a god called ‘Burkhan’. This god had given instructions to Chelpanov both on how to worship and to gather people and pray. This would bring on the arrival of Burkhan himself, and later a second god, called ‘Oirot-Khan’ (Sherstova 2006, p. 14-

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Chelpanov also preached resistance to all things Russian. This included “money, clothes, utensils, dwellings, and even cats in the home” (Tadina 2006, p. 79). A large number of Altaians gathered in Ust-Kan, a district in the western part of the republic, and prayed. After some time the Russian police dispersed them, and Chelpanov and his family were arrested (Ekeev 2006, p. 55).

Burkhanism is said to have had two dimensions to it, one being a resistance to the russification of Altai, and the other being a new or reformed religion (Halemba 2006, p. 29, Ekeev 2006, Tadina 2006). During my fieldwork, no one mentioned Burkhanism, but most Telengits I spoke to referred to their belief as ‘*Ak Jang*’\(^{14}\), which is, and is not, something else. Halemba (2006) writes that what Altaian people calls *Ak Jang* is not necessarily the same as Burkhanism, although this is known by scholars as the same thing. *Ak Jang*, is merely the name of Altaian beliefs, which are manifold (Halemba 2006, p. 29). Of course Altaian beliefs also include elements of Burkhanism. Today many Telengits and other groups of Altaians are Christian. In Kosh-Agach there was a church and I met several Telengits who practised Christian faith. From my observations, I would argue that most Altaians and Telengits mix their worship, a point that I will return to in a later chapter. In many homes in Kosh-Agach you will find a Russian Orthodox icon, a branch of juniper sprigs to sacrifice to the master spirit of the house common in Buddhist rituals, and a small animal figurine to signify the Chinese year.\(^{15}\)

**Soviet history**

After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks gained power of Russia. The revolution brought a change in governing and from 1922 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was formed. The USSR being a socialistic state ruled by a communist party, was built and maintained on Marxism-Leninism. Influenced by the writings of Karl Marx, the Marxist-Leninist political philosophy focused on creating class-consciousness and political action from the proletariat, an economy regulated fully by the government, emphasizing anti-capitalism and anti-theism. Already in 1919 Soviet power was established in Altai, but there was armed resistance from the White Guards in the region until 1922. The socialist rule lasted until 1991, creating what is known

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\(^{14}\) *Ak Jang* means ‘white way of doing things’

\(^{15}\) These objects are also very often seen in cars either on their own or combined.
today as The Russian Federation. The first half of the socialist period was for Altaians, Telengits, and other indigenous groups, marked by forced collectivization. In this period the government focused on preserving some of the indigenous groups features, such as language. The Soviet authorities began the registrations of what they called ‘small peoples of the North’. As Sergey Sokolovskiy (2011, p. 242) writes:

“According to a Marxist version of salvage anthropology popular at the time, the groups listed were to receive ‘socialist development’ to bring them up to the level of social advancement of other population categories of the country”.

This persisted, but changed slightly in the second half of the socialist era, were many were placed in boarding schools and were refused to speak their mother tongue. Galina Diatchkova (2001, p. 221) writes:

“The first post-revolutionary decades saw the expansion of national languages as an incentive to the cultural development of small nations: writing systems for Indigenous languages were created, newspapers and supplements were published, schools where national languages were taught were set up. Then, in the latter half of the 20th century, school education underwent russification. As more Indigenous children studied in boarding schools with Russian-speaking teachers and tutors, and with the cuisine different from local traditional foods, communication ties between generations were disrupted”.

During my fieldwork many of the people I spoke to expressed concern about losing their language, considering this as a detrimental loss to their culture and tradition. This divide between the knowledge of the older generation and the lack of it (or rather, the fear of the lack of it) in the younger generation is still an important issue. Ene was unhappy with the fact that some of her grandchildren spoke better Russian than they did Altaian. She would try only speaking Altaian to them, but they would answer back in Russian. Others would talk about how Altaians in the north lacked knowledge of basic things, like how to do a funeral “right”. To me it seemed that the closer groups in the republic were in proximity and the more frequent their intermingling with Russians or other groups were, the bigger the fear of losing their tradition.
During my time in Kokorya I had gotten to know several of Ene’s friends and family. Some of our closest neighbours were Yegor and Rada. Yegor, was a man in his fifties, with a kind face and a great deal of knowledge especially about traditional crafts. Rada was a woman around the same age, with an equally kind face with small features. She was good friends with Ene, and she would sometimes come over, bring some cheese or milk, and they would talk and drink tea. Yegor and Rada owned livestock and were both very good at handcrafts. I had asked them for an interview for some time, and one day in June, Elena and I went to visit. They talked about their livelihood and showed us different kinds of hand-crafted things, felted blankets of wool, rope, made of yak hair, artistic pieces made of felted wool. We sat in their kitchen drinking tea and I asked them about the history of Kokorya. They told me that before there used to be collective farming in Kokorya, and that back then everybody used to work together, Kazakhs and Telengits alike. “Before we all lived in the mountains and worked in the kolhoz\(^{16}\),” he said glancing out the window at some grazing goats. “Before everyone took care of their own livestock, now many just pay someone to herd them”. Both Yegor and Rada talked a lot about the fear of losing culture, they talked about their grandson, expressing concern that maybe when he was older he would not even know what a yurt was.

Another couple, Andrei and Yeva, also from Kokorya related to me that during the time of the collective farming the material situation was not easy. “Before we had money but nothing to buy, now we can buy anything but there is no money”, said Andrei, a man in his fifties, sitting at the kitchen table with his wife, Yeva. He worked as a chauffeur now, but during the Soviet era, he had worked in the kolhoz. “I started when I was nine years old,” he told me. I asked him how the farming was done and he told me that a farmer could have “private” livestock, but not more than five. “If you had more than five, the state would confiscate it. But we would always have more than this and we would hide them in the mountains”. To him the time of his youth was viewed with both nostalgia and the realisation that it had not necessarily been better. For many people who remembered the Soviet both in Kokorya and in other villages, there was a nostalgia and longing both for the time of solidarity and the idea of working together, but also for older times when people lived in the mountains,

\(^{16}\) Collective farm.
in yurts, taking care of their own livestock. Diatchkova (2001, p. 221) shows how the economic crisis had an especially hard impact on the lives of indigenous peoples:

“The systemic crisis of the socialist society in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the dramatic deterioration of all socio-economic indicators and curtailment of welfare programs. As for the Indigenous population, it suffered a decline of traditional forms of economic activity and a drastic fall of the quality of life compared to other social groups”.

For the people of Altai, they had both independence and forced change in the name of modernisation. Anything different, could easily be considered anti-Soviet, and could put you in danger. Traditional life was both different and considered as a resistance to modernization. “In effect, it was made a ‘crime’ to be backward.” (Hartley 2014, p. 234)

Post-Soviet history
Throughout the 1980s the Soviet economy suffered, and the politicians answered by reform and openness in both economies and societies. But glastnost and perestroika did not save the Soviet; they collapsed it (Gerber and Hout 1998, p. 4). The USSR dissolved in 1991 after the August Coup, and in the ruins The Russian Federation was formed. But the economic struggles did not end. The American economist Jeffrey Sachs was invited by the government to advise them, after his success in the economic reform of Poland. His plan, called ‘shock therapy’, meant:

“immediate price linearization, immediate privatization, immediate establishment of an independent central bank, immediate achievement of balanced budget, immediate introduction of free trade and immediate establishment of a fully convertible flexible currency.” (Marangos 2005, p. 70).

But these reforms brought “economic collapse, stagnation, inflation and unemployment” (Marangos 2005, p. 71). People were left without a safety net to which they had become accustomed, and many suffered especially since the spending cuts were in medicine and education (Marangos 2005, p. 76).
Most of the people I met to during my fieldwork did not talk too much about changes in Russia at large during the 1990s, but were more concerned with their local history. What the 1990s brought for them was distress, both in the collapse of the collective farms and in their ethnically mixed society. Siberia in general was hit hard, with the heart of Soviet industry located here. “Unemployment soared as internal trade fell apart, prices rose faster than wages, the rouble collapsed and saving became worthless” (Hartley 2014, p. 238). For people here there were few jobs, low wages, and little hope. In Kosh-Agach, with the collapse came a prophecy from a shaman that this was the end of their world and that the steppe would be flooded and everyone there would die. Many Kazakh families were on the move back to their “homeland”, Kazakhstan, and the economic struggle combined with this prophecy made many Telengits feel like the Kazakhs were abandoning them in a time of need. This, I believe, is some of the reason for tension between Telengits and Kazakhs today, which will be discussed later on in this thesis.

For indigenous peoples in The Russian Federation the restrictions in the welfare system was detrimental. The policies continued the Soviet strategy of upholding the traditional economy, but this was problematic as it was dependent on state subsidies and these were fluctuating, Sokolovskiy (2011, p. 247) shows:

“The economic crisis of the early and mid 1990s severely curtailed state subsidies with the result that most of the state farms disintegrated and people either became unemployed or tried to live on those resources that still were handy”.

With this many returned to a traditional way of living, but outside of the collective farms, but “what looked like a return to tradition by groups that had been tribal centuries ago was in fact a part of a broader survival strategy employed by many in a time of economic hardship” (Sokolovskiy 2011, p. 248).

For these people the time after the transition was also marked with uncertainty and they were forced to find their place in the ‘new’ Russia. But how people viewed this transition was divided and ambivalent, Susanne Brandtstädter (2007, p. 142) writes:
“Indeed, how people positioned themselves towards the ‘transition’ seems to be related to whether they experienced the time after socialism as a personal modern-ization or de-modernization, i.e. whether they were integrated into the new modernist project as active participants or as passive recipients. This again seems to be related to either the ‘magnification’ of practices bound up with the formation of personal and collective identities through their positive integration into the new ‘space of formalization’, or their ‘minimization’ as local, traditional or resistant practices”.

For the people of Kosh-Agach I will argue that they were abandoned and were not well included in the new modernist project – a reality that is still felt today, 25 years after the demise of the USSR.

Abandonment and stillness
After the Soviet period people were left to their own devices more or less. The socialistic politics, which were supposed to protect you from cradle to grave, were gone and people were left to fend for themselves. They were expected to move from one ideology to another, the system that had once proclaimed capitalism as insufficient, now put forward the notion that socialism was deeply flawed (Brandtstädtter 2007, p. 134). Brandtstädtter (2007, p. 136) further points out:

“Ethnographies of postsocialism show that, instead of unanimously responding to the retraction of the state with a ‘flowering’ of civil society, people often experienced the new era as a time of chaos and loss of privileges, i.e. as a time of cultural struggles.”.

The abandonment by the state still shows in the lack of development of schools, the rate of unemployment, and general poor standard of living. In Kokorya the only road to the village was so bumpy that at times it was hard to stay in your seat. The local health clinic had no running water, and you could often see two people being cared for in the same room. The schools in Kosh-Agach and Kokorya were the same, no running water and highly unsanitary outdoor toilets. There were some houses in Kosh-Agach that were more modern, however. All the military housing on the edge of town was rumoured to have both showers and water closet. I was told that the
communal house of non-local police was the same. The military building was very interesting, because it was also guarded and had a high fence surrounding it. The general trend was that the few Russians living in the area lived in much better conditions than the Altaians.

**Marginality**

When discussing marginality in the context of Kosh-Agach I wish to define my view of it through Deborah Poole and Veena Das’ three approaches to the concept of the margins (2004). The first follows as such: “idea of margins as peripheries seen to form natural containers for people considered insufficiently socialized into the law” Poole and Das (2004, p. 9) further write that:

“marginal populations are formed of “indigenous” or “natural” subjects, who are at once considered to be foundational to particular national identities and excluded from these same identities by the sorts of disciplinary knowledge that mark them as racially and civilizational “other””.

In the context of Kosh-Agach this aspect is easily found in the case of Telengits, Altai being an area that “contains” them to a certain degree. Their indigenous identity becomes a container too, of their culture and way of life. This, in turn, casts “Telengit Culture” as something frozen in time and space, which cannot and should not spread or open up to non-Telengits. This “Telengit Culture” is marked as “natural” and part of some “origin”, which in turn helps to legitimate the containment of it in the margins. For the other residents of Kosh-Agach they also fall into the categories described by Poole and Das (2004), but lack an indigeneity. Rather they categorize themselves as Altaians, i.e. of Asiatic heritage, or Russians, i.e. of Slavic heritage, or Kazakhs, tracing their ancestry to Kazakhstan, and at times legitimizing their categorization through racial theories. This carries some indications of belonging and containment in itself. An Altaian would be naturally contained in Altai, while a Russian would have the whole of Russia as a natural home, a Kazakh is part of a diaspora and has dual belonging. Still, however these people label themselves, they will have trouble challenging the dominant view that they are in some sense less civilized than people living in urbanized areas.
The second approach forwarded by Poole and Das (2004, p. 10) is about papers and state documents and how:

“the state is continually both experienced and undone through the illegibility of its own practices, documents, and words. Among the sorts of practices we consider are the economies of displacement, falsification, and interpretation surrounding the circulation and use of personal identification papers”.

They consider the meeting between the person and the state at the checkpoint a good example of this, as site where ideas of identity and rights can be “suddenly and sometimes violently unsettled” (Das and Poole 2004, p. 10).

Kosh-Agach district is a “border zone” where one needs special permits to be and move. All people moving through and around this area must carry a passport and controls are frequent. Stopping cars on the road, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (hereby referred to as FSB17) controls the papers of each individual, which can take some time. If you lack the right papers, you will be detained. During these stops busses and cars often became very silent, and the stern faces of FSB officers would peer into windows looking for anything or anyone suspicious. To me this seemed bizarre after some time. The same bus went every day from Kokorya to Kosh-Agach, carrying almost the same people18, who always had the same papers. These controls, I argue can be understood as a display of power and dominance, challenging the Telengits ownership of land and belonging. The fact that this was directly connected to movement through the land, I also find interesting considering the Telengits tradition is deeply rooted in nomadic practise. More on this will follow in a later chapter.

