RECONSTITUTING TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF FAMILY PRACTICES BETWEEN KYRGYZSTAN AND RUSSIA

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the Faculty of Social Sciences

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<tr>
<td>AUCA</td>
<td>American University of Central Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEU</td>
<td>Eurasian Economic Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMS</td>
<td>Federal Migration Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBP</td>
<td>Great Britain Pound</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<td>ICG</td>
<td>International Crisis Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<tr>
<td>JK</td>
<td>Jogorku Kenesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KGS</td>
<td>Kyrgyzstani Som</td>
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<tr>
<td>MVD</td>
<td>Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del [Ministry of Interior]</td>
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<tr>
<td>RRU</td>
<td>Russian Ruble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RVP</td>
<td>Razreshenie na vremennoe prozhivanie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UoM</td>
<td>University of Manchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USD</td>
<td>United States Dollar</td>
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<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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GLOSSARY (translated from Kyrgyz unless noted otherwise)

avysyn | sons’ wives relations, this is how they refer to each other
adat | customary, habitual practice
ak bata | lit., ‘white/clean blessing’, or prayer
akcha | money
ala kachuu | lit., ‘to take and run away’; usually refers to a marriage practice when a woman is abducted by a man, more often with his friends, family, and kin
alys | far away, remote
apa | mother; chong apa (grandmother)
ash | (in Naryn) commemoration of a dead person after one year involving close family, kin, neighbours, and colleagues invited for food
ashar | an event organized to solicit help from the wider community: relatives, neighbours, colleagues, and friends, for example, in building a house
ata | father; chong ata (grandfather)
ata-ene | lit., ‘father and mother’; parents
baike | older brother, also used to refer to older men, or, as a respectful form, to strangers
bania | sauna for bathing or washing (Rus.)
bash at | lit., ‘a horse head’, a wedding gift of a horse given by the groom’s family to the father of the bride
bazarlyk | presents brought when traveling afar
beshik | a wooden cradle for babies
bir tuutan | kinsman, immediate relative
blat | using important connections (Rus.)
boorsok | small fried pieces of bread
boz üi | lit., ‘grey house’, or yurt
bölö | cousin on the mother’s side
brigadir | brigadier, a team leader (Rus.)
byt | way of life (Rus.)

1 The glossary is based on commonly used words by the people during my fieldwork in the larger Naryn district of Kyrgyzstan; also see, Krippes (1998).
*chernaia kassa*  lit., ‘a black cash-box’; a social network group with rotating financial support on an agreed-upon sum (and often involving hosting for meals) (Rus.)

*dastorkon*  tablecloth, table setting with food

*Dordoi container*  a stand at the ‘Dordoi’ Market in Bishkek where individual vendors sell their products; in 2011, a container’s price started from 10,000 USD

*el*  people, *el menen* (with people), *eldei* (like people)

*eje*  lit., ‘older sister’, also used to refer to older women, or as a respectful form, to strangers

*et*  meat

*FMS*  *(Federal’naia migratsionnaia sluzhba)*: Federal Migration Service, incorporated into the *MVD*, is responsible for migration control and social benefits for migrants; it is likely to become an independent ministry in the near future (Rus.)

*iigilik*  success, achievement

*ini*  younger brother

*jailoo*  pastures for grazing cattle where herders and their families settle most often in yurts over spring, summer and early fall

*jeen*  nephew, niece on father’s side

*jenge*  sister-in-law, in reference to older brother’s wife

*jezde*  older sister’s husband; in case of younger sister’s husband, man is referred by his name only, or *küüö bala*

*Jogorku Kengesh*  the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic

*joolu*  woman’s headscarf

*kalym*  bride price, usually a sum of money

*kara jumush*  lit., ‘black work’, used to refer to physically demanding work, or unskilled labour

*karyndash*  younger sister

*karyz*  debt

*katysh*  to participate, attend; to have connections, networks

*kaiin ata*  father-in-law

*kaiin ene/apa*  mother-in-law

*kelechek*  the future

*kelin*  bride, in reference to a younger brother’s wife
keshik left-over food from feasts shared with family, kin, neighbours, and colleagues

ket- to leave, depart

kiit gifts exchanged between family members of the married couple

kiziak dung, manure, compost (Rus.)

kolkhoz collective farm (Rus.)

koshumcha agreed-upon sum of money during feasts and celebrations

koshuna neighbour

köch to migrate

kuda father of the bride/groom, also refers to male in-laws

kudagyi mother of the bride/groom, also refers to female in-laws

kudalar the in-laws, usually refers to the parents, but also in general to one’s child’s spouses’ kin

kyz girl, daughter, maiden, virgin

kyz uzatuu a farewell for the bride at her parental home

MVD (Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del) the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or the Ministry of Interior, a Russian police force (Rus.)

namys dignity, honour, reputation

nebere grandchild

nelegal illegal migrant

nike kyi: also, nikah: Islamic (religious) wedding ceremony

oblast’ administrative division, or province (Rus.)

peskoblok a building block made of cement, sand, and water (Rus.)

plov Central Asian dish of meat and rice

propiska during the Soviet Union (and today), residence registration or authorization to reside in a particular town or village at a particular address, but not an immigration status (Rus.)

raion administrative division within an oblast’ (Rus.)

registratsiiia the legal successor of propiska; two types: permanent registration (at a place of residence) and temporary registration (at a place of stay); all persons (residents and aliens) in Russia are required to have a registration and failure to do so is legally punishable (Rus.)

reid raid, used to refer to police raids (Rus.)

rubl’ or rouble, official currency of the Russian Federation; in 2011, 1GBP=48RRU
**RVP** *(Razreshenie na vremennoe prozhivanie)*: temporary residence permit; *vid na zhitel’stvo* (permanent residence permit) immigration documents that foreign nationals need to obtain as part of the process of naturalization (Russian)

**sarai** a barn, stable

**sherine** a type of feast among extended kin, or a group of friends, based on rotation

**som** official currency of the Kyrgyz Republic; in 2011, 1GBP=70KGS

**sotka** colloquial for mobile phone (Rus.)

**sotok** measurement unit of land (0,01 ha) (Rus.)

**sovkhоз** *raion* farm (Rus.)

**söikö saluu** ceremony of engagement when the groom’s female kin places earrings on the bride’s ears as a promise of marriage

**süüänchü** good news; usually the informer of good news receives a monetary gift

**taiata** maternal grandfather

**taiene** maternal grandmother

**tandyr** a clay oven used to bake bread, a tandoor

**toi** celebration, party, feast of different rites of passage: *beshik toi* (baby shower), *kuda toi* (reciprocal gift giving celebration between in-laws), *nike toi* (wedding), *sunnöt toi* (circumcision), *tushoo-toi* (infant’s first steps celebration), or *üi toi* (new home celebration)

**töshök** usually thin and long mats filled with cotton and used for sitting or bedding

**tuugan** relative, relation; native, natural; *tuuganchylyk* (kindred)

**tülö** a smaller ritual, usually, praying for rain

**tyng** strong, firm, prompt, efficient

**tüütün** lit., ‘smoke’; household

**uiat** disgrace, shame, dishonour

**uruu** tribe; *uruuchuluk* (tribalism)

**ushak** slander

**ustukan** assorted food (often meat, bread, candy) wrapped to take home after feasting

**üi** house, home

**üi-bülö** lit., ‘house-member’; family

**üi charba** household; *domokhoziaistvo* (Rus.)
üi-jai residence, housing
üilön to get married (for man)
ümüt hope; ümütsüzdük (hopelessness), ümüt-tilekter (hopes and dreams)
vziatka bribe (Rus.)
zags otdel zapisi aktov grazhdankogo sostoiatia (ZAGS, or zags), the office for registry of civil marriage

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration of Kyrgyz and Russian words follows the Library of Congress Romanization tables for Slavic alphabets. In the case of the Kyrgyz alphabet, which is based on the Russian alphabet and uses Cyrillic letters, but is a Turkic language, I made four alterations. They are as follows: Ж (ж) = J (j); Ө (ө) = Ö (ö); Y (ү) = Ü (ü); Н (н) = Ng (ng).
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Medina D. Aitieva  
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)  
2015

TITLE: Reconstituting Transnational Families: An Ethnography of Family Practices between Kyrgyzstan and Russia

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines transnational family practices between Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan experienced intensive internal and external mobilities. As one of the poorest Soviet republics, independent Kyrgyzstan continued to battle with poverty and high unemployment, which pushed nearly 20% of its population to seek jobs internationally. Transnational families have become a norm for Kyrgyzstan that receives the equivalent of one-third of its GDP in remittances.

Using the transnational perspective, I explored the role of migration in reconstituting ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996, 2013). In a multi-sited ethnography of family life between Alcha village and Yakutsk city, the study demonstrates the everyday lives of transnational family members maintaining ties across time and space. Treating families as groups of configurations, rather than households, the study illustrates the multitude of family and kin relationships and networks that family members are embedded in. Through the examination of remittances and monetary ties, communal celebrations, arrangements of caregiving in migrants’ absence, the study describes the contradictory effects of migration.

I argue that migration has dramatically transformed and reconstituted family life. Divided and fragmented, Kyrgyzstani transnational families continued to maintained strong ties with home. I demonstrate that transnational families coped with the contradictory consequences of migration that shifted the family meanings, practices, constitution, and architecture of Kyrgyz family lives. The dissertation argues that Kyrgyzstani families, characterized by extended family relations, are nonetheless increasingly engaged in nuclear family type of relations in the transnational social fields.
DECLARATION

This dissertation is the result of my own work. No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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My most sincere appreciation goes to my supervisors, Dr. Madeleine Reeves and Dr. Nick Thoburn, who welcomed me to the University of Manchester and provided instrumental guidance over years. I especially thank Madeleine who at times believed in my project more than I did, and who patiently continued her positive reinforcements. In my final year of writing, Prof. Mark Elliot’s constructive encouragement was indispensable.

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This dissertation gained in depth from critical readings of different chapters at various times of the writing process. I thank my colleagues Adi Moreno and Ulrike Flader from the University of Manchester’s Department of Sociology for reading work in progress in all its stages. I deeply appreciate my friends and colleagues, Gulzat Botoeva and Aisalkyn Botoeva, who although working on their own doctorates, enthusiastically read and shared their valuable advice and comments on different drafts throughout the years. I thank my friend Patricia Scalco for believing that I was at heart an anthropologist. I express my thanks to Prof. Jennifer Mason and Prof. Penny Harvey who provided useful recommendations during annual reviews, which redirected my research in important ways.
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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my remarkable partner and friend, Christopher Hattayer, who wonderfully encouraged my project from its very start until its completion. Our prolonged lives across distances powerfully added to my appreciation and understanding of transnational relationships. My most personal thanks go to Chris for his unremitting feedback and humour over the delicious meals that he was happy to cook while I finalized my apparently lengthy telling of this story.

THE AUTHOR

Medina D. Aitieva completed a BA in Sociology at the American University of Central Asia in 2001 and received a Master of Arts in Sociology from the Ball State University in Muncie, USA in 2003. She taught sociology at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, from 2003 until 2010, when she began her doctorate studies at the University of Manchester’s School of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology. Here she was affiliated with the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Economic Change (CRESC). Medina is interested in the role of migration in reconstituting and renegotiating family responsibilities and obligations in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.
Mira, 52-year-old grandmother, native of Alcha. She has five children, four of whom are migrants. Unemployed pensioner, she received a monthly pension and cared for one grandson when I lived with her family. Later, she assumed responsibility for two more grandchildren.

Ermek, 56-year-old grandfather, Mira’s husband. He has been unemployed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and does not receive a state pension. He worked as a taxi driver for years in Bishkek. He owns a car, but does not offer taxi services any longer.

Askar, 28 years old, the eldest son of Ermek and Mira. He migrated to Yakutsk in 2006. He works for a private firm as a welder and as a team leader of a group of 10 workers, most of whom he invited from Kyrgyzstan with his boss's consent. Askar became a Russian citizen; he is married and has one child; his wife also works full-time in Yakutsk.

Aidai, 22 years old, Askar’s wife, the family’s eldest daughter-in-law. She became a Russian citizen, and lives and works in Yakutsk as a hairdresser. She learned to cut hair in Bishkek. She has a child who is being cared for by her mother-in-law. Her son is a Russian citizen and lives in Alcha. Aidai plans no additional children in the near future.

Rahat, 26 years old, the family’s second son. Married, he has two children, who were both born in Russia and became citizens. He bought land in Bishkek and his house was half-built. He works in Askar’s crew, also as a welder. He opted not to receive Russian citizenship.

Bilim, 25 years old, Rahat’s wife. She is also a naturalised Russian citizen. Unemployed due to consecutive pregnancies, she has stayed at home taking care of children and the household chores. They planned to leave both children with her husband’s mother, so that both can work full-time in Russia.

Janat, 24 years old, the youngest son. Single, he has a responsibility to marry and take care of his parents. His brothers’ families financed the construction of their parental house in Alcha, which he will inherit.

Jyldyz, 20 years old, Aidai’s sister. She is a hairdresser and lived with her sister in the same house in Yakutsk. She aspired to study pharmacy in Bishkek, but came to Yakutsk after graduating from high school to help her parents earn money to build their new house.

Baktygul, 14 years old, the family’s second (and youngest) daughter. She attends high school and helps her mother care for her nephew. The family wants Baktygul to study and not to become a migrant.

Ainash, in her 40s, Mira’s sister. She moved to Yakutsk and worked as janitor at a hair salon, and changed jobs. She naturalised as Russian citizen, but sees her future back in Kyrgyzstan. Her husband and son joined her efforts and eventually they bought a house in the Chui province of Kyrgyzstan. Her son wanted to start his family in Kyrgyzstan; after the festivities, they returned to Yakutsk to pay off wedding costs.

Bakai, in his late 40s, Ainash’s husband. He worked part-time as a driver for a private company and earned additional money as a taxi driver. Bakai could not find ‘appropriate’ jobs for half a year; he resented working for a funeral company, but had no better choices.
Sardar, 24 years old, Bakai and Ainash’s son, who worked in his cousin Askar’s brigade. After coming back to Kyrgyzstan, he married and now lives with his wife in their new apartment in Bishkek’s outskirts. He found a job in Bishkek.

Kyial, 14 years old, Bakai and Ainash’s daughter. She lives with her aunt Mira’s family in Alcha, as agreed until her parents return from Russia. Kyial plans to apply for a professional school after completing ninth grade. In Alcha, she attended the same school as her cousin.

Nur, 35 years old, Mira and Ermek’s neighbour and extended kin. She is married and has three children. Her family runs a kiosk selling household goods in Alcha.

Amanat, 38 years old, Ermek’s sister-in-law. She works in Alcha’s market.

Tursun, 43 years old, Askar’s crewmember in Yakutsk. He works as a welder. In Alcha, he is a neighbour of Amanat.

Dinara, 38 years old, Tursun’s wife. Unemployed mother of three children, she stayed in Alcha when Tursun worked in Yakutsk.

Burul, 68-year-old grandmother. She raises two grandchildren, children of her daughter in Novosibirsk, in her own house with her youngest daughter-in-law, Altyn, and her two children.

Kadyr, 37 years old, Burul’s youngest son, who migrated to Sakhalin. His wife and two children lived separately, but they moved in with his mother after his migration.

Altyn, 35 years old, Kadyr’s wife, Burul’s youngest daughter-in-law. Altyn works as a nurse in Alcha’s hospital. She worked in Russia for a year and invested in an apartment in Alcha.

Janybek, Burul’s son, Kadyr’s older brother, lives in Bishkek, has three children. He came to Alcha to reconstruct their natal barn for Burul, his mother.

Bakyt, 35 years old, private construction worker. He learned to renovate apartments and build private houses.

Jamal, 33 years old, Bakyt’s wife. She was a professional cook, worked in a café, and planned to start her own business. She has a daughter who lives in Bishkek with her sister.

Ardak, 34 years old, Bakyt’s younger brother. He learned herding from his parents who were professional herders during the Soviet Union.

Samara, 34 years old, Ardak’s wife. She has three children. During spring through early winter, her family migrates with their livestock to the pastures.

Belek, 33 years old, Bakyt’s youngest brother. He used to work in Yakutsk until he returned to Naryn to marry and take care of their father.

Aziz, 28 years old, Askar’s crewmember, neighbour in Alcha. He worked in Yakutsk for one season only. He sent money to his brother and invested towards livestock, which was sold and used towards his niece’s hospital expenses. When he returned, his wife divorced him. He has one child.
Asel, in her mid-30s, hairdresser, on maternity leave. She has three children, one of them was born in Russia. She has Russian citizenship. During her maternity leave, she tried to work as a personal aide to help migrants with paperwork.

Talant is a 39-year-old businessman in Yakutsk, where he moved with his family who are naturalised Russian citizens. His family sees their future in Russia. They travel to Kyrgyzstan every summer. His family plans to open a café in Yakutsk serving Central Asian food. Talant runs a barbershop where Aidai and Jyldyz worked along with other Kyrgyzstani migrants.

Amina is a 38-year-old hairdresser, co-owner of the barbershop, she is Talant’s wife. She learned to cut hair after she arrived in Yakutsk, and her husband decided to open the business that quickly grew and developed. They have two children.
Kyrgyzstan, also known as the Kyrgyz Republic, declared independence on 31 August 1991 after the Soviet Union’s disintegration. In 2013, its population reached nearly 6 million people. Two mass protests in 2005 and 2010 led to overthrows of Kyrgyzstan’s incumbent presidents – A. Akaev and K. Bakiev respectively. An interim government was formed headed by the first female president in the post-Soviet republics, R. Otunbaeva, who wrestled with recurring ethnic tensions in the country, particularly, in southern Kyrgyzstan. Elected in 2011, A. Atambaev is the current president of a new parliamentarian republic, which was a presidential republic until 2010. Kyrgyzstan is divided into seven oblasts (provinces); Naryn province has the largest territory.
Map 2: The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Russian Federation
Preface: Personal Feelings and Intellectual Motivations

‘Kinship is fascinating’.
– Jennifer Mason, *Tangible Affinities*

‘I felt it was no longer appropriate to reflect upon ‘other’ people as if being a sociologist entitled one to be apart from these cultural shifts, emotional tides, and personal feelings’.
– Carol Smart, *Personal Life*

‘Бөлүнгөндү бөрү жәйт’ [The wolf will eat the one who is separate].
– A Kyrgyz proverb

‘Туугандан да тажайт экен киши’ [It turns out kin will tire you out].
– A Kyrgyz-Russian migrant

This dissertation explores the shifting nature of Kyrgyzstani family lives shaped by transnational labour migration. I begin with a personal account of immersion into transnationalisms. Events in my family of origin, and also amongst wider kith and kin, sparked my academic curiosity in migration’s impact on families. Perhaps many dissertation topics are motivated at some level by questions that concern us personally as well as professionally. During my years of dissertation writing, I have not been asked why I opted to study Kyrgyzstan, and not Ecuador, for example. The apparent lack of knowledge about this post-Soviet country, and the fact that I was from Kyrgyzstan, seemed to be self-evident justification for my choice. Instead, many wondered how I came to choose my research topic. The following vignette is a family episode that triggered my interest in pursuing questions surrounding transnational family practices. Like many similar cases I encountered during my fieldwork, it sheds light on some of the emerging dynamics of everyday experiences of migrant families that require a deeper exploration because transnational families are understudied.

In summer 2009, my youngest brother returned home to Kyrgyzstan from Moscow where he had been living and working for several years. In this respect he was not unusual. As many as 20% of adult Kyrgyzstanis are estimated to earn a living as migrant workers. Every other year he visited home, in his words, ‘to relax’ with family and friends. During his two-week stay, he used my rented apartment in Bishkek’s city centre as a base to catch up with the routines of visiting home: spending time with parents and extended kin, traveling to a lake resort, clubbing, and eating out with friends – the facets of life he had sacrificed in Russia due to his demanding workload, big-city life, and his desire to save money. At home, he felt expected to display his ‘ex-pat’ status by covering dining bills and bringing gifts to make up for his prolonged absence from his social networks.

A week before his intended return to Moscow, I received a frantic phone call. He was desperate to talk to me, his older sister, with whom he rarely shared intimate details of
his personal life. From our hurried phone call, I learned that my brother had a girlfriend in Kyrgyzstan. They had met in Russia. She had returned to her natal village near Bishkek after losing her job during the economic recession of 2008. She was recently offered the same job in Moscow. My brother claimed they were ‘serious’ about their relationship. He proposed to her, but believed a week would not be enough time ‘to plan a wedding’ [sygrat’ svad’bu]. The couple deliberated, sought advice, independently decided, and then informed their families that their engagement would take place in Bishkek, with the intent of moving together to Russia and marrying in Moscow. I recall being amazed by the tight timeframes within which decisions regarding such important life matters had to occur. Their agreement was to be sealed with the ritual of sӧikӧ saluu [putting earrings on], a traditional Kyrgyz engagement ceremony that would bind them as a couple before they married. When my brother mentioned that he knew a trustworthy mullah in Moscow to officiate the nikah, the Muslim wedding ceremony, it appeared that the young adults had put significant thought into what at first seemed to be a spontaneous decision. Thus, he called me asking for help in arranging their engagement ceremony. As his older sister, I could not decline despite my own hectic university teaching schedule. From my own practical and implicit knowledge of Kyrgyz kinship, I knew that I could not avoid such obligations as an older daughter, older sister, and not least, as someone who could host family members in the city.