The third, and final approach “focuses on the margin as a space between bodies, law and discipline. After all, sovereign power exercised by the state is not only about territories; it is also about bodies” (Poole and Das 2004, p. 10). This approach is about the power of the state over life, bodies and normativity. Although this approach is interesting I do not apply it further to the context of Kosh-Agach.

17 Federalnaja sluzjba bezopasnosti (FSB), previously the KGB, is the principal Russian security agency; they are in charge of both internal and border security, among other responsibilities.
18 And really, how much variation could you have when the village only has about 1,000 residents.
Similar to these approaches to the concept of the margins is one of minoritization and remoteness, presented by Humphrey (2015, p. 4) with regard to border areas in Buryatia. She writes:

“Buryats — and in fact anyone — living in the border zone thus find themselves more ‘remote’, in the sense of cut off, than they were in Soviet days. Each district has its own small and generally sleepy town as administrative center; and then spread out over a vast area are villages separated by mostly unused grasslands, forests and mountains”.

Contrasting the present day situation with the Soviet one, is something I too find very fruitful. While the Soviet brought nationwide development, the post-Soviet situation finds these ghosts of development rotting as they stand.

Although my view so far has focused on how the state impacts the margins, it must be clear that the margin also has an influence on the center and on the state. This connects partly to Poole and Das’ (2004) first approach, where the groups are “considered to be foundational to particular national identities” (2004, p. 9). In a Russian context the idea of the multifaceted Russia, made up of a myriad of different peoples, often referred to as “a brotherhood”, still lives on from the Soviet period where it originated. In an article, then prime minister, Vladimir Putin (2012) writes about ethnicity in Russia: “Ours is a multiethnic society; we are a united people”. This idea means that the Russian Federation’s identity is tied up in the multiplicity of its content. This gives the margins an aspect of power, a card to play in the political game. The margin represents everyday Russia, it represents traditions, either “Russian” or “Ethnic”, and therefore it has a position. I argue that this romanticizing of the margin can be used as a strategy of combating abandonment and stillness, and is being used in Kosh-Agach, especially through the tourist industry, a point I will return to in a later chapter.

**Stillness**

I suggest that after the collapse of the Soviet, a time considered by many as “chaotic” followed in Kosh-Agach a time of stillness. I use the concept ’stillness’ to indicate

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several things at one. The word has connotations both to sound, movement, and circumstance. This concept carries some of the same connotations as Humphrey’s ‘remoteness’ (2015), but I take ‘stillness’ to encompass not only a spatial aspect, but also elements of action.

The first aspect of stillness that I find relevant is the absence of sound or noise. In the beginning Kokorya was nothing if not silent. I felt I had landed on the moon, the land is flat and seemingly “empty”, people stayed in their houses most of the time and there were great distances between villages on the steppe. Reading about Kokorya I had learned that this was a place central to the practise of Ak jang religion. I had imagined that a place that was important must somehow be busy, and consequently, loud. But most days in Kokorya were calm. They were quiet in a certain kind of way that felt like the world was standing still and the smallest event or sound became a thing to be observed. Often Ene and I would sit by the table in the kitchen. Outside the only sound would be of calves mooing after their milk-heavy mothers. Every now and then you would hear a car leaving or arriving. Ene would always observe them, knowing most of the cars in the village she would know who had been in Kosh-Agach, when they left or arrived. Exiting the house, you could hear the river running, and birds, especially one big one, that I to this day don’t know the English name of, screaming. It sounded like a horse neighing. You could hear the wind too, and walking to the outdoor toilet, the door slammed loudly shut from a gust of wind. Looking over the high fence I could see dogs running around, probably looking for scraps in the big garbage piles that were at the back of almost all houses. After some time, I began to notice that most of the sounds in Kokorya were from the river, animals, wind or people (though this was very rare). The only sound that stood out was the cars. Russian tourists would be the noisiest, they would drive through the village without slowing down, wanting to reach the steppe beyond. Livestock and children would be chased of the road to avoid being run down. The silence of Kosh-Agach, and especially villages like Kokorya, is today a direct consequence of abandonment.

The second aspect of stillness, which can also be found in the context of Kosh-Agach, is the lack of movement. Now, people in Kosh-Agach spend a lot of time in cars. They move constantly between villages, visiting friends and family, or just

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20 The reason for this was, naturally, that at the time of my arrival it was the middle of February and temperatures reached as low as -40 degrees Celsius.
driving around. For young people the car becomes a room where one can be oneself, boys and girls can sit close and listen to music, and race on hills to simulate the sensation of a rollercoaster. While all this can seem to be the opposite of stillness, I argue that it still becomes relevant in this regard. The aspect of stillness here is connected to lack of movement in the traditional nomadic form that is now considered diminishing or lost, and to the possibilities for social movement available to the people of Kosh-Agach. Both Kazakhs and Telengits repeatedly discussed the first aspect. Nomadic life was a tradition they shared, and the despair of losing or not returning to what many considered central to their way of life, was common. After the collapse of the Soviet, that forced stationary life to begin with, many old traditions had a revival but nomadism was not one of them. Still, people were proud and eager to show of the remnants of their nomadic ways. Living in what is under the modern Russian state defined as border control zone, the free movement in constrained. One has to carry papers with one at all times, and the Russian military or FSB are frequent controllers of people moving over the steppe and on roads. The aspect of the border itself also becomes a hindrance. Anastasia, a woman living in Tashanta, a village close to the border to Mongolia, told me about pre-Soviet life: “Before there were no borders and we could move freely, now there are rules and restrictions, and we must stay in one place.” For most people I talked to, the feeling of having lost nomadic life and motion was present.

Third and last, we find the stillness of development. It becomes evident when comparing the material and developmental situation in Kosh-Agach to the one in Gorno-Altaysk or even Moscow how massive the differences of life is. Maria, my Russian friend living in Moscow were shocked when I told her how in Kokorya there are no running water and that one has to relive oneself in outdoor toilets. “I did not think in today’s Russia that people still lived like that!” she said.

What Humphrey (2015) writes about Buryatia echoes my empirical findings and the fact that development and resources are actively being kept from the Altaian inhabitants of Kosh-Agach. She writes: “The acute experience of this inequality, combined with the ability to compare one’s own with other places, is central to post-Soviet experience.” (Humphrey 2015, p. 3). During an interview with Karina, a younger woman living in Kokorya I asked her what she thought the village would look like in ten years. She laughed, maybe finding the question bizarre, and said she did not think about that too much: “Maybe we will have some new shops, maybe a
bazaar or a café.” In her mind, ten years would not bring much change. Other people too, were careful not to comment too much on what the future would bring. How people feel the remoteness is also mentioned by Humphrey (2015, p. 3):

“the same center-focused organization is found in Russia as a whole, in each Republic and Oblast, and in districts (raion) and down to the lowest level. Because this order applies not only to roads, but also to public transport, communications, distribution of supplies, and allocation of funds, it creates enormous inequalities, which people feel very strongly at each level”.

For people in Kosh-Agach, I suggest, speculating and hoping for development, something they haven’t really experienced for years, might be a source of pain and lead to the realization that they might not have the material and social possibilities as other Russians.

Kosh-Agach is, like Humphrey’s (2015) example from Buryatia, at the end both of Russia and the republic, this means that the villages at the edges of the district is worse off than the villages closer to the center. The only exception speaks volumes, and that would the village of Tashanta, where there is a big border control point, and they are currently developing big apartment buildings, a new school and kindergarten. The visibility of the development of Tashanta, the very last village before the border to Mongolia, makes it clear to every citizen of Kosh-Agach district that they are being denied development and care. If it can be done in Tashanta it can certainly be done in the other villages in its proximity. This means that the possibility for development is present, tourists bring money, which can lead to development. The military brings development, but development for whom? While the military bring elements of development to Kosh-Agach it is exclusively for its employees, which happens to be mostly white Russians. The tourist industry could be a possible source of development, and resource for many to make a living, but the fact is that few of the tourists that come to the Altai Republic every year ever reach Kosh-Agach (Broz and Habeck 2015, p. 556). This may be due to distance, and the fact that there is a lot of striking nature and landscape well before you get to Kosh-Agach, which is what most tourists come to see. If you want to see mountains and rivers, a tourist does not have to travel all the way to the border area.
For people living in the district of Kosh-Agach the state is far away, money is far away, and modernity is only available to a few. Stillness can be frustrating, but for some it is a beautiful state. For the tourist that visit Kosh-Agach and Ere Chuy the “simplicity” provides an escape from their busy lives in bigger Russian cities or European countries. But also for some of the inhabitants of this area there were positive aspects with this life. For Galina, a woman in her 20s of Russian background, “Kosh-Agach Life” as she called it, brought a simpler way of life for her and her young son. She did have her own struggles – unstable employment and a lower standard of living - but this was home for her and she was dedicated to staying in Kosh-Agach long-term.

A man on a horse rides through the centre of Kosh-Agach.
Combating stillness: Practicality and pragmatics
In this thesis I want to argue that as a consequence of the state abandonment of Kosh-Agach, people find new ways of combating and manoeuvring the stillness left behind. They do this through a variety of choices and actions often focusing on the effect of the action rather than the strict adherence to a certain framework. This focus on effect, I suggest is a form of intense practicality and pragmatism. Political scientist Vincent Pouliot (2008, p. 258) writes that what most people do:

“does not derive from conscious deliberation or thoughtful reflection – instrumental, rule-based, communicative, or otherwise. Instead, practices are the result of inarticulate, practical knowledge that makes what is to be done appear “self-evident” or commonsensical. This is the logic of practicality, a fundamental feature of social life that is often overlooked by social scientists”.

I believe this to holds true for how the people of Kosh-Agach manoeuvre their lives and I argue that it is so imbedded in everyday practises that it becomes “self-evident”, and to a point almost invisible.

Garbage, decay and stillness: The uncontrollable signs of abandonment
The presence of garbage and decay permeated Kosh-Agach. One is stricken by the amount of garbage both in and around villages. In Kokorya people generally burned their own trash out in the streets, mixing it all together. People were seemingly not disturbed by the amount of trash that surrounded them in their daily lives. In bigger cities like Gorno-Altaysk, the streets are cleaner, and Moscow doesn’t even compare; it is very clean. This, I argue, is just one of the many ways state presence diminishes as you reach more peripheral areas. Asking Elena why people threw their garbage on the ground and not in the trash cans stationed around Kosh-Agach, she told me that it was because people from traditional times would throw their garbage anywhere and it would rot away. This she said, was also the reason as to why people don’t sell or demolish old houses, because a traditional house would be made of wool, wood and leather, which all would rot. While this explanation is interesting, I find it hard to believe that the people of Kosh-Agach don’t know that plastic does not decay; the evidence is all around them. I would rather argue that the awareness of abandonment and the discouragement felt because of this could lead to a lack of willingness to
improve or even uphold their locale for some. This, I think also connects to the situation of the ruins in and around villages, as I will discuss below.

*Picture from an abandoned home in Kosh-Agach. The house was filled with garbage, old beer bottles and other bottles having once contained alcoholic beverages.*

**Ruins**

All around Kosh-Agach, Kokorya and several other villages were abandoned houses and buildings. Some of these were ruins of old collective farms (*kolhoz*), others were old schools or other official buildings, and some were private houses. In one village there was even a building that was never finished. The story was that it was going to be a new house of culture with a library, and Mongolian builders were hired, but one day the builders just up and left back to Mongolia, never to be seen again. These ruins
were often still in some use, either by alcoholics needing a place to sleep or kids playing. They were not considered altogether safe though. As we shall see, with all things connected to decay, they were potentially filled with bad spirits; körmös.

Elena’s childhood home for example was a shared house where her family lived on one side of the building and one family had lived on the other. Seeing her house for the first time she discouraged me from looking to close at the abandoned part of the house, claiming that spirits lived there and it could cause harm to either me or to her own family. On the very same day we walked by a demolished house, basically just rubble, lying on a plot. I moved closer to have a better look, but was again told not to walk near it. Elena told me that spirits of houses and people lingered behind when a place was decaying. This was the same with trash; in trash you will find more spirits. I asked her if these spirits were inherently bad and she said most of them were körmös, evils spirits of the underworld. In the area outside each village where trash ends up, this was also the case. “They are villages of körmös. Just like we have a village for people, they have a village for körmös,” Elena told me. Generally, in Kosh-Agach, where there are ruins there are alcoholics. Many people who struggle with severe substance abuse roam the streets and use these ruins as shelter and a place to drink. Me, being curious about these houses and ruins was discouraged to go too close to them and look inside. This was for the fear, I suspect both of evil spirits and of angry drunks, but also because of a different fear grounded in more systemic reasons, as will be discussed in the following section.

The decay of care
I suggest that the reason things associated with decay were considered dangerous is directly connected to the abandonment experienced by the people of Kosh-Agach. These physical manifestations of the state’s abandonment become saturated with images of danger. What both garbage and other objects of decay have in common is that they are uncontrollable. They collapse, may be tricky to place in the “correct” space, and they may be an unavoidable eyesore. Many of these abandoned houses were sites where garbage and ruins existed together, and in many instances telling the two categories apart was impossible. The nature of decay, the dirt and rot of it, has a tendency to melt things together, become unmanageable and make them ambiguous “pangolins”, hard to categorize and object of perversion. These uncontrollable objects of decay are dangerous and needs to be separated from the living to not cause them
harm. This is the argument of Mary Douglas (1984) who stated that dirt is “matter out of place” (1984, p. 36). The ruins also serve as constant reminder of the Soviet times and the following collapse. The unwillingness to re-use or re-build these structures shows both how pervasive the fear of decay and spirits are, but also a very basic lack of funds and political will to implement any development in this area. As Halemba (2011) writes about the House of Culture in Kosh-Agach, she is told that there are plans to build a new one, but these plans are never set into action (Halemba 2011, p. 97-116). The stillness of development shows itself in almost every aspect of public life in Kosh-Agach. I too heard about several projects that were supposed to happen. Ene told me that there were plans to build a small airport, but when I asked when it would be finished she told me “in about nine years”, which seemed to me a bizarre amount of time for a district airport.