The next day, in my tiny one-bedroom apartment, I anxiously awaited my parents’ arrival from Naryn, a mountainous provincial capital located a five-hour drive away, and my own town of birth (see Map 1). Under ‘ideal’ circumstances, a family friend or a relative would host both families in the comfort of his or her home, introduce the future in-laws, and over a dastorkon [tablecloth] covered with food, celebrate the ceremony of the man’s mother (or closest female kin) placing gold earrings on the woman’s ears to symbolize the promise of future marriage. This would usually be followed, over the course of years, by various intermediary ritual celebrations bringing the two families together, gradually leading to a wedding celebration where the wider network of kin would meet. Given that my older, married siblings – better versed in customary rules rather than my single self – lived further from Bishkek and were preoccupied with their children’s school year preparations, my parents agreed to arrangements that made me fully responsible for the night, logistically, financially, and emotionally.

Out of the plethora of Bishkek’s booming restaurants – their presence in the urban landscape a vivid reminder of the new consumption and entertainment horizons facilitated

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3 See ‘Glossary’ (pp. 6-9) for translation and description of the culturally specific terms used throughout the dissertation.
by the growth in migrant remittances – I opted for a quieter, simpler, albeit less traditional space appropriate for the two families’ first meeting. During two hours of drinking tea and eating food, the fathers introduced their spouses and described their families in some detail. My father followed a traditional form of ‘apologizing’ to his future in-laws [kudalar] for ‘taking their daughter away’ from her family (cf. Kisliakov, 1969), but he also noted that they were victims of atypical circumstances. Finally, in the middle of dinner, my mother fulfilled the expected ritual of hanging golden earrings – which had been purchased earlier that day – on the bride’s ears. While carefully placing each earring, dipped in a shot glass of vodka to disinfect them, my mother expressed joy for their engagement and instructed her future daughter-in-law about the kind of kelin [bride, wife] she should be. My mother advised the bride to ‘look after both families equally’ [eki jakty birdei kara], balancing her new commitments. ‘If you have any disagreements, you should consult parents on both sides’, my mother guided, among many other pieces of advice. She completed the ceremony by wrapping the bride’s head with a white headscarf. I noted to myself how the groom’s role in this celebration seemed minimal. This ritual vividly demonstrated how the engagement was less a celebration of the young couple’s personal feelings and sentiments toward each other than a public display of respect between two new groups of in-laws. No questions or discussions followed about how the young couple met. The small ceremony was about the families meeting face-to-face, welcoming the bride to the groom’s family, and the collective and public acknowledgement of their engagement.

The joyful evening reached a turning point, however, when the fiancée’s father spoke up. He briefly expressed their happiness, speaking on behalf of his spouse, for the union of the families. He remarked that he had met his prospective son-in-law and that he was in favour of his daughter’s choice. Then, the tone of his remarks changed. ‘You need to understand us. What am I going to tell my kin if they ask where my daughter is? Why marry in Russia, if you can marry here in the presence of your living parents! Even if there is little time left, you can get married in one day, otherwise, you should wait until next year’, he concluded. The cheerful atmosphere suddenly turned to anxious glances in anticipation of what would follow. The silence spoke of how unprepared anyone was for this development. I felt that my parents, although supportive of my brother’s situation, sided with their in-laws in believing that the marriage should take place ‘at home’ and not ‘somewhere over there’. Meanwhile, the young couple excused themselves and stepped outside the café, where I soon joined them. The newly engaged were perplexed and started justifying their position, ‘If not for the pressing time, we would have married here’. The groom knew he could not go against his future kaiin ata’s [father-in-law] expressed
demand; it would have been disrespectful. Years later my sister-in-law explained, ‘For us then it did not matter where we got married, here or there, but once my father disagreed, we could not resist his stand. I come from a traditional family. I was brought up to respect my parents’. The dinner ended on the premise that the families would consult their kin and that my brother would attempt to secure additional days off from his work in Moscow; otherwise, the engaged couple would have to postpone their marriage until their next visit home.

From the moment we returned from dinner, my parents prepared to head back to Naryn. My mother convinced my brother that our kin would help organize the celebration together if he could arrange for additional time. Throughout the rest of the night, my mother made a flurry of arrangements by phone. First, she called her eldest daughter-in-law, living hours outside of Naryn, sharing the news and requesting her assistance. She dialled her kin, each time informing them of the good news [sūüńchū], and checking their availability to lend a hand.⁴ Thankfully, my brother was able to secure permission to stay a few additional days. He immediately purchased a new airline ticket for his return, borrowing money from my parents, as he had exhausted his own funds. One day after the engagement, he arrived in Naryn with his fiancée, whom he and friends ‘took’ from her house to commence their religious marriage ceremony.⁵ While I could not take time off from work on short notice to attend the nikah that would formally mark the marriage in the community’s eyes, I felt comforted knowing that my sister lived close to my parents and relieved to have been able to organize the engagement. Two days after the religious ceremony, my brother hurriedly left for Moscow, while his wife remained with my parents for another week and continued celebrating among the groom’s kin without him. My new sister-in-law quit her job in Bishkek, joined my brother in Russia weeks later, and immediately commenced her new job in Moscow.

It is notable that the newlyweds set the goal of saving their first year’s earnings in Russia towards holding a civil marriage ceremony back in Kyrgyzstan.⁶ During that year, the couple deliberated over whether a civil ceremony in ZAGS (Department of Civil Status Act) was necessary and continued negotiating with family members from afar about how they envisioned their civil marriage celebration or toi. Migration scholarship on Kyrgyzstan has illustrated how migrant remittances increased family expenditures on life-

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⁴ See C. Werner’s (1998, p. 603) discussion of ‘donating’ labour and time to kin and neighbours during various life-cycle occasions. On engagement practices during the Soviet Union, see Kisliakov (1969) and Abramzon (1971).

⁵ See A. Ismailbekova’s (2014, p. 382) description of kyz uzatuu, a farewell party held for women before the couple leaves the parental home for marriage.

cycle ceremonies that were ‘dramatically curtailed’ during the austere 1990s (Reeves, 2012b, p. 108). Igor Rubinov (2010) suggested remittances even contributed to a so-called ‘toi economy’ where remittances are invested into a ritual economy. Traditionally, parents were responsible for paying for their child’s wedding, however, these young migrants wanted to celebrate their ‘once in a lifetime event’ as ‘expected of them’ in a lavish way.

One year later, the newlywed ‘transmigrants’ (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc, 1995) had mostly paid for, and therefore dictated the content, form, venue, and size of their wedding, celebrating amongst an intimate circle of friends and immediate kin. During the year, they physically lived abroad, but mentally and emotionally ‘lived’ back home. Not only did they amass funds towards their wedding celebration, but they also worked to accumulate a sizeable bride price [kalym] to help my parents meet their customary responsibility to the bride’s parents.7

When asked why they had assumed this obligation, the newlyweds explained ‘they both worked’ and they ‘could’ help our pensioner parents. Their enigmatic responses and actions seemed to obscure details that I felt compelled to uncover further to better comprehend these very personal dynamics in my family and culture. I realized how my ‘real-life kinship’ was as ‘fascinating’ to me as Jennifer Mason’s case (2008) was to her, because it involved the ‘ethereal and sensory dimensions’ understudied by sociologists (p. 43). I felt compelled to step in that direction and apply ethnography and qualitative sociological analysis to contribute to the understanding of this undeservedly understudied sphere of shifting post-Soviet family dynamics. Transmigrants’ lives are often depicted in the national print media of both sending and receiving states, including a few documentaries (see Madeleine Reeves’ (2011b) review of Long Distance Love) that have been widely screened in Bishkek.8 Due to the sensitivities of personal lives, I have omitted many moments, instances, and memories to avoid putting too much personal detail in the public sphere, at the risk of losing some of the embedded complexity of those lives.

Family lives are often messy and are often kept private. Yet, many stories of migrant and

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7 Kalym [bride price] is a sum of money that is negotiated to be paid to the bride’s family upon marriage. Current scholarship shows that kalym is still relevant (Ismailbekova, 2014), but more so, Reeves (2012b, p. 109) argued that the bride price ‘has risen significantly’ due to labour migration in southern Kyrgyzstan. In Naryn, both a bride price and dowry were traditionally expected, and I argue that while these family practices are diverse, they are constantly renegotiated.

8 Long Distance Love (2008) is set between Osh and Moscow depicting a young transnational family’s life contributing to discussions around migration, love, and transnational intimacy, as suggested in M. Reeves’ (2011b) academic review in the Central Asian Survey. Also see other documentaries: Casual Worker (2009), Almaz [Dordoidon Chykkas Asyl Tash] (2010), Bez Litsa [Faceless] (2010), and Dolgaia Doroga Domoi [Long Way Home] (2010).
non-migrant ‘transnational’ family members from my fieldwork sites in Kyrgyzstan and Russia resonated with my brother’s story, because transnational family members are ‘spatially dispersed’, yet they keep up a ‘collective welfare and unity’ (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002b, p. 3) and ‘forged a dense web of transnational relations’ (Guarnizo, 1997, p. 281) across national borders.

In this dissertation, I follow David H. Morgan (1996, 2013) in recognizing that families are what they do and that we ought to concentrate on the practices rather than think of families as social institutions. I also share Carol Smart’s (2007, pp. 4-5) position for pushing the sociology of family life ‘beyond established boundaries’ as addressed in her new conceptual framework for understanding ‘personal life’ sociologically. Using the transnational approach to make sense of the intersection of family lives and migratory processes, I reject the nation-state as the only point of empirical analysis (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, 1995; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003), and focus on the simultaneity of practices taking place in multiple localities (Amelina and Faist, 2012; Mazzucato, 2008; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004) between movers and stayers (Thieme, 2008a, 2008b; Marcus, 1995).

The vignette above clearly illustrates some of the classical sociological debates around families (cf. Smart, 2007, pp. 10-13). Are industrialization, urbanization, and individualization transforming families from extended to nuclear? Is marriage changing family from a domestic economic unit to a form of companionship based on romantic love? Is children’s status in the family changing? Finally, is the family in decline? The vignette also illuminates broader issues related to transnational families that I develop theoretically and ethnographically. For instance, in my brother’s case, I was struck with the transnational families’ relationship with time (cf. Meeus, 2012). The speed with which the couple and both families – the one with a current migrant and the one with a returning migrant – had to make decisions suggests that transnational families are often presented with difficult decisions and short deadlines. In this case, non-migrant family members were willing to disengage from their commitments and travel far to partake in their kin’s life events. Their parents, who were not officially working, exhibited a certain flexibility and dedication by making the time to travel and allocating resources to attend to their children’s needs. At the same time, the lack of time to organize a rite of passage ‘properly’ can also be seen as convenient. My mother availed herself of the opportunity by inviting kin to a few feasts to avoid future continuous celebrations in the absence of her son and his bride. Although stressed, my mother was happy to have fulfilled her parental responsibility to marry off her son. Reflecting on experiences of time in England, Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993) suggest that the concept of negotiation cannot be
considered without the perspective of time. They argue that negotiations about ‘who will acknowledge what responsibilities, and towards whom, take place over time’, generally over the lifetime of the parties, and thus we cannot understand fully how family negotiations work without looking at ‘the long view’ (Finch and Mason, 1993, p. 61). These negotiations, however, can happen more quickly when migration is imminent.