These abandoned houses and buildings could have carried an element of potential, but if people have no use for a building or the idea of creating something new seems too far fetched it will obviously never be done. These ruins were in a state of limbo in many ways. They were too indestructible to vanish easily and they were too destroyed to be used. They were too new to be actual ruins in the fetishized, tourist-centred way, but too old to actually have some function. These ruins were stillness made visible; they stood as beacons of time passed and opportunities that never became available to the people of Kosh-Agach.

All these uncontrollable signs of abandonment further indicated a decay of care. The lack of care is in itself a perversion, a thing that for a historically clan-structured community was unimaginable, and the images of the state that withdrew became angst filled, dirty places. The logic that these sites would then be filled with evil spirits, almost ghosts of the care itself, is easy to see. The constant reminder of abandonment and decay could not be avoided, so they became sites of danger.

**Abandonment, stillness and marginality – revisited briefly**

I suggest that the concepts of ‘abandonment’ and ‘stillness’ capture several aspects of the situation in Kosh-Agach. These terms are multifaceted and will therefore serve as fruitful scopes for the following discussion. ‘Stillness’, that to my knowledge has not been used as a conceptual framework for analysis in anthropological literature, I believe, can serve as an analytical tool to capture the complexity in studies of marginalized peoples and studies of the periphery. ‘Abandonment’, which I suggest
encompass the feelings people of Kosh-Agach had towards their situation goes well together with ‘stillness’. I take ‘stillness’ then as the resulting effect of abandonment, as well as a conceptual framework to describe but also disentangle the various effects abandonment has on people and land in Kosh-Agach. I also apply the terms ‘marginality’ and ‘marginalized’. These terms, I use as a way to better understand the full meaning of abandonment and stillness.
Chapter 2: Networks, moralities and possibilities

Introduction
To elaborate on the theme of abandonment and stillness, I want in this chapter to show how the inhabitants of Kosh-Agach counter these aspects of life. One of the many ways that I noticed was through actions of strategic consumption and attempts to create economic opportunities. This created an economy where multiple individuals carried the responsibility of a person’s survival. The people of Kosh-Agach, as will be described in more detail below, create extensive social and economic networks and are through these networks “insured” from economic despair. This pooling of risk is central to life in Kosh-Agach, yet not everyone is included in these networks. Your choices and their moral implications shape your possibility to enter into relations with others. If you fail in your obligations to family, friends or society as a whole, this support will vanish or be minimized. The sanctions may come from legal structures, where for example a former convict will not be able to work in certain sectors or from private structures were one loses ones economic security that is held collectively. This means that your moral choices directly affect your economic possibilities and that your economic choices directly affect your moral status. I suggest that this is closely related to the social fabric of Kosh-Agach society that is made up of formal and informal networks that cross ethnic lines, gender, and clans. These networks I suspect grew forth, or just became more visible, in the post-socialist context, because of the economic situation during the 1990’s and in modern day Russia.

These networks functions as a way of lateral social control, where a person can be excluded as a form of punishment for morally problematic activity, such as deviant sexual behaviour (in Kosh-Agach this would include homosexuality) and crime, but also for certain economic choices, especially ones that are associated with capitalism. In short these networks hold their own form of micropolitics, and people manoeuvre, negotiate and manage these relations in everyday life. In this chapter I focus mainly on the networks of young people, because it was through my younger group of contacts that these themes showed themselves more plainly.

Siberia in the “New Russia”
As I have already shown, the current situation in Kosh-Agach cannot be understood without considering people’s strong sense of abandonment by the state and the
following stillness that permeates the area. But it is not yet clear as to why a state would abandon its subjects in the way it has done in Kosh-Agach. The historian Madhavan Palat (2004) describes how the relationship between Russia west and Russia east changed both during perestroika and after the socialist period. During the perestroika political climate, strong and influential voices claimed “Russia had drained her energies by commitment to the non-Russian parts of the Soviet” (2004, p. 4) and pushed for a move to divest from these areas. But, as he also points out, the reason why Siberia might be an economic drain on western Russia is directly caused by the Soviet ideology and planning, which sought to inhabit any place “regardless of cost” (2004, p. 6). According to Palat the Russian government consider the solution to this problem that the people in peripheral countryside move to the bigger cities in Siberia, like Omsk and Novosibirsk, and this can be achieved either by market or government forces (2004, p. 6-7). The status of Siberia as is stands today is that:

“the Russian and Soviet state has been cleansed of Eastern Europe, now reimagined as Central Europe; the Baltic, the Ukraine, Moldova, and various parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia have been wholly or partially amputated; and the vast and seemingly inert space of Siberia now remains to be lopped off as an ungainly and toxic appendix” (Palat 2004, p. 1).

I argue that this might be part of the reason as to why peripheral and marginalized areas of Siberia are abandoned. This draining of possibilities and funds is also emphasized by Humphrey (2015, p. 16):

“Hyper-centralisation […] has systematically created areas of ‘remoteness’ at the edge of administrative units at all scales — and in particular a vast and elongated area of isolation along the Siberian border with Mongolia. Buryats, Russians and others living in this zone are subject to the same contemporary conditions of withdrawal of state services, lack of transport, unemployment, high prices, scarcity of money, and difficulty in obtaining goods”.

The lack of investment and upkeep of these areas slowly drains them of opportunities and, in the end, people. But still, as can be seen in Kosh-Agach, people counter these trends by various means and strategies.
Making money: employment, networks and morality

In my group of friends in Kosh-Agach many were employed by each other. I even contributed in this dynamic by employing Elena as my interpreter and, for a time, Bolat as my driver. Still their jobs often seemed insecure and changes in the group dynamic could mean you no longer had a job. In both Kokorya and Kosh-Agach this seemed to be fairly common. Unemployment was high at 11.5%\textsuperscript{21} compared to 5.4% on average in the Russian Federation\textsuperscript{22}. Many people were well educated but there were no available jobs in their field. One of Ene’s daughters, for example, who lived in Kosh-Agach worked in a kindergarten, but had been educated as a lawyer.

People were concerned with the economic situation of others, but few were overtly talking about money. Rather they would comment about objects a person owned, such as: “this person has a nice car”; “his house is very big”; “her clothes are very nice”. These comments seemed to say something about the individual beyond a description of their material situation. Avoiding talking about the actual amount of money a person had could be a remnant from the Soviet times, were Marxist ideology condemned ownership and market exchange, and deemed it an impersonal and amoral. Similarly today, talking about money could cast you in an unfavourable light, making you seem like you supported money’s eroding force and that you were part of destroying Kosh-Agach community.

I met Aleksei through Elena. He was a Russian man in his 20s with a big personality and an even bigger smile. Usually our conversations would be lighthearted and full of jokes, yet during a longer conversation I had with him in late May he related to me in a very frustrated and serious tone how economic life, morality and gossip were connected in Kosh-Agach. He told me that people generally cared a lot about what possessions you lacked or had, and that people secretly talked about how much money you were making. Not having a car, for example, was bad, and not wanting to spend money in the “normal” way: buying a house, a car and a fur coat, made people talk. He said: “All everybody thinks about is how many things you have, and how they can get something from you. People here are too concerned with what

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Numbers from 2012: http://уровень-безработицы.рф/республика_алтай.aspx (Downloaded 12.01.17).}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Numbers from 2016: http://www.tradingeconomics.com/russia/unemployment-rate (Downloaded 12.01.17).}
you own, not who you are”. For him this obsession with things and money was a sign that people did not care about others, or that they were only caring about them to gain something. Implicit in Aleksei’s statement, there was a strong moralization towards people who stand out as greedy or towards talking about the economic situation of other people. Overt displays of networking for economic gain were shameful, but still common in his view.

The pattern that presents itself is one of criticism toward capitalistic behavior in certain situations, such as personal relationships, but still a desire for the benefits of an economic and moral network. This discrepancy can become problematic for the participants in social, moral and economic relations in Kosh-Agach, as these relations may have varied moralities imbedded in them that operate simultaneously.

Moralities
As shown by Signe Howell (1997) moralities are a complex theme. For one, there are several moralities, and opinions of what is a good moral choice will vary within a group or society. A person can hold several different moralities within themselves and these can lead to vastly different choices of action varying according to context.

Humphrey (1997, p. 32-33) argues that, in Mongolia moralities are not grounded in altruism, but rather grounded in avoiding punishment by spirits. While I cannot say with certainty that this was the case in Kosh-Agach, it was clear that the possibility of retribution from spirits was a constant factor the Telengit population related to and was aware of. But since I do not consider the networks exclusively Telengit, this explanation falls short in this context. I do, however, suggest that the moralities of the networks are heavily influenced by Soviet and post-socialist moralities. In a post-socialist context, moralities become important, as after any collapse of state ideology, the choices people make are scrutinized and placed on a scale between good and bad. Mark Steinberg and Catherine Wanner (2008, p. 3) write:

“We need to recognize that however coercive Soviet socialism often was, it provided a type of moral community, a sense of integration, order, and shared values. It is not surprising, therefore, that many mourn the loss of community and seek to recover, rebuild, or invent new communities, however divergent their visions”.

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I argue that the networks of Kosh-Agach are part of a moral community that grew and found its current shape in the aftermath of the collapse and crisis during the 1990’s. The general skepticism towards capitalistic or self-serving behavior suggests a sustained influence by socialist ideology. This is not to say that the moralities are purely socialist, but rather that they are specifically Kosh-Agachian; not entirely cut off from their immediate socialist past and in constant flux and negotiated in a society shaped by religion, spirits, ethnic variation and border zone politics. Yet, despite the flux and negotiations that characterize social relations and notions of morality among people in Kosh-Agach, one main moral aspect can be discerned. This encompasses quite fittingly what Humphrey (2015, p. 7) describes for Buryatia:

“The crucial moral injunction is that one should not steal from one’s own people — but ‘one’s own’ may be defined more widely, or more narrowly. Such relative, or scalar, fault lines appear also in perception of occult social realms, which also sometimes coincide with administrative and/or socio-economic divisions”.

In Kosh-Agach, making money seemed to be an activity that was for many riddled with instability and uncertainty. Although many had jobs that gave them a regular wage, job security seemed varied. Many of my friends had been let go or been forced to quit different jobs, often due to changes in their personal relationships. For instance, if you worked in a shop owned by your friend’s husband, and her husband did not like how often you spent time together, your job might be on the line.

In other circumstances people’s attentiveness to other’s needs and their willingness to help out were striking. Living with Ene, I slowly realized that much of the foodstuff we had in the house was to be shared with neighbours or family (close and distant). We often had people over, especially Ene’s female relative Arunai, bringing us cheese, milk, or other locally harvested or produced foods and when Ene went to see her family she brought with her big pieces of meat and bottles of milk. She also gave meat as gifts to guests on several occasions. Most gifts she gave had to do with food, in one way or another. This reciprocity, I suggest, show the true purpose of the network; to keep you alive, in an explicit, if not ritualized way. As these
examples have shown, the networks you form are highly relevant and the upkeep of the relations require constant work.

Networks that work
People in Kosh-Agach form their economic relations as social persons, drawing on their networks. This, I suggest, enables them to form strong bonds and, for some, a stable economy. But it also puts you at risk, mixing your professional and personal life to a degree where you might lose your job or your friends, or both. The question of morality within these interpersonal relationships and how you mix friendship and money seemed to be discussed constantly, though often not loudly and in front of anyone. Caroline Humphrey and Ruth Mandel (2002, p. 12-13) make a similar point:

“People take part in ‘the market’ as social persons, that they are already participating in a variety of relations (with families and household members, friends, workmates, bosses administrators and officials, and so forth). In this sense we cannot support the idea that ‘economics’ has split away from ‘politics’, for relational persons are inevitably also political actors and subjects in whatever power relations surround them”.

I argue that this, in Kosh-Agach means that people manoeuvre both micropolitics, social- and economic dependency through creating networks. When the state fails to care for its subjects, other ways of dependency tend to show themself or grow. In the book ‘Give a Man a Fish” (2015) James Ferguson argues that when the state or any other institution of care, diminishes or disappears, other variations of support becomes visible. The argument then is that there is no real independence, just ways of dependency that are valued differently (Ferguson 2015, p. 39). This is similar to the situation described by Lindskog (2011) in Mongolia. After the collapse of socialism social networks called *tanil tai*, grew forth, and presently includes friends, family, partner’s relatives etc., and one spends a great deal of time: “visiting, making requests, brokering deals and nurturing relationships” (2011, p. 83). In Kosh-Agach they do not necessarily have a term for these networks, like the Mongols in Lindskog’s case, but the noun *baloush*, which indicates the help one is expected to give and get from friends, family and clan, is a possible descriptive term for some of the activities of the networks described above include. Elena describes the word
**baloush** as “something you should just give and expect to receive in return”, and that it was pivotal in friendships and relationships. When I asked what could be given and received she said that it was help of any kind. This interdependency meant people would lend money and services. Women especially, often gave each other small gifts such as earrings, tea and biscuits, potato chips or homemwares. These gifts could be received with thanks and an overtly shown gratitude, but also with a very nonchalant attitude, not expressing thanks or acknowledging the gesture. This may be down to an aspect of expectancy, especially in joint social situations where the thing given was to be consumed by several people, and it may be seen as just “chipping in” to the social activity. I suggest that the economic crisis during the 90’s demanded such a high degree of sharing that it became an expected aspect of everyday interaction – this survival strategy still lingers on in the networks in Kosh-Agach, creating reciprocity that are have elements both of gift-exchange and sharing.

Joma Nazpary (2002) shows us a very similar situation where people in post-Soviet Kazakhstan form networks in order to survive, and that these networks are filled with morality. In addition to this, these networks can suffer from change, especially if there becomes a high degree of social stratification between members of the same network (Nazpary 2002, 85-86). The networks of dependency that become visible in Kosh-Agach are under-communicated, but important in everyday interactions and choices. This in turn, creates micropolitics with their own morals and rules of negotiation. Within this moral framework, a misstep can lead to permanent exclusion. An example, told to me by Elena, was about a young man from a village in the district who had tried to sexually assault a child about 10 years ago. He was to this day a pariah of the society; nobody would marry or associate with him. These consequences could also be suffered by former convicts and people suspected to be homosexual. While being cut out of all social ties were one of the more extreme sanctions people could issue, they would only be used in severe circumstances. In most cases the sanctions would be in response to small missteps, often temporarily excluding a person from economic and/or social support. For example, when Talgat, a friend and employee of Anara, borrowed a large sum of money from her and did not pay her back, the sanction that followed was a temporary social exclusion and a vow to never lend him money by certain members of the network he and Anara shared.