Moreover, intergenerational relations and traditional respect for authority have a powerful way of showing the relationship between dependence and independence in transnational families (Hegland, 2010; Soto, 2010). The young adults’ independence in making important life decisions under tough conditions was trumped by their parents’ verdict, specifically by the bride’s father (cf. Kisliakov, 1969; Ibraeva, 2006; Kandiyoti, 2007). It is notable that while the fiancé’s parents were willing to adjust to their son’s practical realities, the fiancée’s parents expressed concern for their daughter’s reputation and felt the pressure and expectation of explaining their decisions before their extended kin. As she told me, the fear of xenophobia, the well-publicized violence against single Kyrgyz women migrants in Russia (cf. Botoeva, 2012; Myrzabekova, 2015), and their unfamiliarity and lack of direct influence on their children’s lives in Russia induced the fiancée’s father to dictate conditions appropriate for their family. Ensuring that his daughter left the country ‘married’ – no matter how hastily arranged – rather than ‘engaged’, was most important to him and allowed him to fulfil his parental responsibility before she was passed on to her husband’s family: a dynamic that Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) would classify as ‘classic patriarchy’. In her description of marriage practices in Kyrgyz families, Raia Osmonalieva (2005, p. 450) remarked that daughters are considered as kyz konok [daughter guest], ‘temporary family members’, whose fathers ‘passed [them] on to their husband’s authority’ after marriage.

As such, this case also demonstrates shifting gender relations in transnational migration, as ‘deeply embedded norms and expectations [that] distinguish the daily practices of men and women’ (Parreñas, 2005, p. 4). I later learned from my sister-in-law that she had a promising career in Kyrgyzstan and dreaded leaving her ailing mother behind. Not only did her father influence how she married, but he refused to ‘allow’ a 25-year-old woman to live and work in Russia alone when she was offered a job in Moscow. Although her ‘married’ status briefly granted her a measure of freedom, mobility, and independence in her life far away, her parents began reminding her on the phone of the importance of having children soon after their wedding. The normative gender expectation was not directed towards my brother, reflecting ‘declarative’ gender equality in Kyrgyzstan (Osmonalieva, 2005, p. 449), and the ‘Soviet paradox’ of modernization and women’s emancipation (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 602).
Finally, there is a complex relationship between migration and family formation. Over Skype years later, my sister-in-law explained that their marriage was a negotiation, ‘It was not romantic as they say… once the opportunity arrived, it happened quickly; we thought it was a good chance to get married and live and work together in Russia’. This case is exemplary of how a migration opportunity affected the timing of this young couple’s decision to tie the knot. They discussed openly that migrating together as a family would create better opportunities for their future, thus showing that family formation influenced by migration can be calculated and pragmatic. Migrants attend daily to the pressures of both nation-states by living in transnational social fields. While it may seem easy to call one’s boss in Russia from Kyrgyzstan and ask for additional vacation time, a migrant worker worries about the risk of losing his or her job. When migrants move between states, making homes ‘here’ and ‘there’, their lives are shaped by daily concerns of staying legal and documented. These notions have a way of affecting migrants’ sense of belonging and meanings of home. Migrants understand that their lives are divided between two or more places, separated temporarily, for an uncertain period of time, until they figure out where they belong. These dynamics raise a host of questions that I seek to explore in this dissertation. How, I ask, are family and kinship relations done as a result of migration? How are family obligations and responsibilities negotiated when families divide and maintain lives transnationally? How are family lives shaped by the realities of precarious work and complex state interventions? How are ideas about what constitutes a ‘right’ marriage changing? And how, in sum, are family practices reconstituted through migration? Similar to Carol Smart’s ‘intellectual motivations’ (2007, pp. 3-4), I felt obliged to reflect on these questions that came out of the ‘cultural shifts, emotional tides and personal feelings’ that are part of our ‘own’ people, but not ‘other’. This narrative of my brother’s marriage, born out of transnational migration, will help frame – as it did during the course of my research – the consideration of kin, gender, and generational relations in relation to shifting responsibilities and commitments that appear in the chapters that follow.
1 Introduction

Figure 1.1: Construction of a new house foundation, Alcha 2012

Migrant Dreams

‘Bul jerge biz jangy üi salabyz. Buiursa, chong üi bolot!’ [This is where we will build a new house. All being well, it will be a big house!] During the first months of my fieldwork in Alcha, a north-eastern village in Kyrgyzstan’s mountainous Naryn province, Mira eje expressed her hopes of building their family’s ‘big house,’ pointing at an open space inside a massive yard. Walking through her courtyard with a stunning view of alpine mountains, Mira showed me their recently built barn [sarai], her family’s first tangible investment that visibly stood out alongside the worn-down house they had

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9 All photographs were taken by the author, unless noted otherwise.
10 All names are pseudonyms, including that of the village. While changing names might not guarantee my informants’ anonymity given the family dynamics and arrangements I discuss in detail, I tried to make every effort to protect their privacy, therefore, I used pseudonyms for all extended and nuclear family members, and omitted specific details. Eje [sister] and baike [brother] are used with names as a display of respect towards older people. In everyday life, I used these respective forms, but throughout the dissertation I will stick to names only, unless necessary for accent.
inhabited for nearly three decades. Wooden boards, roofing materials, mounds of stones, and other assorted supplies were neatly stacked in the open air beside a garden plot used for growing potatoes, the family’s staple crop, and grass for livestock. This site attracted the youngest member of this household, Mira’s two-year-old grandson Nurik, who played with toys few village children owned in such numbers. Dressed in *importnyi* [imported] clothes sent from Russia by his parents, Mira’s migrant son Askar and her eldest daughter-in-law Aidai (see Figure 1.2), Nurik was the centre of this transnational family’s attention since the day he had been ‘left behind’ by his young migrant parents just a few months after his birth. Their migration was an agreed-upon transnational family strategy, a sacrifice, which I argue has become a norm for Kyrgyzstan, sending one-fifth of its population abroad (ICG, 2010; Marat, 2009) and receiving the equivalent of one-third of its GDP in remittances (World Bank, 2013). Migration had fragmented this family unit, yet it also tied and unified not only immediate family members, but also extended kin, by allowing these young adults to earn better wages abroad and by sustaining the needs of those remaining behind. Nurik was cared for by his grandmother Mira, his aunt Baktygul, and his great aunt Kyial.\(^\text{11}\) Continuously maintaining ties from afar, these ‘transmigrants’ brought to fruition many family ‘dreams’ in Alcha, one of which was the construction of their ‘big house’, which inevitably anchored them to their place of birth [*tuulgan jer*].

![Family Tree](image)

**Figure 1.2:** Mira and Ermek’s family, 2011-2012. In bold, family members and kin who lived together in Alcha during my fieldwork. Mira and Ainash are sisters.

By the fall of 2011, when my fieldwork started, Mira’s three sons – Askar, Rahat, and Janat – had sequenced their moves to Yakutsk, ‘the coldest city on earth’ in Russia’s north-eastern Siberian permafrost (Berg, 2010). Situated on the Lena River’s western bank, the capital of Russia’s Republic of Sakha (also known as Yakutia), Yakutsk city’s surprisingly large population of 270,000 people represented one quarter of the entire

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\(^{11}\) In order to help the reader keep track of the numerous actors throughout this work, I created a list with key personae (see ‘Dramatis Personae’, pp. 15-17) and their basic socio-demographic characteristics.
population of Siberia (Iunker, 2013). Yakutsk was ‘attractive’ to villagers within Sakha for similar economic and educational reasons as in Kyrgyzstan: young people were leaving rural areas for the economic and educational opportunities that Yakutsk afforded (Argounova-Low, 2007).

Narrated by Mira over endless cups of tea with home-baked bread, jam and butter – the common display of hospitality among the villagers – her use of ‘baldar Rossiaga ketken’ [literally, ‘children gone to Russia’] and ‘alyska ketken’ ['gone far away’] to refer to migration implied the action’s temporality, assuming and expecting that the migrants would return. In practice, the word ‘migratsia’ [migration] from Russian language, a *lingua franca* in Kyrgyzstan, was rarely used by villagers in their everyday lives. It did not translate well, as to the Kyrgyz, the act of migration [*köchüü*, or *köchüp ketken*] referred to a more permanent move. Similarly, within Kyrgyz culture, seasonal movements of people and livestock to pastures are also seen as ‘jailoogo ketken’ ['gone to pasture’] with an implication of temporality. Some of my respondents used, ‘migrant bolup ketken’ [has become a migrant], once again showing the difficulty of using the word ‘migrated’ as a verb and signifying the development of locally meaningful uses of alien terms.

Once the eldest son settled in 2006 in Yakutsk, his social networks followed, including various relatives, *odnoklassniki* [secondary school classmates], *odnokursniki* [University mates], neighbours, and co-villagers. Migration scholars have argued that once a network is established, it becomes less risky and costly for the migrants who follow because the preceding migrants guide and assist the newcomers (Levitt, 2001, p. 8). In this case, the brothers helped each other to find jobs and work year round, as opposed to many seasonal workers from Central Asia who avoid Yakutsk during the harshest season of the year. Taking turns returning home every two years, the brothers and their wives purchased different materials, gradually procuring the essential supplies to start the

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12 I use ‘migration’ and ‘migrant’ throughout the work as opposed to ‘immigrant’ and ‘immigration’ to stress the transitory dynamic of the moves.
13 For similar discussions, see M. Reeves (2012b) as migrants in Batken (in Kyrgyzstan) used ‘shaarga ketken’ [gone to town, meaning Moscow], E. Isabaeva’s (2011) ‘talaada’ [in the field], and D. Rahmonova-Schwartz’s (2012, pp.11-2) description of how villagers respond to the word ‘migration’ in southern Tajikistan.
14 *Odnoklassniki* generally refers to classmates (elementary to high school), while *odnokursniki* denoted friends in college, or higher educational institutions.
15 Seasonal workers arrived in Yakutsk circa March and worked through December. For many, coming back home in December meant spending the New Year’s holidays with family. These practices changed over the course of my dissertation writing, as Russia’s immigration policies constantly changed. See Berg (2010) for Yakutsk’s winter temperatures.
construction of a dream house for their parents. This mode of family life, extending between Kyrgyzstan’s highlands and Russia’s Far East, was conceived of by families as an economic strategy of ‘getting on our feet’ in this poverty stricken post-Soviet country with a growing unemployment rate of 18% (BTI, 2012, p. 19) and snowballing labour mobility. In the two decades since the Soviet Union’s demise, Central Asia has become one of the most remittance-dependent economies in the world, where Kyrgyzstan’s remittances represented 28% of its GDP in 2008 (Ratha et al., 2010, p. 2). By 2013, Kyrgyzstan remained a top-ten receiver of migrant remittances as a share of GDP (World Bank, 2012, 2013). These were the conditions in which many villagers felt compelled to migrate ‘out of despair and hopelessness’ that life in their impoverished villages would improve.