Traditionally in Kosh-Agach, both for Kazakhs and Telengits, their social network would revolve around their clan and their spouse’s clan. During the Soviet
the networks also included the *kolhoz* — the collective, and in these work teams Kazakhs and Telengits worked side by side.

For most people today I would argue that one’s network are formed by a combination of clan connections, religious affiliation, work relations, and other friendships from school or university. In the context of Kosh-Agach, who you know is who you are. I remember well when I got to know Elena, and Ene was trying to figure out who she was. I was told by Elena that Ene had called around asking about her family, her friends, who she knew and who she spent time with. Ene was socially mapping Elena to figure out what kind of person she was. This was not uncommon, Elena told me, though she denied doing this herself.

In this thesis, writing about networks does not indicate an approach influenced by ‘Actor-Network Theory’, although I agree with John Law’s (2009, p. 12) definitions on assemblages and how one ought to study them:

“To study practises is therefore to undertake the analytical and empirical task of exploring possible patterns of relations, and how it is that these get assembled in particular locations. It is to treat the real as whatever it is that is being assembled, materially and semiotically in a scene of analytical interest”.

Marilyn Strathern (1996) writes how networks are cut, what causes their cutting; ownership and money, and that cutting the network are important to the network itself (Strathern 1996). I agree with Strathern and wish to introduce morality as a significant reason for cutting networks. As my research shows, moral obligations and choices strongly influence your connections to others, and by cutting ties with an individual one confirms networks with others, thereby creating meaning both in one-to-one connections and for the network as a whole. In other words, morality interfere with how networks are constituted and the rationales people have when manoeuvring their social and economic relations.

For the people of Kosh-Agach, I would maintain, that the most important factor of these networks is their efficiency and practicality. I have previously argued that a high degree of pragmatism and practicality shape this field. As Elena told me during a conversation about religious practice and the multiplicity of choices people make: “What is the most important thing is that it works”. I believe this statement can
also be used to describe networks in Kosh-Agach. How you operate within the networks is strongly linked to actual results.

I want to be careful as to not portray people as cynical or greedy in any way. This was not what I observed during my fieldwork. What I did see was people struggling in a new Russia where individualism and the idea that you serve yourself is a growing ideal. In the context of Kosh-Agach where resources are scarce, the only way to get by is to depend on your network, and the quality and efficiency of said network becomes imperative for economic survival.

**Identity and consumption – young people in Kosh-Agach**

For my young friends in Altai, things, style and expression was central in their daily lives. Buying new clothes, cars, and having their nails done was how they spent their money. What we consume says a lot about who we are or want to be. In post-socialist societies, where western goods have at one point been both very expensive and rare, it is no wonder that consumption of these objects carries a particular symbolism. The people I knew were not rich, and the choice of prioritizing buying these things surprised me. Bolat, owning a very nice car, nicer than most of the cars in Kosh-Agach, had trouble paying a fine he got. Still, he would buy us western chocolate bars, which were much more expensive than their Russian counterparts, when we were out on trips. As Farideh Heyat (2002, p. 22) writes about consumption in Azerbaijan: “Generally in Soviet society, acquisition of Western goods by the elite and their association with power and privilege became a marker of elite identity”.

Both Caroline Humphrey and Sergei Oushakine write about a new emerging group of Russians called “New Russians”; they are described as the newly rich, with an expensive taste and a habit of buying expensive objects for show (Humphrey 2002, Oushakine 2000). Oushakine (2000) especially writes about how young people in Barnaul23 talk about “New Russians”, the Soviet, and self-identification. He finds that there is a great deal of scepticism towards the “New Russians”, but there is also a slight fascination, and a toying idea of becoming one in the future. While I will not claim that there were any “New Russians” living in Kosh-Agach, people were aware of them and the idea of these people echoed with some of the strangeness I saw in the consuming activities of young people there. This was especially the case among

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23 A big city, about four hours drive away from Gorno-Altaysk.
young men, whom it seems from Oushakine’s work are the ones slightly more enamoured by the idea of becoming a “New Russian Man” (Oushakine 2000, p. 110). One day in May Elena and I were walking around Kosh-Agach and by Anara’s salon we saw one of her employees, our friend, Talgat. We knew that he had been put in charge of the salon while Anara was away, but what made us stop and look was the way he was dressed. He wore a full on suit, fancy shoes and was carrying a suitcase, an outfit rarely seen in Kosh-Agach and very strange for a hairdresser, like he was. We laughed a little about it and I asked Elena why on earth he would be dressed like that. She said that he probably just wanted to look important and business-like. I believe that he wanted to portray himself as, what Oushakine calls, a ‘New Russian Man’. This role is heavily associated with the post-soviet development and consumption of luxury goods. This character is contrasted to the Soviet image of the woman in queue for sausages (Oushakine 2000, p. 101-102). The gendered difference is stark in these popular imageries: one (the woman) is seen as passive and subservient; the other (the man) as active and innovative. Further we can see how invoking such an image can be an economic strategy. In “Sunglasses, suitcases and other symbols” Sarah Pink (2001) writes about the strategic use of objects in Guinea Bissau, and shows how the use of one object (sunglasses, gold chains, garments, etc.) can give you access to other objects or economic possibilities: “The status represented through costume and clothing is thought to increase one’s access to other resources” (Pink 2001, p. 103).

The confusion Elena showed during the abovementioned event reveals that this practise is accepted to a certain degree but if one “overdoes it”, like Talgat did, one can be the victim of ridicule, and possibly social isolation. This could in turn, weaken one’s status in the social networks. Humphrey (2002) mentions these failed self-identifications and also how the aspect of distance connects to this theme, both physical and social: “The further one moves from a political metropolis, the weaker and more incoherent this self-identity becomes, contested and laughed at from outside and incapable of containing and subsuming the objects to its own interpretations.” (Humphrey 2002, p. 183). The peripheries have little control, and far less knowledge over the symbolisms of the centre, and this makes it difficult for inhabitants of the

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24 If seen, then on newspaper editors, politicians or members of the local intelligentsia.
margins to navigate these symbols and use them to their benefit without becoming the victim of ridicule.

**Identities in the margins**

Living in Kosh-Agach is for many younger people to live away from action. My impression is that they felt the stillness in an acute way, trying to realize their dreams, but finding few choices available to them. I argue that the marginalization of the people of Kosh-Agach has an impact on how young people self-identify, and what possible futures they imagine for themselves. Many young people expressed a will to move away to different countries - Japan, France and South Korea being popular - or to bigger Russian cities like Novosibirsk, Moscow or Gorno-Altaysk. For them it is evident that their problems will ease if they move closer to the metropolis, that greater futures lay waiting in bigger cities and that they should work towards being able to fulfil them.

Since the end of my fieldwork many of my friends have moved away from Kosh-Agach, for example Aleksei who had been planning a move to Gorno-Altaysk for some time. In conversations with him he had been quite explicit about his wish to live in a big city like Moscow or St. Petersburg and to become a makeup artist. For him the life he wanted was not compatible with what he and his friends called “Kosh-Agach Life”. This life, they described as still, filled with obligations to family and friends and with economic instability. Yet, by many, it was also described as fulfilling in a spiritual way; fulfilling your duties to your ancestry and family, making a good choice for your community. Some, like Elena who had been living in bigger cities and even abroad, felt that living in Kosh-Agach was a way of balancing out her spirit and paying back to her community. But still, she felt like her full potential could not possibly be reached by living in Kosh-Agach. Some of the reason for this conviction, I believe is in part thanks to social media. In Russia many young people have a smartphone, with several popular apps like Instagram, and the Russian version of Facebook: vKontakte. These platforms inform them on how life both in -and outside Kosh-Agach looks. Every now and then, often around holidays that included gift

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25 Numbers from [https://www.statista.com/statistics/284447/russia-social-network-penetration/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/284447/russia-social-network-penetration/) (Downloaded 06.03.17) show that 46% of Russians have an active account on social media.

26 Or at least, access to one.
giving they would put up pictures of gifts they had received or things they had bought themselves. What caught my eye was that often these pictures would be arranged to include logos from designer brands, flowers (which are very expensive to buy in Kosh-Agach), and/or western chocolates. These displays of goods seemed popular amongst their peers and they would receive many “likes”. This display of staged wealth can be analysed along the same lines as the example of Talgat previously mentioned. But since the displays are on social media, the possibilities of controlling the image, both the distribution and the visual aspect, are greater. What is communicated through these images is purchasing power and one’s social status in general.

I suggest that different dominant narratives can be part of the struggle of identity among young people in Kosh-Agach. The narratives create ideals while at the same time being at odds with each other. One narrative may be of “the good daughter or son”, one who stays or returns home, takes some education, but helps their family and practice a life where tradition takes centre-stage. This is contrasted by the idea of “the modern woman or man”, who is well-educated, spends money on one self, are up to date on what is trendy, and lives in a bigger city, making a lot of money. Both of these narratives are by young people considered available, and often one attempts the second narrative, is disappointed and chooses the first one. This is very similar to what Mary Beth Mills (1997) writes about young Thai women in Bangkok. Here too, there are two conflicting, but dominant narratives, which young women especially are drawn between (Mills 1997). A similar study was carried among the Eveny in Yakutia, Siberia. Olga Ulturgasheva (2015), an Eveny herself, interviewed children and adolescents about their futures. She discovered different narratives from the children who grew up in the forest and in the village, especially when it comes to the idea of “good” areas and “bad” areas. For both categories of children, they considered the forest “good” and the village “bad”, but while the village children expressed a desire to leave and go to a bigger city, the forest children did not consider it an escape as much as a needed step to have other opportunities (Ulturgasheva 2015, 85-108). These narratives show how, in the margins, the pull between identities can be intensified.

As Poole and Das (2002) suggest, the traditional identities at the margins are substantial in creating the national identity (p. 9). It shapes the national imagery, and in turn, the symbolism not only of the people of the margins, but all the citizens of the
nation. This means that the margins and the people who live there may have tremendous symbolic impact on the centre, and thus, in a sense influential and defining power. But, the stress this puts on the marginal individual, and the pull between the “traditional” identity of the margin and the “modern” identity of the centre, creates a double-bind that leads to pain and stress for many.

Consumption as creation
According to Caroline Humphrey (2002, p. 176) consumption in post-socialist countries:

“is central to the creation of culture, since it involves a process of objectification which enables material things and their discourses to become forms through which people have consciousness of themselves”.

In this context the consumption is a scope through which one creates an identity both as a culture and as an individual. I argue that for people in Kosh-Agach, and especially among young people, consumption is a way of combating stillness. Both through the practical effect of consumption: economic growth, stock refill, but also in their self-identification. They can identify as consumers and contributors to the Russian economy, which in turn gives them a voice to be heard, but they can also identify as global citizens, spending money on foreign brands, and displaying their consumption on international social platforms. This also contributes to make Kosh-Agach a place of relevance, both in a Russian and global context. Consumption can also combat other aspects of stillness: with the consumption of cars, which is very central in Kosh-Agach, you can create motion, and create a link with your nomadic past. All of this consumption directly combats stillness; it creates both people and place as important and as such counteracts the abandonment of the state.

Cars and possibilities
For people in Kosh-Agach the car comes to represent many things. For herders on the steppe they are practical vessels to keep comfortable, moving fast and transporting things, animals or people over great distances. For people in the village they make life easier as they travel in them to the district centre of Kosh-Agach to buy groceries, clothes, winter boots or kitchen utensils – things that are more expensive to buy in the
local village shops. They are also a source of income; for taxi drivers, village chauffeurs and others who ask a small fee to drive people from A to B. Every now and then Ene would talk about wanting a car. She had a lot of pain in her feet and back and would walk quite slowly, expressing pain if we walked for too long. She had a car she told me, but from what I could gather it was either not drivable or was borrowed to family. Walking through the streets of Kosh-Agach she would often point out a specific kind of car: small, but modern and foreign, sigh slightly, and say “I wish I had a car like that”. For her a car would mean freedom, and comfort, she could drive to visit her family in other parts of the republic, and travel easily in her own time from Kokorya to Kosh-Agach. It would also mean that she could move more easily through the centre of Kosh-Agach. Broz and Habeck (2015, p. 557) show how cars are a source of emotions for people in Altai and write: “One of the prime automobile emotions seems to be the desire for cars”. This is especially the case in post-Soviet Russia. During Soviet times cars were in most areas objects of scarcity, although this was not fully the case in Altai, as shown by Dmitry Doronin (2015, p. 37-38). Doronin (2015) also argue that the car has a specific status in Altai and is integrated into the cosmology taking on a similar role as horses have. The Altaian word for car: *tsemir* is directly translated as “iron horse” (Doronin 2015, p. 38). Any Altaian will go to a shaman before buying a car, as they also would do when buying horses; the shaman would bless the car and one would look for answers in from the spirits if a car broke down or crashed (Doronin 2015). I suggest that the car also comes to represent possibility and mobility, both social and physical. Owning a car can, similar to putting on a suit, generate potential access to money and status. The car is possibilities in motion, it becomes a sanctuary for many young people, as Broz and Habeck (2015) suggests; a mobile living room, where all the inhabitants are sensing and heading in the same direction. For some the car is the place to explore “forbidden” pleasures like alcohol, cigarettes, dating and sex. Although it grants visual access to anyone who comes close to it, it can be moved away from people, and can be transformed into an alternative space, where the owner of the car sets the rules. I argue that the car both as a place and as a symbol becomes significant for young people in Kosh-Agach. It combats stillness by consumption, creating mobility possibly in both the physical and the social status of an individual. It is also an object that joins together “modern life” and “traditional past”.

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In this sense cars can be understood as a way of placing oneself out of the role of “the abandoned”. Through movement you remove yourself from remote areas and you are able to fit the role of a subject of the state, seen and recognized, and maybe even cared for. One of the few areas of Kosh-Agach where one might feel the presence of the state is on the main road, both through the fact that this road is the only one that is regularly cared for, a point also made by Humphrey (2015, p. 3) and through the constant control of the very same road and those who use it.

I will briefly return to the theme of cars in the following chapter, exploring the meaning of car tourism.
Chapter 3: Sharing Stillness

One day sitting in the Maria-Ra, the local shopping centre in Kosh-Agach, with Elena, a colleague of hers, Aiman, walked over and joined us for some tea. She was a woman in her 30s, Kazakh, and living in Kosh-Agach. She asked me where I was living, and I told her that I was staying in Kokorya. She looked at me for a bit, and then said: “I used to visit that village all the time as a child. I had relatives living there before. But now I can’t visit, it hurts too much.” I asked her what she meant and she replied: “The village was so beautiful before, there used to be this big rock in the middle of the village, but the people living there they just destroyed it to build more houses.” I was surprised to hear this Kazakh woman, so clearly feeling the pain of a village she once knew, telling me that the people of Kokorya, presumably Telengits, had destroyed a rock to build houses. To me it seemed almost like the tropes in my head of the Telengits and the Kazakh had been reversed, and here sat a Kazakh in pain about land the Telengits had violated.

This situation showed me that how people connected themselves to land was not as easy as I had first thought. Nor was the practice of the different groups in Kosh-Agach district. It revealed to me once again the fluidity of practice and pushed me towards wondering “Do the Telengit and the Kazakhs feel the same way about the land of Kosh-Agach district?” “Where do they differ in experience and practice?” and “What about the other ethnic groups that live on this land?” “Do they all share stillness?” The result of this wondering you will find in this chapter.

Introduction

Kosh-Agach, although it is known as an area “belonging” to the Telengits, is full of people with different ethnic and national identities. Arriving there, keen and slightly blue-eyed, I envisioned a land where I would find shamans and Telengits around every corner. This was not however the case. The first person I ever met from Kosh-Agach was the man who drives the bus from Gorno-Altaysk to Kosh-Agach, called Nikolai. He was very friendly, asking me about my plans and being patient when my response was in poor Russian. I asked if he was a Telengit, and he answered that no, he was a Kazakh. I remember thinking to myself “Oh well, nice that I got to meet a Kazakh too. Maybe I should exchange information so that I have a Kazakh
connection”. Little did I know that Kazakhs in Kosh-Agach were not a scarcity; rather than meeting shamans around every corner, I met Kazakhs.

I found that the land of Kosh-Agach district is shared by several different groups, and while this is accepted and not heavily contested it is not always easy and calls for some degree of “drawing lines” between what is mine, what is yours and what is ours. Spending a lot of my days in Kosh-Agach I could often go days without meeting another Telengit, except from Elena. In Kokorya on the other hand I was told there were only Telengits, and in Zhana-Aul, the neighbouring village, I was told there only lived Kazakhs. The image that was presented to me was a myriad of villages with varying degrees of mixing of ethnic groups, but with every village labelled as either a “Telengit” or “Kazakh” village. Like Telengit-Sortogoi, for example, a village with a substantial Kazakh population, yet still categorized by people as a “Telengit” village. This, Elena told me, was because the village was founded by Telengits and due to the placement of the village; it lay at the foot of one of the sacred guarding mountains of the Kosh-Agach steppe. At the time of my fieldwork the Kazakhs of Telengit-Sortogi were building a mosque, but this was apparently not popular among the local Telengits. It might have been a far too permanent indication of the Kazakh presence, and was considered by the Telengits as disrespect towards the spirit of the mountain.

Generally, it seemed that villages with particular placements within the land, built in connection with a sacred place such as a mountain or a spring, more often than not would be categorized as “Telengit” villages, while newer villages like Zhana-Aul, which literally means “new village”, had a stronger tendency of Kazakh “labelling”. This was because some of these villages were founded after the return of the Kazakhs, which I will explain in detail in the following section.

However, while Kazakhs and Telengits are the majority groups in Kosh-Agach district, they are not the only ones living there. The third group of people that also share the land of Kosh-Agach are the Russians. I draw a difference between Telengits, Kazakhs and Russian, because this is a difference that is drawn by the people themselves. Although an Altaian, Telengit or Kazakh may at any point claim the identity of a Russian, when calling someone “Russian” in Kosh-Agach, it strongly suggests a white Russian. Whiteness in this case is a signifier of difference and is conflated with a Russian identity, which also has connotations to power and money, which I will show in the following discussion. While I will not discuss the emic
understanding of race or racial theory in this chapter, it is worth mentioning that this was a theme that came up during several occasions in conversations with people. Ene, when telling me about the people of the world and the Asiatic peoples said: “There are different races in this world, the Mongoloid race, the Negroid race, the Caucasian race. You are white - therefore you are Caucasian. I am of the Mongoloid race.” She used these models to explain an inherent difference between people, implying there were biological differences both in phenotypes and in behaviour. This concept of biological difference could, for Ene, be used as an explanatory model for any differences between ethnic groups.

The groups of Kosh-Agach are in constant contact, and live quite peacefully besides and with one another. I argue that the borders of groups become visible through everyday actions, minor avoidances, and micropolitics. While the networks discussed in the previous chapter show how the people of Kosh-Agach form bonds and rely on each other, this chapter will deal with how the land of Kosh-Agach and Ere Chuy is shared, and how this creates tensions between ethnic groups. The lives shared by different groups is similar to Fredrik Barth’s (1969, p. 9-10) argument on ethnic groups, and how they operate:

“Categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories”.

There were also other ethnic groups in Kosh-Agach, such as Mongols, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Chinese, and Turkmen, who worked and lived there, most of them temporarily. These people were so few and did not have any significant community, from what I was able to observe, which puts them slightly out of the scope of this thesis.

The Kazakhs of Kosh-Agach
It is difficult to describe the identity of the Kazakhs of Kosh-Agach because of several reasons. Should I call them immigrants, descendants of immigrants, post-Soviet inhabitants or nomads? They are a little bit of everything. Kazakhs are someone that can trace their lineage in some way or other back to Kazakhstan. They
might have been born there, have parents or grandparents that were born there or have nomadic ancestors further back that had connections to the land. They might have returned there during the economic crisis during the 1990’s or they might have married a Kazakh woman, to “keep the bond to the homeland”. They are mostly Muslim, and have their own separate language, which is similar to Altaian.

For an outsider, trying to distinguish Kazakh and Telengit customs and culture, is very difficult. It took me several months to correctly point out Kazakh garments and patterns, or discern a Kazakh dance performance from a Telengit or Altaian one. Valeria, a Russian woman told me: “Their way of life is so similar, it can be hard to tell them apart. This may be the reason as to why they … (gesticulating two fists butting each other).” “Conflict, you mean?” I asked. “Yes, they share so much and that creates a lot of debate”, she answered. This sentiment is echoed by Halemba (2006), who argues that since Telengits are constantly exposed to Kazakh culture, their own culture is viewed as both being conserved (like a border towards the Kazakh tradition) and having been muddled by Kazakh influence (Halemba 2006, p. 42). This resonates well with Barth’s (1969, p. 10) theory:

> “Ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence”.

This interdependence is similar to the networks I have already discussed. The networks that are formed, and the relations that are perpetuated does not threaten the cultural distinctions of Kazakh and Telengit culture; it heightens the need for definition. The local intelligentsia, both Kazakh and Telengit, work hard on defining their respective traditions, and both groups have museums which display their specific way of life, and publish pamphlets and books regularly. This can be seen as enfolding within a conceptual framework of ‘resistance to stillness’. The constant work of their respective intelligentsia creates a negotiation between ethnic groups in Kosh-Agach and keeps their identity politics relevant and in development. It demands attention both from other locals, from academics studying the area, and from long time visitors to Kosh-Agach. It also generates local development, such as the building of museums,
and even new villages. But while you might today find this mild strain of social life at the core of everyday interactions, it has not always been like this. The tension between Telengits and Kazakh is supposedly a relatively new pattern in the social fabric of Kosh-Agach.

One day in the Blinaja I asked Elena about the history of Kazakh people in Kosh-Agach. She told me that Kazakhs had been in Altai for over a hundred years and that they emigrated here because of instability in their homeland. “When they arrived the Telengits living here decided that they would share their land with the Kazakhs and try to live side by side with them. And this was the case for many years.” She continued to explain that because of the crisis during the 1990’s and a shaman’s prophecy that the steppe would be flooded and everyone there would die, many Kazakhs “returned” to Kazakhstan. But after only a few years most of them came back to Kosh-Agach, finding that the situation in Kazakhstan was not much better than in Altai. The Telengits did not take kindly to this, they had felt abandoned and the Kazakhs leaving had not been easy for them. This story was told to me a couple of times when asking about Kazakhs. The same story was told Halemba during her fieldwork in Kosh-Agach (Halemba 2006, p. 40-41). In her story it was stressed that the Telengits considered the Kazakhs as guests and that the Altai spirits had granted them permission to stay as a gift. Leaving would be a highly immoral act, which in the Telengits mind would cause retribution from the spirits (Halemba 2006, p. 40-41).

As already discussed, moral missteps are in Kosh-Agach followed by exclusion and this was also the case following this incident. In many villages, the return of the Kazakhs was heavily negated and in some, like Kokorya, they were not welcomed back. This exclusion, I suggest was caused both by a disliking of the choice of the Kazakhs, but also by the fear of supernatural retribution. Having Kazakhs in the village might endanger everyone and since the punishment delivered by spirits are hard to both predict and prevent it must have seemed safer to avoid the trouble altogether. As shown by Alexander Diener (2005) the return to Kazakhstan was not easy for the diaspora Kazakhs. Their customs and way of life were different, and many did not find their place in their “historic homeland” as they had hoped. But as Elena’s story suggest, it was not easy to return to Altai either. A teacher I

27 A café.
interviewed in Kosh-Agach specifically mentioned that her family had never left during the tough times in the 1990s. This struck me as a strange remark, as I had not asked her about it. To me it seemed like a significant remark, since she mentioned this as she was telling the story of her life and who she was. Her family’s choice to stay might have become a key element in her identity as a Kazakh in Kosh-Agach, proving her and her family’s explicit loyalty to land and people.

After some time in Kokorya I discovered a Kazakh resident, right across the road to Ene’s house. This man was married to a Telengit woman, and lived with her and their children. Their house stood out from the others in the village, being very small, badly kept, and not frequently visited. I never spoke to the Kazakh man or his wife, but I observed their house every day and noticed how the other villages avoided it. Ene would also be annoyed with small things, such as their dog barking or their goats eating grass by her fence. To me it seemed like these people had fallen into a role of *personae non gratae*. They had, I suspect, no place in the networks of Kokorya. I do not know the full circumstances of why, but I assumed that it might have had something to do with being a Kazakh in Kokorya specifically. A Kazakh in Kosh-Agach was no issue as that village is not of spiritual importance, but a Kazakh in villages that have direct relation to the spirit world, like in the case of Kokorya where the village is connected both to a sacred mountain and to the beginning of the sacred river Chng, was dangerous. Kazakhs could bring the village and its inhabitants in risk following the spirits presumed retribution towards the Kazakh population. It seems that time has healed some of the old wounds of Kosh-Agach. There the inhabitants showed a strong will to overcome the problems of the past and most Telengits knew and cared about Kazakhs, as friends, as colleagues or maybe as a spouse. However, in some situations comments on a presumed greediness of Kazakhs would appear.

After the economic crisis of the 90s it seemed that the group that thrived economically in Kosh-Agach were Kazakhs. Presently they own most shops and the political leader in the area is Kazakh. This social position was also pointed out by Halemba (2006, p. 41-42). The growth and thriving of one group in an area filled with scarcity, may lead to a feeling of competition, and that what others have might have been robbed from your very hands, which creates tension. While no Telengit ever expressed these sentiments to me directly, it was not hard, especially among the older generation to sense tension between these groups. As an older Telengit women
told me: “where there is money, there are Kazakhs. Us Telengits, we do not act that way”.

Often Elena and I would spend time in the bazaar. It was both a natural place to kill time while waiting for someone or just hanging out, while it during wintertime also served as an escape from the cold. The bazaar was a wooden building with approximately 50 small shops ranging between 2-10 square meters. Most of the vendors were Kazakhs or Mongolian, selling woollen products, clothes, shoes, underwear, stockings, and bags. In the summertime there was also stalls outside the building. Sometimes we would walk around with other friends, looking at clothes and shoes, trying some on and talking about what style of clothing we preferred. For Elena this was a place to buy clothing that represented individuality and modernity. The fact that most sellers in the bazaar were Kazakhs was no surprise to me. Some people talked about how the Kazakhs were just better with money and business, but others would claim they had no shame in their business ventures. On one occasion I had taken a trip by taxi to a smaller village outside of Kosh-Agach and upon arrival the woman meeting me there asked how much I had paid. She got slightly upset when hearing my response, saying that Kazakh taxi drivers were scoundrels and always wanted to trick people into paying more than they should.

Chris Hann and Keith Hart (2011) write about how the collapse of the Soviet created, a growing marked economy and new businessmen. But the socialist propaganda denouncing capitalism and its actors still persisted and anything other than honest labour was considered morally corrupt (Hann and Hart 2011, p. 132). Because of their association with capitalism and entrepreneurship I would argue that Kazakhs are at risk of being conflated with ‘New Russians’, a term discussed in the previous chapter, which signifies people thought to make a great deal of money, often through perceived criminal or corrupt activity. Humphrey (2002, p. 177) writes that they are thought of as “new” because:

“they do not give precedence to various hoary Soviet values, which are still mostly seen in a rosy hue by everyone else: the value of honest labour, of supporting the kollektiv, of respect for the working masses, of high-minded personal frugality, above all the value of production of goods for the benefit of society as a whole. […] no one could become so rich in an honest way”.
She shows that this term does not refer to a social group, but rather “a new mentality and an aspirational status” (Humphrey 2002, p. 178). I suggest that this mentality was considered to overlap with another “mentality”: the Kazakh one, which seemed to be viewed as “a good mind for economic success, often at the expense of others”.