Over the following months, I stayed with Mira’s family, taking part in her family’s daily life, chatting with different household members, and recording my observations. Mira told me that her children’s migration to Russia was regarded as temporary. They fit the profile of what some researchers called ‘target earners’, migrants with specific short-term financial goals who intend to return (Pribilsky, 2007, p. 7). My conversations with her eldest migrant son, Askar, revealed that when his father’s ‘business opportunity’ (especially popular in the 1990s) of driving cars from Europe and selling them in Kyrgyzstan failed miserably, it left the family with huge debts to the kin who had lent them money. This period witnessed significant rural-urban migration within the country (Elebaeva, 2002, 2004; Thieme, 2008c; ICG, 2010). This family opted instead for a transnational family strategy, which they considered was the only realistic option to respond to their substantial financial problems. In unpacking the ‘transnational’, Thomas Faist and his colleagues (2013, p. 7) explain that migrants do not just cross borders to live somewhere else, but they transform it into ‘a strategy of survival and betterment’ that becomes a ‘lifestyle of its own’. Thus, Mira and Askar used their loosely established extended kin networks and travelled to Yakutsk in 2006 on a whim for the prospect of

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16 Materials were purchased in Bishkek. Also, I noticed a slow boom in construction shops in Naryn, including in Alcha. There were also cases of cement being purchased and brought from Torugart, a stopover at the Chinese border, some five hours away.
17 Due to the Russian ruble’s (RRU) 45% loss to the USD in 2014, the Kyrgyzstani som (KGS) for the first time was worth more than the ruble, although the som fell by 16% (Lelik, 2015). This raised many questions regarding migrants’ future decisions about whether to stay or return to Kyrgyzstan (see chapter ‘Conclusions’; AKIpress, 2014). With Kyrgyzstan’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) membership as of 1 January 2015, its citizens are not required to use international passports to travel to Russia, and labour migrants do not need to purchase patents, permission to work. The EEU includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.
18 By 2015, the migrant family members still considered their stay in Russia as temporary, especially after the ruble collapse of 2014.
finding jobs (cf. Abashin, 2014). Meanwhile, Mira’s husband Ernok turned their car into a taxi-driving service between Alcha and the capital city to feed his remaining children in the village. After Mira’s unexpected return less than a year later due both to ‘less chances of being hired as an older woman’ and to her mother’s illness, Mira’s second son, Rahat, joined Askar. It took them approximately two years of arduous work to pay off fully the incurred debts.

With their major liability resolved, the brothers realized that they could make ‘good money’ [jakshy akcha tapsa bolot eken] together by continuing to stay in Russia, and they invited their youngest brother to join the common effort. Like many young adults coming of age, these brothers were aware of the impossibility of achieving their dreams back home. Their ideas about the future and other fundamentals of coming of age, where each of them wished at least to own their own home [sobstvennyi dom], celebrating their marriage ceremonies seemed likely (as they were convinced) only with the kind of economic capital that external migration allowed. By 2012, global remittances to developing countries surpassed 400 billion US dollars (World Bank, 2012). In this family, as in many other Kyrgyz families, the parental house would ultimately pass to the youngest son, as Kyrgyz customs [salt] oblige the youngest son’s family to care for his parents through co-residence.19 When, during these five years, the two eldest sons established families of their own, their wives also joined the labour force in Russia to contribute to the common budget. The accumulated proceeds were then allocated based on the migrants’ discussions and negotiations. For example, it became imperative for siblings to at least build houses for each brother’s families.

Transmigrations

At the heart of this dissertation are the questions that intrigued me when I first heard this family’s migration story. I was struck by the details of the parents’ first trip to Yakutsk from Alcha requiring buses, cars, taxis, trains, and even jumping over breaking blocks of ice from one bank of the Lena River to the other. I was impressed with the creative ways that family members chose ‘to get on [their] feet’ despite the continued challenges of managing separated and divided family lives. Globally, patterns of

19 See Kisliakov (1969) and Abramzon (1971) for practices before and during the Soviet period. It is a widely accepted practice in families with sons. See Borubashov (2009) for a detailed discussion of the regulations of material relations according to Kyrgyz customary law. However, it should be noted that in practice decisions about who inherits the parental home can be contentious and based on a range of variables, such as the ages of sons at the time parents pass away, the caring negotiations among siblings, etc.
permanent settlement (or immigration) have surrendered to what some scholars have described as strategies of transmigration where migrants’ ‘networks, activities and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies’ bringing them into a ‘single social field’ (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p. 1; cf. Portes et al., 1999; Faist, 2000, 2010; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Olwig, 2007; Faist et al., 2013). While maintaining ‘multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders’, Glick Schiller and her colleagues (1992) stressed that these actions have a way of connecting family members ‘simultaneously’ (p. 2).

Migration had a significant impact on the sense of belonging to those who acquired Russian citizenship because the new status eased the job application process, and guaranteed health care and social security services (Ruget and Usmanalieva, 2007, 2008; Podolskaya, 2011; Abashin, 2014). Both brothers’ children were born in Russia and became citizens, but were eventually brought back to Alcha for their grandmother Mira’s care, which I was told, allowed for a faster accumulation of wages and stretching of resources across multiple family projects. Most recently, Sergei Abashin (2014) reported Russia’s Federal Migration Services data for 2013 that half a million of Central Asian citizens of titular ethnic groups have received Russian citizenship (p. 23). For example, by 2011, media outlets reported 270,000 Kyrgyzstanis received Russian citizenship (Podolskaya, 2011). However, many obtain citizenship to ease their daily lives of being documented. Many continue considering themselves as ‘migrants’, and not as citizens of Russia, because many see themselves returning to Kyrgyzstan eventually.

This opening vignette demonstrates that the task of understanding Kyrgyzstan transnational family dynamics is challenging due to a multitude of factors that influence transnational families. Family relations are embedded in complex structures of power and authority, familial and kinship obligations and commitments (Leainaweaver, 2010), organized by age, gender, social roles, and positions. Had I only interviewed one person in this family network (as some surveys do), my understanding of transnational families would have been incomplete. Therefore, following transnationalism scholars who value multi-local research on family life (cf. Marcus, 1995; Mazzucato, 2008; Thieme, 2008a; Faist et al., 2013), I argue that transnational family lives must be understood within the particular contexts of ‘interpersonal relations that stimulate and inform their mobile life trajectories and shape their attachments to a shared place of origin’ (Olwig, 2007, p. 6). In other words, multi-sited ethnography allows for extending social and symbolic ties across distances offering ‘the complexity of transnational phenomena’ (Faist et al., 2013, p. 148). Furthermore, post-Soviet family lives en large have been understudied and undertheorized (Kuehnast, 1997; Ibraeva, 2005; Kandiyoti, 2007; Rahmonova-Schwartz, 2012). In his
The most recent ethnography of peace and harmony among the Kyrgyz of the eastern Pamirs, Till Mostowlansky (2013, p. 465) raised an important point that the concept of membership [üi-bülö müchösü] or belonging within a family can depend on the time spent and work done in the family. In this dissertation, I conceive of family as an expansive unit, one that one can become a member of by sharing the household chores, eating from one kazan [pot], that creates one tütün [smoke off the chimney], signifying that people living under that roof are a family, or have family-like relations, adding to some of the critiques of Western conceptions of families as fixed and bound. There is a strong Kyrgyz value of family as a group of kin constituted through genealogy and related to a male lineage, and yet in practice it is an expansive unit, where it is recognised that people can become (temporary) family members through co-residence. In the chapters that follow, I extend the works of family scholars using the experiences of global transnationalisms and the configurational perspective (Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008) in order to capture the ‘logic’ behind ‘the interdependencies existing among large sets of family members’ (Widmer et al., 2008, p. 1). I introduce this perspective in greater detail in chapter 2.

The family dynamics depicted in Mira’s household above raise a number of interesting questions that this dissertation seeks to explore:

1) What happens to family life when a working-age adult (or several adults) migrate(s)? In what range and types of behaviour do other family members left behind engage? How in this context are family and kin relations done? How can we understand the kind of adjustments that happen within families and for their members while they maintain relations transnationally? What does it mean to be a ‘house member’, and what does transnational family membership involve?

2) How do family members negotiate their sense of belonging? Where do migrants belong? What becomes their home? How are ideas about what is a ‘right’ marriage changing? How does a migrant challenging co-residence shape the intimate realms of individuals? How are family lives shaped by the realities of precarious work and complex state interventions? What does living and working transnationally mean in terms of childbearing? What does it mean for monogamous relationships?

3) How are money transfers utilized by family members? How are decisions made within family hierarchies characterized by age, gender, and position within families? What are the notions of productive remittances? How are family commitments, obligations, and responsibilities being contested, negotiated, and reconstituted when families divide and maintain lives across time and space?

4) Who are the agents of decision making in migrant families, those who earn money or those who stay behind? What are the effects of migration on family life as seen
by different family members? Where do migrants see themselves living and having their families—in Kyrgyzstan, in Russia, or in another place?

This dissertation sheds light on families coping with the contradictory consequences of international migration. I argue that migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia is at the root of changing meanings, practices, constitution, and architecture of Kyrgyz family lives. The chapters that follow give voice to the stories of migrant, non-migrant, returnee, and about-to-be migrant family members and their ‘family configurations’ (Widmer et al., 2008). In other words, as the title suggests, the dissertation focuses on the transnational practices in which these configurations engage. I take as my starting point the recognition that ‘individual actors cannot be viewed in isolation from the transnational social fields in which they are embedded’ (Levitt, 2001, p. 7). In this way, I aim to develop an interpretive framework illuminating people’s perspectives rather than reflecting the public discourses and ideologies of the receiving and sending nation-states. In so doing, the study addresses important gaps in understanding how families negotiate responsibilities and obligations transnationally and how they renegotiate their sense of belonging and constructed meanings of home across nation-states. These family practices illumine how intra-family relations between spouses, parents and children, siblings, and inter-family relations with kin have become monetized and, as a result, are adversely affecting the strength of ties. I argue that in order to understand these contradictory consequences, we need to be attuned to the following emerging tendencies. On the one hand, instead of dividing and fragmenting families across borders, migration has reproduced and strengthened the idea and value of ‘family’ as important and worth maintaining from a distance. On the other hand, transnational extended families have increasingly developed nuclear-type relations: that is, the conjugal pair and their offspring have become increasingly important as a realm of decision making and financial and affective investment. In other words, the nuclear-type relations are characterized by conjugal pair’s interest in living as a separated unit, which in the context of temporary transnational lives are driven by quicker accumulation of resources.

How Do Kyrgyz Transnational Family Lives Work?