During a 2002 interview the Telengit leader Vladimir Sabin talked about the differences between the Kazakh and Telengit communities in Kosh-Agach in regard to poverty and change. He stressed that the Kazakhs had better protection from these issues because of their religious community and international ties stretching to Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia (Badenkov and Sabin 2002, p. 323). When considering the networks discussed previously, I suggest that the Kazakhs have strength in the possibility of international networks, a reach that most Telengits do not have. This provides them with the constant option of returning to Kazakhstan, and to draw on connections in other countries where economic and social possibilities may be different. One taxi driver I met told me about his plans to go to school, become an agricultural engineer, and move his whole family to Kazakhstan. Yuri Badenkov also points out that many Kazakhs have demanded the right to cross borders without visa and to be granted dual citizenships28 (Badenkov and Sabin 2002, p. 322). This suggests that still, for many Kazakhs, the connection to Kazakhstan is being nurtured their minds.

For the Telengits and Kazakhs, everyday life is a constant reminder of their sameness and alterity. This is not to say that bonds cannot be formed through alterity, I suggest quite the contrary. Rupert Stasch (2009) shows us how in societies it need not be sameness that creates relation. His analysis of the Korowai of West Papua shows that strong bonds can be shaped while still upholding the idea of alterity and otherness. I suggest that both sameness and alterity are ways for Kazakhs and Telengits to create relations; difference does not in exclude sameness, they are not mutually exclusive forms of relatedness. Through their tradition of movement, much like the Korowai, their societies have been in constant contact with people they do not know, but which have influence on their lives (Stasch 2009, p. 2). Heidi Fjeld and Benedikte Lindskog (In press) write about the principle of separation in Mongolia and Tibet. They show that the principle of separation is highly important in regard to both the world of humans and the world of spirits. Here the connectedness between them is

28 Russian/Kazakh citizenships.
“established by separation” (Fjeld and Lindskog, In press, p.23). I suggest that for the Telengits this same idea exists both in relation to the spirit of the land, but also in relation to the other ethnic groups that live there: “Alterity – by separating and upholding discontinuity between realms, is a condition for unity, in as much as unity – the sharing of certain abilities, qualities and life-essence - is a condition for maintaining alterity” (Fjeld and Lindskog, In press, p. 81).

In other circumstances highlighting one’s sameness, either as Asians, nomads, or Kosh-Agach inhabitants becomes important. Like when on the 1st May when during a celebration at Ene’s sisters house there was more Kazakh people than Telengits. They sang Kazakh, Soviet, and Altaian songs. Ene expressed envy of how the Kazakh songs had quicker beats and generally a more uplifting sound, and in contrast she mimicked Altaian music with a mannerism of sulkiness. I found it interesting how she highlighted positive aspects of Kazakh culture and negative aspect of Altaian culture. Later the same evening she gestured to the Kazakh guest and said to me: “You see, they are Kazakh, I am Telengit, Altaian, but we are all Russians.” This example shows how situational relatedness also becomes a part of sameness in everyday life. Considering the fact that Ene grew up in a, back then, mixed village, maybe having Kazakh friends since childhood one can see how the border between Telengits and Kazakhs is one that is crossed just as often as it is asserted. These people know each other; they share history and are to a certain degree viewed as “the same” to the Russians who try to assert control over the area. They walk a line of sameness and alterity and often find strength in unifying to a certain point. Still, as Simon Harrison (1999, p. 249) has argued, sameness can be a source of great conflict:

“The felt similarities between ethnic groups, not just the differences, can sometimes assume an important role in ethnic conflict or contribute to bringing such groups into conflict in the first place, as groups seek to augment or enhance their identities – or indeed construct them – by trying to borrow or purloin elements of each other’s identities”.

This echoes the point made by the Russian woman Valeria, above, saying says that it is because of their similarities that they have conflict.
Telengits and Kazakhs daily balance their ethnic belonging on a scale of sameness and alterity. This means, from what I observed, that in most cases they will look for ways to bring tension to a minimum in situations with people they share networks or other good-natured relations with. In situations where the other person in a stranger or a disliked person one will often resort to explain the behaviour of this person within a framework of “Kazakhness”, “Telengitness” or even “Russianness”. This way of describing a person becomes part of a bigger stereotyping of ethnic groups in Kosh-Agach, and every time a person from a certain ethnic group acts in a similar way to the stereotype it confirms that these traits are essential and shared by all members of the group.

This is not to say that tension is always an outspoken and very visible aspect of everyday life, especially not in Kosh-Agach. Tension is also filled with silence, with the unmentioned and disregarded. As shown by Marita Eastmond and Johanna Selimovic (2012) silence is used strategically to relieve tension among ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I suggest, that this is also used as a way of manoeuvring relationships in Kosh-Agach. Talking to Elena she mentioned silence as a way of maintaining friendships. I asked her about how normal it is for Kazakh and Telengit youth to be friends. She said it was not that unusual, but often in friendships like these there were things you just did not talk about. “We cannot talk about the tension, we could have big disagreements and it could be damaging to our friendship”. For her, the idea of discussing the situation between the Telengits and the Kazakhs would without bring un-repairable damage to her relationships, and the better choice was silence. Even in the closest of relations there are choices to be made that are a direct consequence of the tension between Kazakhs and Telengits. It cannot be avoided, but it cannot be completely confronted either.

**Russians: guests or hosts?**

One of the biggest differences between the republic’s capital, Gorno-Altaysk and Kosh-Agach is the amount of Russians. In Gorno-Altaysk, they seem to make up approximately half of the population, but in Kosh-Agach there are so few that when you first see one, you notice it. Most of the Russians living in Kosh-Agach appeared to work in the military or in the police force.

But are the Russians on Kosh-Agach viewed as guests or hosts? From the Telengit perspective the Kazakh have been categorized as a guest, albeit a long
staying one. The Russians however are harder to place. They are power holders, they represent the sovereign state, they use Kosh-Agach as a tourist escape, and as a politically charged land where the border is reproduced and controlled. Both the Telengits and the Russians elevate the status of the Kosh-Agach steppe, but where the Telengit practice is one of submission to the powers of the land, the Russian practice demands domination and control of both land and the people who live and move there. In the following discussion I will make a distinction between Russians who live in Kosh-Agach permanently and the Russians who are temporary workers, often for the police or military.

The Russians temporarily posted in Kosh-Agach are there as extensions of the state, and live separated from the rest of the Kosh-Agach population. Most of them live in a big apartment building at the edge of the town. This building is surrounded by a tall fence and has security guards posted at the gate. Right by the building is one of the more expensive restaurants in Kosh-Agach, a sushi restaurant with a chef that was trained in Moscow by Japanese sushi chefs. I went there every now and then with Elena, Anara, Talgat, Oksana and Galina. Often the only other customers would be Russians.

I suggest that the spatial separation of the Russians from the rest of the Kosh-Agach population is a necessary part of the power these temporary workers are supposed to hold. Abstaining from joining Kosh-Agach society gives them a superior position, it upholds their ties to the centre and it reproduces the division between “us” and “them”. These miniature societies that the temporary workers live in are, as Teresa Caldeira (1996, p. 308) writes:

“private property for collective use; they are physically isolated, either by walls or empty spaces or other design devices; they are turned inwards and not to the street; and they are controlled by armed guards and security systems which enforce rules of inclusion and exclusion. […] they possess all that is needed within a private and autonomous space and can be situated almost anywhere, independent of the surroundings. […] the enclaves tend to be socially homogeneous environments, mostly for the middle and upper classes”.

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Caldeira (1996) points out how enclaves contest the idea of a city where one can move freely and people are equal. They create difference between classes and a sense of danger. She also argues that enclaves are public space:

“…increasingly abandoned to those who do not have a chance of living, working, and shopping in the new private, internalized, and fortified enclaves. As the spaces for the rich are enclosed and turned inside, the outside space is left for those who cannot afford to go in” (p. 319).

While this is not yet completely the case in Kosh-Agach I suspect it may become the case in Tashanta, a small village about 50 km from Kosh-Agach. There they are constructing big enclaves, with playgrounds inside the fences, only available to the children of the military personnel who work there temporarily. This means that it is to some degree possible to create a miniature version of the centre in the margins, and this is for the benefits of mostly the Russian temporary workers. Now, I will suggest that some of the value of the centre is that it is limited both in space and in number of people. Although bigger cities, which are the inner core of the centre, hold vast number of people, only a few can manoeuvre the centre and claim it as their own. A part of the mythology of larger cities is that no one really belongs there, but the few who do are held to be the most successful in the nation. This I suggest is also the case with the enclaves built in Kosh-Agach, and may also be what gives them some of their power. They contain a limited number of people and are limited in their space, with stark boundaries to the outside.

Other Russians who live here participate in Kosh-Agach society for the most part. Aleksei and Galina were Russians, and had strong ties to people and land. It seemed that the Russian who lived here permanently either lived in Kosh-Agach or Tashanta village. Both these villages have bigger Russian communities, and Kosh-Agach also had Russian Orthodox Church. At one point during my fieldwork, I was, together with the group of people I spent much time with, introduced to a new resident of Kosh-Agach, who had come here to work as a priest in the Orthodox Church. They welcomed him, but to me it seemed like they were tepid in their reception of him. This is might have been due to the fact that he was a Russian, and only supposed to work in the area temporarily. It does not seem as important to form strong bonds with someone expected to leave after only a short time. This is similar to
the reception of southern Norwegians when working in small villages in Northern Norway as shown by Frøydis Eidheim (1993). The power relations between the southerners and the northerners are also an aspect with this expectation of abandonment (Eidheim 1993). The northerners are sceptical of the southerners and expect them to leave after a short stay, therefore they do not care to make friends. This, in turn, enforces the idea that the southerners do not try hard enough to integrate into the village society, and that they are treated poorly (p. 48). They are guests, expected to leave and not return.

One of the main “meeting-grounds” between the Telengit/Kazakh population and the Russians are the frequent controls of papers on the R-256, the highway known as the Chuysky Trakt. This road runs from Novosibirsk, through Altai and to the Mongolian border. Like pointed out by Poole and Das (2004) the state power over the margins can become especially visible in situation where official papers and bureaucracy plays a role. In this case the Russian state’s power over the Kazakhs and Telengits is one that seeks to make a point of ownership and sovereignty. Demanding that the population of Kosh-Agach district constantly carry identification papers and permits, stopping them in their daily lives and asking about their movement, is a practice that can be seen as questioning and challenging their way of connecting with land and spirits, of which movement is an important aspect of.

**The tourists in Kosh-Agach**

The idea of Russians as guests could also be connected to the tourist industry that has emerged over the last 15 years in Altai. Many Russians go on daytrips or on longer road trips, as documented by Halemja (2006, p. 5-14) and Broz and Habeck (2015). Mostly the tourists come by private cars, looking for wild, untouched nature, indigenous culture, and as Halemba (2006, p.13) writes: “energy”. The idea that Altai and Ukok plateau is filled with a certain energy that can be tapped into has its origin in Altaian cosmology and semi-local Russian tourist know this, but I suspect, have not researched it thoroughly. Broz and Habeck (2015) suggest that the number of tourists arriving every year is quite high, possibly 1.5 million in 2012, and over half in private cars (Broz and Habeck 2015, p. 556). They view the car tourism to Altai in an historical scope and argue that: “the desires satisfied during the current wave of

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29 They are somewhat sceptical of the accuracy of the number but they, as I did, witnessed great numbers of tourists.
automobilisation of Russia are derived from […] late-Soviet desires for both cars and individual holiday-making” (Broz and Habeck 2015, p. 558). This desire for cars has been discussed earlier in this thesis, but is interesting to note in the context of tourism, because it indicates that tourism can to a certain degree be a performance of wealth, meaning that the Russian tourists treat their tourist activities as a way of showing their material status.

Many people in Kosh-Agach expressed an ambiguity with regards to the tourists. They were a potential source of money; they were often rich Russians from the bigger cities surrounding Altai Republic, such as Biysk, Barnaul or Novosibirsk. But they are also seen as threat to the good relationship between the Altaians and the spirits of Altai, and to the preservation of the purity of land and nature. When interviewing Yeva, our neighbour, she told me about how tourists had disrespected both the sacred springs (arshan suu) and the ritual cairns (oboo or üle), and how this had repercussions for those tourists. Several other people echoed this, “every year somebody dies,” said a Telengit man in the village Chagan-Ozun, “they are not careful\textsuperscript{30} and they suffer the consequences”. Like the Kazakhs, the tourists are viewed as guests to the sacred land of Ere Chuy and will face retribution if they disrespect the spirits.

Karina, a middle-aged woman in Kokorya, told me that rich Russians bought hunting licenses to shoot endangered species like the sacred and endangered argali sheep (ovis ammon) and snow leopard (panthera unicia), and every now and then a helicopter could be seen flying over the mountains surrounding the steppe heading further into the mountains, which is the natural habitat of these species. Kathleen Braden and Natalya Prudnikova (2008) also discuss this hunting and show that illegal hunting is a big threat to the survival of endangered species in Altai (p.16). In 2003, illegal hunters were caught hunting ibex goats (capra sibirica) by helicopter. One of the hunters was the head of the Russian Department of Conservation and Hunting Resources (Barden and Prudnikova 1008, p.16). This scandal, along with others, sends a clear signal to the Altaians that the Russian population, and indeed the state agents, does not care about the land as they do and that the tourist poses a real threat both to the physical and spiritual aspects of the land. This leaves the Altaian

\textsuperscript{30} I understood this to mean both in physical movement in the land and rules relating to sacred areas.
population with a sense of precariousness and confirms that they are the only ones that can care for the land and the spirits in the “right” way.

**Sharing stillness – a joint fight?**

Although the area of Kosh-Agach is shared between several ethnic groups one can wonder if the stillness is shared by all of its inhabitants.