Transnationalism researchers posit that transnational families ‘live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely, ‘familyhood’ (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002b, p. 3). This perspective foregrounds the importance of dense ties that are
sustained between family members in movement and staying put. Most importantly, these families ‘do not necessarily require unilocal residence’, and in this process, they undergo many changes, but family commitments do not stop when migrants move (Faist et al., 2013, p. 30). In fact, commitments are negotiated ‘in relation to sets of cultural understandings about what kinship is’ (Mason and Tipper, 2008, p. 137). When the brothers Askar and Rahat, introduced above, moved to Russia, they sustained this collective sense by living together regardless of changing circumstances, sharing meals and daily chores together as if they continued living in their natal home. When the two older brothers married, these nuclear families continued to reside together in one household, or ‘big family’, even as they expanded. This big family’s migration was remarkable because the two married couples with children and a single sibling pooled their salaries, which the eldest son controlled with his brothers’ and their wives’ cooperation. When necessary, they discussed their priorities and regularly sent money home to cover the basic needs of those who stayed behind. The patterns of sibling migrations have become widespread; however, further studies are necessary to examine the dynamics of emerging different kin formations.

When Mira’s second daughter-in-law, Bilim (Rahat’s wife), gave birth to her firstborn in Russia, she, in contrast to Aidai (Askar’s wife), decided to raise her child in Yakutsk rather than traveling home to leave her baby with her husband’s family. As a result, Bilim faced numerous pressures by becoming a ‘stay-at-home’ mother and also becoming pregnant again soon after. Although she was caring for two toddlers, cooking meals for everyone every day, and taking care of the household chores in Yakutsk, her contribution was not measured in economic terms. Yet her children were also a source of elation for her after a day of hard work. There are similar trends globally when migrants’ lives introduced gendered moral criticisms of parenting qualities (Schmalzbauer 2004; Keough 2006; Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Tolstokorova 2012). Eventually, Bilim felt obliged to follow suit by leaving her children with her mother-in-law, Mira, and start earning money. In the fall of 2012, a year after I completed my fieldwork, in a phone conversation from Manchester, I learned that Bilim had travelled home to Alcha and left both of her children with in-laws along with Nurik.

As these examples illustrate, migration caused financial, social, and emotional hazards for everyone involved (cf. Maehara, 2010; Svašek, 2010). Mira recognized that although conditions were improving for her family [jakshy ele bolup kaldyk], it was ‘broken up and divided’ [böłünüp kaldyk]. On the one hand, migrant family members’ approach to saving three of the four salaries being earned in Yakutsk, and covering food and accommodation expenses with the fourth salary allowed them to fulfil more quickly
amorous projects. My research participants in Kyrgyzstan and Russia acknowledged that employing such strategies of pooling family resources was difficult to accomplish because many migrants were more interested in personal gains. These migrants took on several jobs, often without days off, in order to earn extra, untaxed money [shabashka] to add to the common ‘moneybox’. ‘We do not go guesting [konokko barbaibyz], we do not go here and there [tigi jakka, bul jakka], we do not have relations’ [katyshpaibyz] with other Kyrgyz here, we collect our money’, Aidai explained some of the reasons why she thought migration ‘worked’ for her family.

On the other hand, contentious decisions about whose land would be purchased first, whose house would be built, whose clothes would be replaced, and which rites of passage would be celebrated, while simultaneously covering the daily needs of their unemployed parents in Alcha, inevitably divided family members causing tension, resentment, and contestation over how to ensure a fair and timely distribution of accumulated resources (see chapters 4, 5 and 6). As one of the brothers articulated, all of them were interested in getting as much out of their time and labour in Russia as possible, given that they conceived of their migration as a transitory phase in their lives (‘We should work hard while we can!’) and because they envisioned their futures back in Kyrgyzstan. But what does it take to be successful as a migrant? When migrants’ family lives play out in transnational social fields, why do commitments to home endure? In the words of the brothers, becoming house-owners [üilüü] or ‘successful’ and ‘modern’ was possible only by being tyng [firm, prompt] and ‘working hard while we are young’ [literally, on a running mode: churkap ishtesh kerek, and also, in a ‘competitive’, literally, ‘soul-snatching’ mode: jantalashyp ishtesh kerek] referring to personal qualities of adaptation, work ethic, the ability to work incessantly, and being physically prepared for such conditions. ‘Successful’ transnational family lives also were possible because they opted to stick together despite often-unarticulated clashing individual goals. The opportunity to accumulate several salaries while being thrifty in their social and cultural lives in Yakutsk, managing proxy presence in the ‘toi economy’ back home (Rubinov, 2010), and economizing on rent and food by staying together ‘as a family’ were only some of the main strategies for achieving their long-term goals. Accordingly, my focus in this dissertation’s ethnography is on what families do in practice (Morgan, 1996, 2013): in the intra-familial relationships – between parents and children, between spouses, between siblings, and in the inter-familial relationships between relatives and kinship groups, and finally, in the meanings of family.

I argue that the answers to my research questions would enable a better understanding of how Kyrgyzstani transnational families are reconstituted as a result of
migration’s continuous effects on the everyday lives of families. The key argument that I propose is that family relations are constituted in relationships where family structures affect family practices and vice versa. People’s solutions to everyday problems are intertwined with the changes in their communities. During a period in which post-Soviet communities have undergone immense economic, social, political, and cultural transformations, understanding changing family dynamics is a tough task. This is precisely so because understanding what ‘family’ has become due to migration requires a deeper look into what it is known as and how it is ‘done’ in practice. The challenge is grasping what ‘family’ and ‘family relations’ are ethnographically. Studying transnational families requires studying dispersed family members, whose lives are ongoing in different social and geographical spaces, in a single study.

I suggest that the existing literature on transnational families has paid insufficient attention to family configurations, concentrating more on dyadic relationships. My empirical research on the ‘whole’ family dynamics producing and maintaining lives across borders, on dynamics of ‘familyhood’ as Bryceson and Vuorela (2002b) would say, contributes to our knowledge about extended transnational families. I further argue that although Kyrgyz families value kinship ties and social networks (Werner, 1998; Thieme, 2008a), migration is slowly pushing family members to relinquish close kin ties, at least temporarily, in order to fulfil their immediate goals. There is a growing gap between the ideology of family and its real manifestations in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

**Kyrgyzstani Migration to the Russian Federation**

Kyrgyzstan’s contemporary migration trends need to be situated within its historical, economic, political, and socio-cultural contexts. In this section, I will briefly describe four aspects in Kyrgyzstan’s recent history of migrations to Russia to situate migration’s role vis-a-vis family lives. Migration is not a new phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan. In the 19th century, Russian tsarist expansion and colonization resulted in the massive arrival of peasants from western Russia, the so-called non-titular population. There is much evidence suggesting that during the Soviet times migration was managed (Barnes, 1934; Yanitsky and Zainochkovskaya, 1984; Gibson, 1994; Buckley, 1995; Heleniak, 2008; Kassymbekova, 2011; Baiburin, 2012; Sahadeo, 2012), resulting in a considerable increase in the non-titular population of Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet period. Between

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20 For a detailed discussion of the Russian tsarist colonization and modernization periods, see Katsunori, N. (2000); for a discussion of forced and regulated migration in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, see Schmidt and Sagynbekova (2008, pp. 112-3).
1989 and 1994, 590,000 people, or nearly 13%, left the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (later Kyrgyzstan) (Abazov, 1999, pp. 237-8). Although the departure of the non-titular populations to their historic homelands started before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Abashin, 2014) it became known in Kyrgyzstan as ‘the reverse migration’ (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008, p. 111; cf. Pilkington, 1998; Flynn, 2007) only after the crisis of the 1990s.

Migration is also an important part of the Kyrgyz national narrative. The Kyrgyz people have been known to have emigrated en masse from Enesai (Enisei, the contemporary southern Russian provinces of Tuva and Altai), a legend that is widely recited by children through Kyrgyz epics such as Manas. As nomads, Kyrgyz people lived in yurts, moving seasonally between mountains and valleys, grazing cattle and sustaining family lives through hunting. The Soviet modernization programmes, however, pressed Kyrgyz to settle and to readjust to new sedentary livelihoods. This history of migratory lifestyles is often used in the current debates about Kyrgyz people’s capacity to survive and to adapt successfully to new circumstances.

Second, the migration of Kyrgyzstan’s titular population in the post-Soviet period increased dramatically although such a massive movement was unanticipated by experts and scholars, not least because migration of the titular populations of Central Asia during the late Soviet period had been relatively limited (Fierman, 1991; Patnaik, 1995; Abasov, 1999; Abashin, 2014). There was an increasing competition for jobs in the cities of Soviet republics (Ginsburg, 1993), where the titular population of working age was beyond supply. Evidently, the huge outmigration caused a ‘brain-drain’ of highly qualified human capital (Ginsburg, 1993; Abasov, 1999; Korobkov, 2007), and it also triggered internal mobility from rural to urban areas. However, the current out-migration of the titular population should be seen as qualitatively different from the migration of the non-titular population in the early 1990s. The current outflow of Kyrgyzstanis is tied to ‘economic dislocation, poor governance, and corruption’ (Fryer et al., 2014, p. 172) and has escalated during the second decade of independence (IFHR, 2009; Marat, 2009). Due to the difficulties of gathering reliable data from both sending and receiving countries (Marat, 2009; ICG, 2010), it remains challenging to find realistic estimates for actual population movement statistics in the wider post-Soviet space (Light, 2006). In 2013, Abashin (2014, p. 12) referring to Russia’s Federal Migration Services (FMS) suggested

21 There is a noteworthy exception pointed out by Abashin (2014, p. 23) that Immanuel Wallerstein (1973) writing about Soviet Central Asia predicted mass migration of Central Asians to Russian cities twenty years before the Soviet Union’s collapse.
about 4.5 million people migrated from Central Asian countries, of which 4 million belonged to titular ethnic groups.

Third, migration has become gendered in new ways in that it is no longer a male affair. The post-socialist transformations increased socio-economic stratification and inequalities (Steimann, 2011). Although early post-Soviet migration data suggested Kyrgyz migration was mainly a male phenomenon, a United Nations’ (2013) report on *International Migration 2013* estimated that women constituted nearly 55% of Kyrgyzstani migrants. Increased female migration was also addressed in the social media in a negative light. Video clips of Kyrgyzstani female migrants beaten and stripped by a self-proclaimed group of Kyrgyz ‘patriots’ emerged on YouTube, with migrant men allegedly ‘teaching’ migrant women and potential migrants a lesson for ‘dating non-Kyrgyz men’ while in Russia (cf. Botoeva, 2012). During 2012-2013, at least three such videos caused an outcry on national television and in social media in both countries. One of the consequences – a ‘controversial resolution’ was introduced by the Kyrgyzstan Parliament in 2013, which would have banned women younger than 22 years-old from travelling abroad without parental consent. The author, Deputy Yrgal Kydyralieva, expressed her concern with the effect of increased external migration on community life and saw such measures as a means to protect migrant women’s rights. Ultimately, the proposed bill failed to become a law. This case, however, was illustrative of the nation’s divisions on how best to deal with the ‘detrimental’ effects of migration on its population. It also illustrates how gender has become politicized in the context of migration.

Finally, post-Soviet migratory processes have become a source of political contention in Russia itself. Some of the post-Soviet ‘brotherly republics’ continued exercising a visa-free travel regime; therefore, population movement was not strictly regulated. Russia largely depended on foreign labour given its declining population trends (cf. ‘Internet-konferentsia’, 2015) and its rapid economic revival (Abashin, 2014). Citizens of both Russia and Kyrgyzstan could travel using local identification cards until January 2015 when the use of international passports became required (*AKIpress*, 2014). However, while getting to Russia is trouble-free, as Russia still does not require visas for Kyrgyzstani citizens, staying documented is very difficult (Aitieva, 2012; Reeves, 2011d; 2012a). Scholars and experts suggested local candidates in Moscow politicized migration

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22 See Trilling’s (2013) article on how the law was accepted, followed by his apology, as news agencies learned the law did not pass, but was only a ‘resolution’ without legal powers.

23 Kyrgyzstan inherited most of its legislation from the Soviet Union; the amendments made by presidents and the Parliament did not change the form, and even the content was largely minimally altered.
by using election slogans that promised to ‘cleanse’ Moscow (and other big cities) from migrants [Ochistim stolitsu!] as propaganda to win votes (Laruelle, 2013; Thompson, 2013). Abashin (2014, pp. 18-9) argued that Russia employed a ‘new strategy of domination’ by labelling Central Asians as ‘migrants’, replacing the tsarist use of inogorodets [alien] or natsmen [ethnic minority person]. This caused a double manipulation causing ‘proletarianization’ of rural Central Asians who move from rural to urban spaces, but also from one country to another (ibid., p. 19).

Enduring Commitments to Family

Throughout this dissertation, I attend to the ways in which migration is reconfiguring local meanings of ‘family’ as organized and maintained between two nation-states. In order to demonstrate some of the changing notions in the constitution and architecture of family life, or as David H. Morgan (1996, 2013) would say, ‘family practices’, I shift my attention back to my conversations with Mira and her significant others about the meaning of ‘family’ to them. Responding to my questions, she clarified, ‘Which one? Do you mean my own family I live in or my parents’ family?’24 Family sociologists use categories such as ‘family of birth/origin’ or ‘family of procreation’ to clearly distinguish individuals’ living experiences, something John Gillis (1996) called ‘families we live with’ and ‘families we live by’, which, he argued, contradict each other. Mira’s deliberations offer fascinating insights into what I suggest are two key ways in which transnational migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia is at the root of reconstituting Kyrgyz family practices:

MIRA: Üi-bülö? [Family?] Well, for the Kyrgyz [kyrgyzdarda], family is when you have children. The head of the house is at home [Rus.: khoziaín doma]25 <laughs>. You have children, grandchildren, so all of them together would be considered your family.

MEDINA: Who constitutes your family?

MIRA: In our family <pause> everyone! Our children are part of our family. They did not separate from our family. They are just working abroad, but they are considered our family. We have not yet separated them as households [bölö elekbiz]. They are building their houses right now here [Kyrgyzstan], but they are just working there [Russia]. However, when we give them [for example] five

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24 Riitta Jallinoja’s (2008, p. 106) work on family configurations clarified that for adults ‘there are two domains which appear to deserve to be categorized as families’: ‘current’, or ‘own’, family and one’s ‘childhood’ family, or the family of ‘origin’.

25 This term can also be translated as, ‘lord of the manor is at home’.
blankets [juurkan], five bowls, then we can say that we have separated them, but now they are still in our family.

The discussion to follow sets up my original contribution to knowledge about transnational families in two key ways. First, I argue that although migration divides families, my empirical research showed the idea and the value of ‘family’ has been strengthened with international migration (albeit in different ways for different family members). Second, I argue that migration has reinforced the stretchiness, or elasticity, of Kyrgyz transnational family boundaries. To understand how migration strengthened Mira and Ermek’s transnational family, let us consult Kyrgyz family dynamics. In Kyrgyz culture, their children’s marriage is a parental responsibility. Noor Borbieva (2012) explained, ‘Marriage is a rite of passage, bestowing adult status on the marrying couple and raising the status of the parents, who by marrying their children publically fulfil one of the most sacred responsibilities of a Kyrgyz adult’ (p. 154). Once children are married, they are expected to separate as nuclear families and start families of their own. The exception is the youngest son, whose nuclear family becomes the caregivers for his parents while inheriting the natal house.

**On the value of yntymak [harmony]**

As evidenced above, Mira intentionally kept her ‘big family’ together. She encouraged, and at times instructed, her children and daughters-in-law from afar to continue as one family, that is, to reside together, ‘to support each other when far away, eating from one pot, like a family’. Mira’s children and daughters-in-law were expected to commit to their family’s connectedness, because Mira exercised immense power and authority over her children’s personal lives. Her eldest daughter-in-law’s response to why they did not separate as a married couple demonstrates her subordination as well as her realization of the importance of having harmonious relations when abroad:

AIDAI: When I moved here to Yakutsk, I was told by my mother-in-law that we all have to live together. She said we should live in one place.

MEDINA: What did it mean?

AIDAI: <laughs> If we lived in Kyrgyzstan now, we would have been separated [bölünmökbüz], right? We [married brothers’ families] would have lived on our own [otdel no jashamakpyz]. Well, Rahat and Bilim, at some point, wanted to separate.

MEDINA: Why didn’t they?
AIDAI: You see, they still think that if they live on their own, they could control their money, but the truth is they would not be able to accumulate it [money] the way we have done now. We had a conflict because of that.

MEDINA: Why were they convinced that that was better for them?

AIDAI: *Apam* [my mother-in-law] feared that we would lose *yntymak* [solidarity, harmony], so she kept [instructed] us together.

MEDINA: When are you going to live separately?

AIDAI: <laughs> Hopefully, in a few years <pause> after Janat’s house is built, then we will work on Rahat’s house. One day we will all separate <laughs>.

I wondered why Mira did not allow her children to separate and live their lives on their own. However, besides family solidarity, Mira strategized that the ‘big family’ stood a better chance of reaching ‘big family’ goals than separate nuclear families’ individual goals. In this light, it is interesting to examine Soviet ethnographers’ descriptions of Central Asian family lives. Pre-Soviet Kyrgyz formed ‘small’ and ‘big’ patriarchal families, where ‘big families’ were considered to be better off than ‘small families’ (Abramzon, 1971, p. 256). Similarly, Kisliakov (1969, p. 37) noted that poor families tended to stay ‘unseparated’ or together, while wealthier families could easily separate their children into a new yurt; however, they could continue to eat together from one *kazan* [pot]. The one smoke coming out of the yurt’s chimney symbolized one ‘large unseparated family’, which by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries was characterized as a ‘small individual family’. In the parlance of the Soviet ethnographers, it was small ‘conditionally’ because such families still consisted of any of the parents, unmarried children, some relatives, single brothers and sisters of the patriarch, single nephews, or grandparents (Kisliakov, 1969, p. 39). Married sons were separated after common cohabitation. The processes of forced Sovietization of families dramatically altered Kyrgyz family structure turning large nomad families into sedentary households, however, the practices of intergenerational accommodation resumed over decades.

Thus, in the context of international migration, where families can be motivated by economic concerns, the values of harmony and solidarity around family relations equally deserve attention. I agree with Jason Pribilsky’s approach in conceptualizing transnational families that ‘the economic function can be, and often is, dictated by the cultural commitments people bring to domestic activities’ (2007, p. 22). He also asked why Andean migrants retain the value of family while they do not exhibit solidarity in practice, and responded by drawing upon Gillis (1997, in Pribilsky, 2007, p. 22), who argued that families continue to serve ‘as symbolic and ideological buffers defined in opposition to the outside forces of state and market’.
Clearly, transnational households are sites where tensions develop between the families people live with and live by. Aidai desired to live separately with her husband and her son, but at the same time, she criticized her husband’s brother’s wife for trying to implement the same vision. The two daughters-in-law were positioned unevenly: the chronologically older second daughter-in-law was culturally considered younger than the eldest son’s wife, whose status was determined by her marriage to the eldest son. As the ‘eldest’ daughter-in-law, Aidai also feared that Rahat and Bilim’s family would not survive the realities of ‘big family’ life because they wanted to be independent. Evidently, the economic significance of residing together to pool financial resources was essential to their motivation to keep the ‘big family’ together; however, there was more to it. In the context of migration, maintaining extended family relations transnationally helps to keep nuclear families together, since living together abroad can create the conditions for keeping migrant family members alert, dependent, and rooted to the place they migrated from.

On family boundaries

In order to illustrate how migration reinforced the elasticity of family boundaries, we need to attend to how conceptions of family [üi-bülo] are being reconfigured because of migration. In the social sciences, the concept of the ‘household’ has been largely ‘romanced’, and critics have pointed to its Western ethnocentric biases suggesting it was not necessarily a ‘useful’ way of counting people in censuses or as a ‘social and economic group’ (Pribilsky, 2007, pp. 19-20). The problem arises when households are seen as ‘uniform and homogenous’ (Wilk and Miller, 1997, p. 65), thus, the diverse interests of household members, men and women, old and young, relationships between siblings, and in-laws cannot be fully recognized. Wilk and Miller (1997) specifically addressed the methodological issues of counting households, where they suggest that the problem lies in treating households as corporate, the idea that society is ‘invariably composed of bounded units with restricted membership, social rules of their own, systems of leadership, common property, and a social order’ (p. 65). Regardless, the household model has been extensively used in migration studies, an approach challenged by feminist scholars, who contested not the form, but argued that migrant households could be organized on the basis of ‘reciprocity, consensus, and altruism’ (Pribilsky, 2007, p. 20). Pribilsky suggested that

26 Also see Wilk and Netting (1984) who argue that ‘households have no single universal function or activity, but everywhere combine different sets of domestic activities from a larger corpus of possibilities, and this set must be determined in each society before households could be counted’ (in Wilk and Miller, 1997, p. 65).
Diane Wolf’s (1991) powerful recommendation to scholars that ‘households do not strategize; people do [and] researchers need to uncover who is strategizing (e.g. mothers, fathers, both parents together, individual children or same-sex children)’ (p. 39, in Pribilsky, p. 20) emerged from her ethnography of Javanese women who were caught between their family obligations and the new autonomy acquired through migration. While the term ‘household’ has often been treated as synonymous with ‘family’, the household’s characteristics ‘still prioritize biological connectedness and/or physical place’ (Smart, 2007, p. 7). Carol Smart insightfully reminded us that these ‘family’ approaches deprive of their ‘emotional content’ and the ‘special importance of connectedness’ (ibid., p. 7).

Mira’s deliberations about her family demonstrate how it is ‘fluid’ rather than fixed (Morgan, 2013). Mira clearly distinguished between the two families to which she belongs. On one hand, she cannot imagine a family unit without children, and her limiting conception was widely shared by most villagers with whom I spoke. To them, bearing children determines a family: I was asked, ‘why marry if not to bear children?’ But her response also pointed to an all-inclusive approach to family membership, how family boundaries are stretchy and flexible as to include parents, children, grandchildren, and even extended kin members. ‘Kyrgyzdarda oshondoida!’ [Kyrgyz do it like that!], I heard from her and villagers when they attested to how things worked in their families and locally. After all, üi-bülö, or ‘family’ in Kyrgyz, translates literally as ‘house-member’, suggesting how members organize their lives around a house. Being together [birge bolup] and harmonious [yntymaktu], unified and connected, whether in Alcha or abroad, was a predominant expectation, parental desire, and hope.