I suggest that since both the Telengits and the Kazakhs mostly shared the stillness left behind they can be considered as sharing the contesting of this state of being. The Russians can to a certain degree be included in this. There are people in Kosh-Agach who I will tentatively suggest, does not share this reality. They are generally temporary workers and or the keepers of power/agents of the state. By this I mean people who produce and reproduce a dominating state presence in Kosh-Agach district, most of them through work as border guards, road inspectors or police officers. The reason for this is both the separation of these workers by walls and economic possibilities, but also the temporary state of their stay in the area. A third reason may be the fact that they themselves represent the state and is then in no sense abandoned by it. The state supplies the temporary workers with a home away from home and with comforts they would enjoy in bigger cities.

Although some Kazakhs and Telengits find work in the same institutions mentioned above, their history and connectedness, I suggest, will still leave them with the experience of abandonment. From the view of the state agents in Kosh-Agach, Kazakhs and Telengits are basically the same. This leads them to have a similar experience of power and dominance. The one aspect that truly separates the two groups in regard to life in Kosh-Agach, is the relation to the land and the constant work that it demands of the Telengits. What is clear is that the spirits of Altai do not view all people of the land as similar. As Elena often mentioned, belonging and land were central to the function of the spirits connected to the individual. She told me:

“A foreigner has foreign spirits connected to her. They will meet the sprits of Altai and Ere Chuy in the spirit dimension and they will not speak the same language. This can lead to fights in the spirit dimension, which then will bring fights in our dimension. Therefor it is dangerous for a foreigner to travel here, and for us to travel other places. When the spirits can’t communicate, it brings trouble.”
In this quote it is indicated that the spirits of Altai and Ere Chuy consider one group of people as belonging to the land and one group or groups as guests. This in turn will for the Telengits legitimize their belonging and claim to land.

Some might view the stillness in a nostalgic and romanticised way, as a past that is lost for the Russians in bigger cities. But this view is a privileged one, that can only be held by people who do not spend their life in this context. As I have shown, the sharing of land is not in itself problematic, but it is the potential for offending the spirits of the land that is filled with risk and danger. In Telengit cosmology one should not leave one’s homeland, and the fact that there are people “out of place” is dangerous not only for them but for others around them.
Chapter 4: Land and Worship

One afternoon in June Elena and I were standing outside on the asphalt road waiting for her taxi to come pick her up. The mosquitos were eating us up and we were tired from a whole day of interviews. She stood there thoughtful while waiving her hands to keep the bugs away, and said:

“You know, I think there truly is coming a changing time. All the biler ulus\textsuperscript{31} and kams\textsuperscript{32} say so. People will return to the practises and we will be at balance with the spirits. And it is because of the spirits. They have the power to make this happen, to bring people back to the traditional practise”.

“How do they have this power?” I asked. “They guide people, and show them their destiny,” she answered.

Elena’s reflection on the spirits intention, brought me to a fuller understanding of how, for the Telengits, the spirits truly govern, and how all worldly forces are under their will. For the first time during my fieldwork the Russian state felt insignificant, and it made me realize that for the Telengits the abandonment of the state was not quite as simple as just that.

Introduction

For the Telengits the area of Kosh-Agach district is one of special status. It contains the notional area of Ere Chuy and is the homeland of the Telengits. As discussed previously the Ere Chuy has fuzzy borders, it starts and ends with its powers, but since its powers are considered as being dispersed throughout the land it is difficult to pinpoint the edges. I suggest that it can be thought of much in the same way of water flowing on to a shore. Where the water ends and the shore begin is not easy to say. But it also is not that important, what is important is that the water is something other than the shore when it all comes down to it. I also suggest, similar to Lindskogs (2011) description of land of a nutag\textsuperscript{33} (p. 7), that Ere Chuy is a generic term, referencing the power of spirits and land, and the belonging and connection of the

\textsuperscript{31}“Knowing people”, people with ritual knowledge.
\textsuperscript{32}Shamans.
\textsuperscript{33}A mongolian notion of “homeland”.
Telengits to this land. It is in Ere Chuy the Telengits trace their origin, and the origin of all Turkic peoples.

Many of the people I met shared the feeling that the land had claimed them in some way. Like Galina, who had grown up in a bigger city outside of Altai, but had a grandmother who lived in Kosh-Agach, and consequently had moved here some years ago: “I came here often as a child. Now I cannot leave, I belong here. When I leave I miss it constantly and feel bad.” Galina was Russian, but she was well integrated in Kosh-Agach, with a job and a son living here. Ene’s comments echoed Galina’s sentiments: “I belong here in this land. I cannot leave for too long.” Others I interviewed in Kokorya, like Yegor our middle-aged neighbour, commented on the possibility of illness, death and the problem for the spirit of the dead person as a consequence of leaving Ere Chuy: “It would be very problematic if a Telengit died outside of Ere Chuy, their spirit would not be at home and could not find peace.” Elena would sometimes tell me jokingly that I might end up missing Ere Chuy so much I would just have to move here. “Ere Chuy will claim you, and your spirit will be bound to this place”, she said. I replied not so jokingly that yes, I might just end up having to return every year to keep my spirit happy.

Through these statements and many like them it became evident to me that although this was a place of stillness and abandonment, this was also a place that contested that label through spirits and power of land. Since my original plan was to study the Telengit experience of traditional healing, this chapter tries to connect the idea of land, spirits, healing, and practicality. In this chapter I show how the worship of land and spirits becomes a way of maintaining importance, power and belonging. I will also suggest that the practicality and pragmatism discussed earlier may have their foundation in practices of worship, which we will see again requires flexibility.

The spirits of Ere Chuy
As already established the area of Ere Chuy is one that the Telengits share with several different peoples. But it is not only others in the form of ethnic groups that are found here. The significant ‘other’ for the Telengits is not the Kazakhs, nor the Russians. It is, in fact, the spirits of the land. These spirits come in many forms and with different intentions. They are constantly in the mind of Telengits and a person lives his or her whole life with the spirits, and in constant consideration of the spirit world. The land and the spirits are considered as one, and the Telengits are also one
with the land. This might in the mind of the reader sound contradicting, but to the Telengits it is not. You cannot separate them, for it would lead to destruction of the whole. For them the spirits are both the ‘other’ and part of the one self.

The Telengits, as does the Altaians in general, consider the world to be divided in three. One is the world of the humans, where most spirits can come and go, the second is the world of spirits, both seen as being above and beside the human world, and lastly there is the underworld, where evil spirits live. The two other worlds are similar to the human, and the spirits need the same objects as humans do. One Telengit man told me a story about a skilled farrier who had fallen ill and went to see a shaman (kam). There the kam saw evils spirits riding his soul and trying to kill him. This was because in the world below they were in need of a skilled farrier, and they wanted to kill him so he could descend and join them. This meant, the Telengit man told me, that for most people who were skilled in their work they had to beware and do their rituals correctly and at the right time, so they would not be claimed by the spirits of the underworld.

Spirits can be categorized into several different types. There are the spirits of a person, mentioned previously. Elena described this as being a guardian spirit, with means of fighting. Animals also have spirits, but these are much simpler entities. There are the spirits of a place, like the spirit of Altai who often is said to be in the shape of an old man with white hair on a white horse, or the spirit of a sacred spring (arshan suu) or a mountain. Once, interviewing a woman in Tashanta, she told me that she had once taken a photo of the spirit of an arshan suu, and that her camera had broken as a result. Cameras can themselves have spirit, as can Altaian instruments, garments, or agricultural equipment. As discussed by Doronin (2015) cars, electrical appliances, such as televisions, telephones, and refrigerators are also considered as having spirit. Evil spirits, also previously mentioned, called ‘körmös’, are frequently talked about as spirits that can inflict anyone by entering the body, often in people considered “weak”, such as children, sick, elderly, women or the sleeping. Children wear safety pins or white shells to keep the spirits away. The safety pins are sharp, and evil spirits will get stung if they get too close to the child. The white shell is seen as the symbol of the white spirit of Altai, and this brings protection from the spirit of Altai. The “stinging-technique” is used in many other ways also, for example at

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34 This wording is analysed later in this chapter.
Elena’s childhood home where they had put a branch full of thorns by the entrance to the house to keep the spirits out, or when Ene and I left knives on our pillows when leaving for a week-long trip. The knives were not intended for evil spirits but for our own, so that they were forced to follow our bodies to our temporary beds.

The spirits of a place can affect you both in unknown and in known ways. One day, Elena and I travelled to the village of Telengit-Sortogoi trying to get some interviews. Approaching the house of a biler kizhi, a knowing person, the person was busy and we were told to wait out on the street. Elena suddenly became quite strange, both very silent and almost moody in a way. She said that we should just leave, that she didn’t think this person was what we were looking for. Me, being surprised by her change of heart agreed but asked her about her mood and reasoning. She told me that upon approaching the house she had gotten the feeling that we were not welcome and that both the house and the biler kizhi had a “hard” spirit. She had a feeling that we should not talk to this person. I asked her about what she meant by “hard” and she explained to me that people and houses, among other things, can have a hard spirit which makes that person difficult to approach and will make you uncomfortable in their presence. She told me that other people have “soft” spirits, and they make you feel “nice, warm, and cared for”. The same goes for houses. A “soft” house makes you want to stay, you feel welcome and you can relax, while a “hard” house will be cold and you will not find a comfortable seat or bed. This means that not only do spirits come in different variations as to where they belong, but they can also have strong personalities or traits, that can be felt by ordinary people. This requires people, and in this case, anthropologists, to be flexible, adapting to spirits’ personalities and wishes.
Ene cleansing her house from evil spirits by using the smoke of dried juniper bush approx. nine days after the new moon.

Through worshipping the spirits of Ere Chuy you signify the land, but also yourself both as an individual, the söök you belong to, and the Telengits as a group. If the Telengits are insignificant in Russia large, at least they are of the highest significance to the spirits of Altai and Ere Chuy.

One day on a visit to Ene’s sister, Polina’s house, a Kazakh neighbour, an older woman, invited us over for tea. Upon entering her house, I was surprised to find artysk (dried juniper branches, used to clean away spirits) in her house, by the fireside. She was very keen to show me her house, but was very careful about one room. She only opened the door slightly to show me the size of it, stating that nobody should enter the room. I asked why and she answered, “Because there is a körmös in
there. My granddaughter saw it, and I haven’t gotten rid of it yet.” I was very surprised to find elements I had categorized in my head as “Telengit” or “Altaian”, in a Kazakh house, in combination with things Ene and Polina pointed out as specifically Kazakh, like tapestries and foods. This showed me that while in my head I might had placed the “Telengit” label on the certain elements, they were in fact shared by people beyond this ethnic group, making relation to the spirit world something Kazakhs also actively participated in. This, I argue, indicates fluidity and open-endedness in tradition and beliefs and when it comes to the affliction of spirits, is does not matter whether you are a Kazakh, Telengit or Russian – when they come for you, you will get their punishment. Once again this also shows a high degree of practicality and adaptability. Instead of denying the presence of a körmös, one accepts it and gets on with dealing with it in the best way possible.

The way people relate to the spirits of the land and how they are acted upon in incorporated into daily life among all people of Kosh-Agach shows how practicality and pragmatism is central in everyday life. A Telengit, when suspecting they are in contact with a spirit of some sort, has to adhere to a strong degree of flexibility, trying to adapt to the unknown spirits will. Halemba (2008, p. 289) writes:

“The spirits with whom they collaborate are in constant flow, they change their characteristics, they arrive and disappear, they change their voice, appearances moods, and they are not always predictable. Altaian spirits appear as outcomes of sporadic actions or personal encounters, and they do not form a coherent cosmology”.

This means that the experience of spirits is one where you cannot prepare for or have set rules of behaviour towards. In turn, this makes the Altaians, and especially the inhabitants of Ere Chuy, who are considered to live in constant relation to spirits, highly practical, inventive and flexible.

**Healing land**

Asking Ene about Altai and belonging she talked about how this was her homeland, where she belonged, and that she would never want to leave. She told me that when her daughters, who lived further north, returned to Kokorya they would often lay down on the ground and roll around to reconnect with the land. One could also hug a
tree, she said, it would do the same. She said that if she herself had been away for a
longer period she did this too. This is also practice found in Mongolia. Lindskog
(2011) points out how this practice, similar to Altai creates a reconnection with land
and spirits, amalgating the body of the person and the homeland (Lindskog 2011, p.
123).

Yegor in Kokorya told me that if a Telengit leaves his or her homeland he or
she must keep all nail clippings and hair from haircuts. This, he said, must be returned
to Altai and be disposed of in the land. If not a person will become ill, because a part
of oneself can never return fully to one’s homeland, an idea also shown by Lindskog
(2011, p. 120). The disposing of the hair also connects to injunctions, to prevent
illness that may be caused by just throwing it away. Birds may use it to build nests
and this can give the person a permanent headache. The recommended way of
disposing of hair, Elena said was to put it into pillows or to burn it in an oven like the
one in one’s banja. This suggests that the hair, even when separated from the body,
still has connections to the person’s wellbeing. This would be because it is considered
to have soul, which lingers on. It is also thought that the soul of a person is situated
above the actual body, approximately 20 cm above the head, and that all knowledge a
person acquires enters through the hair. The hair also becomes important for single
women of marrying age. They are not supposed to cut the hair short or braid it into
more than one braid. During the Altaian wedding ceremony the hair is split into two
sections, and one side is braided by the bride’s female relatives, and the other by the
groom’s. This is supposed to symbolize the woman’s mind splitting in two to include
constant thought of her husband’s life and wellbeing. Elena, having cut her hair short,
was then by some considered as un-available for marriage, and she would often get
comments about her hair, telling her that now nobody could marry her.

The sacred springs arshan suu are particularly important in most Telengits
ritual worship and health. They serve both as ways of reconnecting to sacred land,
like the Ere Chuy, as a way of showing respect to sacred spirits, and as a way of
healing your body. There is an arshan suu for most body parts and organs, like the
eyes, the lungs, the heart, the liver and the genitals. When drinking the water and /or
rinsing your body in it you strengthen the body’s and its spirit’s ability to heal. In

35 A banja is a Russian steam sauna. Usually in Kosh-Agach, every nuclear family has a
banja, where the whole family washes themselves.
36 Elena would often use the word ‘aura’ about the soul seen outside of the body.
other situations, you visit a arshan suu because you suspect there is a körmös “riding your soul”. This can cause you to have physical symptoms, and can be diagnosed as an illness by a doctor, but a kam will be able to tell if the symptoms are caused by a körmös or not.

Tying jalama by the arshan suu. Jalama are clean white, blue, pink or yellow ribbons that are given as a gift to the spirit of the arshan suu.

The land and the forces within it can cleanse a person of many ailments. If a person suspects that a körmös has entered his or her body, he or she can visit an arshan suu, and the water will enter the body “like water sinks into the soil”, said the kam Aksuu. “The water sinks into the bone and washes out the evil spirit. Afterwards it is
common to vomit and have diarrhea, this is part of the cleansing process”. In this statement the comparison between the land (soil) and the body is a clue to the strong connection Telengits have to their land. The body and it parts are of the land and share similarities with it. Therefore, a reinstatement of one’s connection to land can provide healing, like pointed out by Eva-Marie Dubuisson and Anna Genina (2011, p. 474):

“In post-Soviet Central Asia, many problems are conceived not as psychological or purely physical ailments, but are spiritual states, related metaphysically to bodies and social life, which can be healed by strengthening relationships with God, with ancestors […], and with the land itself”.

Another quote by Aksuu highlights other perspectives on health and spirits; she told me: “When a spirit enters the body, they ride the soul. They sink into the bone and heart of a person and harden everything in the person.” “Riding the soul,” indicates mastery over an individual and as I have previously shown the significance of the horse in Altaian cosmology. This wording suggests that the person becomes like an animal, without control and steered by the spirits will. If a person then is under the spirits control it means that the actions can be excused and that the responsibility of one’s actions is not fully your own. Asking Aksuu who would come to her for help, she answered: “Everyone visit me. Kazakhs, Russians, Telengits, Mongols, everyone. When you have troubles you do what you can.” In both these statements the themes of practicality and pragmatism is indicated. In the first, the explanatory model of being under spirits’ control becomes a practical way of excusing terrible or bizarre acts; and in the other Aksuu herself points it out; that when you need to produce an effect, like Elena have already made clear is the goal of most actions, “you do what you can”. Pragmatism and practicality are the true makers of action and lead to flexibility in both cosmology and practise.

The fact that the Altai is sacred gives the Altaians and Telengits legitimacy within the Altai, as a group that tends to a significant area, a job that keeps the whole Altai, maybe even the world, balanced. Halemba (2006) writes about the choice to establish a nature park in Ongudai district in 2001 and writes that this choice was made to “protect from protection” (Halemba, p. 190). Here the only way for the Telengits to take control and keep it is to establish nature parks and protected areas
before the Russian power holders do. This is done to make sure that the way the areas are run does not interfere with the sprits of the land.

Timing is important in all interaction with the spirits of Ere Chuy. This is especially shows itself when it comes to the possibility of travelling and visiting sacred places. When trying to arrange a trip to an arshan suu with Ene, the lack of commitment to a date made the whole project so uncertain that I became convinced that it would never happen and she just didn’t want to tell me that she had no intention of seeing it through. Talking with Elena and browsing Halemba’s book (2006), I was reminded of a very particular aspect of making plans in Kosh-Agach; you don’t. Making plans with too much intent can be seen as setting yourself up for failure and can lead the spirits to sabotage your journey. When travelling to a sacred place planning should be avoided until the day before or the same day. I you plan too far ahead the spirits will expect your arrival, and if, by then, your plans have changed you will suffer their retribution. A similar fear was, I suspect, practiced upon my leaving Kosh-Agach. The day before I was to take the bus to Gorno-Altaysk I took the local bus to spend the night at the house of Polina, Ene’s sister who lived in Kosh-Agach. By the bus I said a short goodbye to Ene, she having promised me that she would travel to Kosh-Agach later that day. Hours later she told me over phone that she was not coming, and me realizing that we would not be saying a “proper” goodbye, became quite sad. Elena comforted me, saying that this was the right way to do it “or you would not return”. I asked her to explain what she meant, and she told me that when two people say goodbye with a lot of sadness the spirits sees it and interprets it like these people will not see each other ever again. They then make it so that their paths will never cross. Ene, securing our future meeting said goodbye to me in the way she would have any other day, tricking the spirits so that I will in the future return to Kosh-Agach.

The fluidity of worship

For many Altaians and Telengits the practice of worship is filled with fluidity and a focus of effect rather than a prescribed and set way of reaching it. Elena told me herself on different occasions: “What is the most important thing is that it works”. The search for effect is the reason for the fluid practice of religiosity in Kosh-Agach. In Ene’s house, she had artysk, and a turguzu, which is a vessel for the spirits of a house, but she also had a Russian Orthodox icon and a monkey to signify the year of
the monkey. Elena practised traditional Ak Jang-faith, but also called herself Buddhist, did healing\textsuperscript{37}, and had a fascination for more mixed versions of spirituality. One young girl, growing up in Kokorya said she did not believe in körmös, while the older Kazakh woman in Kosh-Agach was so frightened of the körmös in her house she would not even enter the room where it was said to be. To draw clear lines between faiths and practices, mundane and sacred was not easy. This open-endedness leads to a myriad of possibilities when an effect is needed.

As documented by Halemba (2006) the traditional practices of Altaian religion are considered to have an aspect personal adaptation (Halemba 2006, p. 28). The actual practices vary greatly from person to person and how, when and if you choose to do a certain ritual is up to you. This was also brought up during a conversation with Tanya, a Telengit teacher in Kosh-Agach. I interviewed her some weeks after Chaga Bairam, the Altaian New Year celebration. I asked her how she had celebrated and she told me that she had joined in the public celebration, but that she did not feel like performing the private rituals, which are performed at home – feeding the fire spirit and cleansing with artysh. I asked her if this was normal, and she answered that “people do what they feel like, I didn’t feel like doing it, so I just haven’t”.

One day, while sitting in a taxi with Elena and talking I noticed her face change. She seemed to be listening intently to the sound coming from the speakers. This was a track of spoken word in Altaian that I did not understand. She told me, as we got out of the car at her house that she had found the whole thing very bizarre: “He was listening to a track about how to feed the fire spirit, and he was Kazakh”, she laughing and seemed surprised. “But why?” I asked, also surprised. “I don’t know. It is very strange”, she said. Her reaction seems interesting to me, mostly because it became clear to me that worship in Kosh-Agach is varied. That a Kazakh man wanted to feed the fire, was for me similar to a Kazakh woman having a körmös in her house, but for Elena the situation in the taxi was bizarre. This shows that although there is fluidity, there were also some elements of worship not considered part of this flux by all.

In recent times, as also documented by Halemba (2004) and witnessed by myself, the local intelligentsia are in a process of officialising the Ak Jang-faith, and during my fieldwork I observed a book conference presenting a new book containing

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\textsuperscript{37} Here referencing the New-Age version of warm hands placed on the body.
the traditions and culture along the Chyua River. This book contained both instruction on ritual practice, history, and poems and songs. Interviewing the author, a Telengit woman, she told me that she had collected the information from the elders in the communities and stressed that this was done so that future generations would know how to do the ritual practices right. As is evident these regulatory practices are enfolded within a wish to systemize the religious practise of the Altaians, and as suggested by Halemba this is caused by influence by other more canonized religions such as Buddhism, Islam and Russian Orthodoxy. As this trend grows forth it becomes more visible to the Altaians that their practise of worship is strongly varied. Telengits in Kosh-Agach would often comment on the practises of Altaians further north, complaining that they did not know how to do rituals “right”. In this it was implicated that the northerners were further away from the “true” practise of the people, and in more contact with external forces, like Russians, which created this diminishing of knowledge. Much in the same way that the care of the Russian state fades as one reaches the margins, so the Telengits turn this on it head, claiming that ritualistic knowledge fades as you reach the Russian centre.

**Making a centre – worship as centralization**

Humphrey (2015) shows us that in Buryatia the idea of the centre is in direct contrast to the Russian one. While the Russian ide of centre is conical, the Buryatian is bowl-shaped, where the centre are the edges (Humphrey 2015, p. 9-10). This fits with the Altaian world-view, which is also bowl-like, where all things of spiritual importance happen on the edges. One Telengit woman, working in the local national park, told me: “We protect the animals here because they are the companions of the spirits, who live on the edge of the mountains”. From the view of the steppe the mountain was not a multifaceted place, but one with an edge situated on the top. But as one reaches the top of a mountain one can see in every direction. From this it is not difficult to see why one would place the centre on tops, albeit on distant ones. The Altaian world-view is strongly vertical, with the idea that places of height are sacred. Heights are strongly connected to knowledge, something I was told by the kam Sonya. She told me that all her knowledge was given to her through her connections to one of the peaks on the sacred mountain Belukha, and that this was foretold during her birth when a local kam had entered her parent’s house telling them that this child would be a great shaman. Elena also talked about heights and she described places of heights as
“clean”, indicating that their cleanness was connected with their sacredness. She related to me that clean places were not only high places, but that these features often overlapped. I asked her about the purpose of these places, and she told me that this is where the home of the spirits and that people use these areas when they need to strongly connect to them and when they needed help from the spirit world. On a different occasion she told me that the placenta after childbirth is often placed in the “clean” areas, such as mountains.

The significance of the bowl-shape is visible in other aspects of Telengit life, often when giving gifts you give containers of some sort, often bowl-shaped and open; drinking glasses, teacups, bowls, curved platters etc. and these object often serve purposes in rituals, where they contain the offerings to the spirits and they are moved in certain directions. This indicated that the significance of the bowl – or the container permeates the cosmology and practise, down to everyday actions like gift giving. This again, is part of how worship makes Ere Chuy, and even Altai as significant and surrounded by a centre.

Through the worship of land and spirits the Telengits make the Altai and Kosh-Agach if not central, then at least important again. The state might have abandoned them, but the spirits have not, and now more than ever require care and worship.
Conclusion: Combating Stillness

I have tried to the best of my ability to compress a complex situation into a few pages, and throughout this thesis I have balanced the voices of both the people of Kosh-Agach, my own and the voices of a myriad of anthropologists. I hope the eclectic use of theory has truly served the empirical material and not the other way around.

In this thesis I have aspired to clarify the present situation in a small, peripheral Russian district, where the indigeneity and worship, ethnic tension, economic tribulation and state abandonment has been treated as the main topics. I have shown how hyper-centralisation of the post-Soviet Russian state has led to a draining of the margins, especially in peripheral Siberia, leaving them undeveloped, decaying, and left behind. This is felt by the people of Kosh-Agach as abandonment, and has created a context of stillness, both in audible, developmental and motional ways.

In this thesis I have shown how the people of Kosh-Agach form and manoeuvre economic, social and moral networks, how the moralities of these networks are varied and how the post-socialist context shapes them. This networking is a direct answer to the abandonment of the state, and the stillness left behind. These networks are filled with moralities, often contradicting ones, and this in turn demands a high degree of flexibility and pragmatism among its members. I have shown how consumption creates both identities for the inhabitants of Kosh-Agach, especially for young people, and is a strategy for combating stillness, potentially giving you access to mobility both in the physical and social sense.

Through the sharing of land, the Telengits and Kazakhs have found sameness and alterity, reasons for conflict and for unity. The manoeuvring of tensions are filled with the establishment, reproduction, and crossing of social borders between ethnic groups. The sharing of land with the Russian population is filled with power aspects, with separation and dominance, especially through bureaucracy. For both the Telengits and the Russians the land of Kosh-Agach district has importance. But while the Russians considers its significance to be either recreational and a place of leisure, or international, political and militant, the Telengits see it as a direct connection to other realms and the entities within them, which have to be treated with reverence and flexibility – the opposite of the Russian practice in the land. In their worship of spirits,
the Telengits have a connection to the land that cannot be broken, and this gives them privileges but also duties.

Ferguson (2015), as already mentioned, shows how when certain forms of dependency wither away others grow to take its place, and I have shown how this works in relation to networks in Kosh-Agach (p. 39). Ferguson’s point, I suggest, is also relevant when approaching the worship of land and spirits in Ere Chuy. It is already mentioned that the collapse of the Soviet is the clearest reason for revival of traditional worship, but I suggest that the abandonment of Kosh-Agach has lead to increased importance of creating the Ere Chuy as a place. To a certain extent we can include the Ere Chuy and the spirits of the land into the networks of Telengits, and it is through their mutual reciprocal behaviour that one makes a reality where the issue of abandonment has little or no importance, for it is not the state who truly governs; it is the spirit of Altai.

These spirits, which have fluid identities and motivations, share the land with the Telengits, making them highly flexible in meeting both spirits and people. The worship, I have shown also contest the hyper-centralisation of the Russian government, by creating a different kind of centre and one that, in the view of the Telengits, has a higher importance in the grand scheme of things. Through the Altaian cosmological understanding, the periphery is the centre and this cosmology directly combats stillness and abandonment, and constitutes the Telengits as both submissive dwellers and as sovereign heirs of the Ere Chuy.

Future studies might find it interesting to look at the actual border as a place where both the Russian “centre” and the Altaian “edges” meet and combine – a point that I suggest would be intriguing to explore the Altaian experience of. Studies like these would be an excellent contribution to the study of borders and their multifacetedness. Equally interesting would be a study of tourism in Kosh-Agach district with a focus on conservation and how Altaians move Russian tourists through sacred areas. Both these potential projects seek to understand the mechanics of the meeting between the local Altaians and Telengits and the Russian state or privileged population, which I consider to be encounters where ethnicity, race, class, sovereignty and historic elements meet, contest and reproduce their relatedness.

While this might seem like a thesis about a pain and hopelessness, I hope that the relentless work of the inhabitants of Kosh-Agach shown in this text has proven them to be resilient, adaptable and capable of creating a life of joy and meaning.
Through the manoeuvring of networks, consumption, and worship the people of Kosh-Agach manage to create a counteraction to stillness. They make their world one of importance, in both permanent and temporary ways. Balancing on accepting Russian, “modern” culture and upholding old “traditions”, they create a world of synergy and pragmatism. With a focus on actual effect, a focus born out of dire need and pain, they also make the fabric of their society a sturdy one, fit for the toughest challenges and one that I trust will stand strong in any storm.
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