In the eyes of another villager, the family can be seen as a strategic unit. When I lived with Burul’s family (see chapter 6), her neighbourhood friend stopped by unexpectedly. Given that it was Burul’s time to pray, she asked me to pour tea for her friend. Apa27 sipped slowly and was not ready to talk to me until her third cup of tea. I asked her how her family was doing, a common conversation starter in the village, which suddenly opened doors to a dilemma she had wanted to discuss with Burul. I learned that apa was ‘in the hands of’ her youngest son [balamdyn kolundamyn], that is, being cared for by her son’s family. Altogether, nine people lived in apa’s house including four of her son’s children. ‘We are ‘eki-tüütünbüz’ [two smokes, two units],’ she started, ‘but we live in one house.’ Apa’s son worked as a school guard, while her daughter-in-law was a school teacher earning 2,000 KGS (29 GBP) per month; their combined salaries were insufficient to support a ‘family’ of nine. As a ‘poor family’ with four children, her son’s

27 Apa is a respective form towards a mother, or an elderly woman.
family was eligible for state support, which complemented their salary with an additional 300 KGS (4 GBP) per child per month. Yet, she spoke adamantly that in order to qualify for this meagre sum of state support, she needed to constantly show proof that her ‘family’ lived separately in two units, according to the state regulations. If state agency workers observed that two family units lived together, they would revoke the state support because apa received a good pension, which when combined with the family’s income, would be just above the minimum threshold for her ‘family’ size (cf. Steimann, 2011). Bir-tütün or eki-tütün, the boundaries of what made a ‘family’ a ‘family’ were murky, or ‘elusive’ (Kandiyoti, 1999, p. 502). The bureaucratic definitions created by state officials failed to reflect the actual family practices. Thus, families can be expected to be maintained as strategic units when it becomes the object of state intervention, and families consciously reflect on how to maintain separate families in order to continue receiving state support.

‘Then, we separated them [her son’s family] in case the agency workers check [on] us, but in actuality we still live together’, she continued, ‘there are many families in the village who are eligible for such support; however, they do not know how to get it. I ran from place to place to get them that status, it is not easy’. Apa concluded that it was easier to rearrange their homes to make it appear as if two nuclear families lived separately than to lose the 1,200 KGS (17 GBP) per month, which covered their bi-weekly costs of a sack of flour, the basis of their daily diet. Losing the state support would be devastating, which painted a grim picture for the families without ‘migrant money’. Parreñas’ (2005, p. 32) research in the Philippines revealed that when statistical breakdowns of households do not account for transnational families they make the nuclear family living closely together appear to be the ‘dominant household model’ despite the reality of transnational families spending greater time apart from each other. Moreover, Jallinoja (2008) drew a useful conclusion, ‘Family configurations cannot be regarded as well-established wholes with clear boundaries and stable composition; instead they are assemblages of a great variety and fluidity’ (p. 115).

In the post-Soviet Central Asian context, my study is informed by Cynthia Werner (1998) and Deniz Kandiyoti’s (1999) critiques of household surveys and of the changing nature of households. I attempted to understand how ‘family’ was practiced without presupposing a priori its boundaries and meaning. Werner (1998) was among the first scholars in Central Asia whose discussion of household boundaries in post-Soviet Kazakhstan exemplified two aspects of household dynamics that mirrored the Kyrgyz family practices. For instance, children (single, married, or divorced) often live with parents or kin ‘for weeks, months, or even years’ (Werner, 1998, p. 599). They were not considered guests, but they contributed to the household somehow. In Mira’s case, her
niece Kyial was living with them for an undetermined period of time until her parents (see Figure 1.2), Mira’s sister’s family, returned from Russia. Kyial moved from the city to the village to attend the school that her cousin attended. She helped her cousin, Baktygul, looking after Nurik and with daily cooking preparations and house cleaning. Ulan, a friend of Mira’s sons, lived for months in the house during my fieldwork because he was hired to build the foundation of their ‘dream’ house. While Ulan was paid for his labour, Mira also cooked for him and his assistants who built the house during the following year. In addition, I also lived with the family for extended periods of time. All these examples suggest that when a migrant family member leaves, migration has a way of rearranging family membership structures temporarily and for longer indeterminate periods of time.

Because Kyrgyz üi-bülö can be defined by co-residence, eating food together from one pot and living in one space contributing work, the conception approaches Morgan’s (2013) ‘family practices’. However, Morgan’s argument that there is no such thing as ‘the family’ lacks value in the Kyrgyz context because the Kyrgyz language does not use definite or indefinite articles, except for defining one as ‘his family’ or ‘her family’. While Morgan argued that it is a difficult task to use family as a verb, except for ‘doing family’, in the Kyrgyz language, ‘doing family’ would mean ‘getting married’. This serves as a useful reminder that, theorizations of families rooted in the English language, which are predominant in contemporary social sciences, can be less useful when applied to non-English speaking cultural contexts.

While Morgan’s ‘family practices’ address different arrangements that take place when children live in multiple households due to divorced parents, his analysis does not speak to the possibility of family boundaries being expansive. Families can also be constituted through relations based on ‘eating together’ from one pot, by visiting and residing with family and kin members for unknown periods of time, or through caregiving arrangements made for short and long periods of time. All these examples attest to the fact that migration and family projects supported by migrants affected family structures. Mira knew that Nurik was her responsibility so long as his parents worked abroad. With her niece Kyial, she did not know exactly how long her niece would live with them: for a year, until she graduated from high school, or until her parents returned for good. Similarly with Ulan, they could not predict how long it would take him to complete the foundation of the house. I argue that family boundaries could be seen as flexible and expansive also in part due to the flexibility of sleeping arrangements. Because beds could be easily made and remade from töshöks [mattresses] laid on the ground, organizationally and culturally, a small space could accommodate a large number of sleepers of both genders. When I lived with Burul’s family in winter, only two of the four rooms were used. At times, one room
easily accommodated four adults and four children for sleeping due to limited heating. There is a kind of flexibility in how families use and share domestic space accommodating large numbers of people around tables when serving meals, when watching the only television in the house, and when making beds each night.

**Why Study Kyrgyzstan’s Transnational Families?**

Individual and familial aspirations intermingle in transnational experiences, especially when migrants’ lives are defined by temporal and spatial distance. During my fieldwork, family members were positioned into different hierarchies of power relations culturally specific to Kyrgyz families, which raises the critical question of how migrants’ structural opportunities and constraints intersect. Instead of defining the positions and statuses of Kyrgyz families, my aim during fieldwork was to examine how families are done, lived, and experienced, and how ‘context and circumstances affect family forms and practices’ (Gabb, 2010, p. 15). My goal was to understand how transnational families work, not in the sense of labour, but as a process (Morgan, 2013); that is, how each actor positioned themselves within the complex organization of family life guided by roles and responsibilities, expectations and commitments, and structures of power embedded in these cultural-economic practices.

My motivation for focusing on migration’s impact on families was three-fold. First, migration struck close to home: as we observed in the preface, my brother lived and worked in Moscow for years. I often heard stories from relatives and friends, far and near, whose kin’s migration to different regions of Russia in search of jobs yielded positive rewards. At the same time, the Kyrgyz public closely followed alarming media coverage of the coffins of Kyrgyz migrants returning home from Russia (Aidarov, 2010; Azattyk Unalgysy, 2011), female migrants’ challenging lives (Doorov, 2007; Akaev, 2009; Dosalieva, 2010; Temirbaeva, 2010), and rising xenophobic attitudes towards Central Asians in Russia (IFHR, 2009; Marat, 2009; ICG, 2003, 2010; IOM, 2010) made migration a hot topic. These personal reasons were coupled with ‘migration’ being a complex global phenomenon that touched numerous lives. The *World Migration Report* estimated that 214 million people worldwide were on the move (IOM, 2010). Migration is a demanding word, because it ‘encompasses a vast array of interlinked phenomena, none of which are clearly explained by the word itself, and because it is a political, social, economic, historical, anthropological, geographical, demographic, and global developmental issue’ (Anderson and Keith, 2014, no page).
Second, while Kyrgyzstan ranked among the top remittance-dependent countries, international migration and the impact of migration on transnational families was understudied and undertheorized in comparison to other sites of global migrations. The consequences of post-socialist transformations increased socio-economic stratification and inequalities (Steimann, 2011). With growing unemployment (officially 18%), Kyrgyzstan’s migratory trends reflected global trends: internal labour migration was the consequence of broadening the boundaries of urban settings through new settlements outside of Bishkek (Fryer et al., 2014). External labour migration was primarily characterized by movements to neighbouring economically better-off Kazakhstan and to Russia (Elebaeva, 2002; Korobkov, 2007; Schuler, 2007; Schmidt and Sagynbekova, 2008; Marat, 2009; ICG, 2010; Dave, 2014). Having reviewed emerging literature on migration in Kyrgyzstan, I realised that the existing body of knowledge was primarily based on studies conducted in the (culturally) southern provinces (Osh, Batken, and Jalalabat) of Kyrgyzstan (Bichsel et al., 2005; Rohner, 2007; Thieme, 2008c; Reeves, 2009a, b, 2010b; Isabaeva, 2011; Ismailbekova, 2013), where villages were transformed into households of grandparents and grandchildren left behind (Ablezova et al., 2008; Rubinov, 2010; Trilling, 2010). Northern Kyrgyzstan received similar interest, but researchers there focused primarily on the capital Bishkek (Jeenbaeva, 2008; Musabaeva, 2008; Thieme, 2008a, 2008b; Schroder, 2010). Many of these scholars examined migrants’ experiences in Moscow, in western Russia, while I learned from Narynians that in addition there was an established phenomenon of Kyrgyz migration to central and eastern Russia, about which almost nothing was written. Migrants offered comparisons between Russia’s diverse geographies, suggesting that people of eastern Russia were phenotypically closer to Central Asian people than those of its west or ‘European’ regions. Historically, some Central Asians migrated from parts of present-day Siberia; thus, the people of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) exhibited similar features to their Central Asian brethren. In Moscow, Kyrgyz migrant workers were acutely conscious of being priezzhie [non-locals] and were often derisively identified as ‘blacks’ for their darker skin colour (cf. Sahadeo, 2012). However, in Yakutsk, it was easier to pass as a local and blend in, an observation I was able to confirm within my first week in Yakutsk while traversing the city via public transport, visiting its markets, eateries, and suburbs.

Furthermore, although post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan was relatively open for social science research, compared to its neighbours (Wooden and Stefes, 2009), I considered Naryn, as a region, to be largely understudied. Few were aware that Naryn province experienced the highest internal migration within Kyrgyzstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Elebaeva, 2002). I sought through my research to contribute to the current
literature on migration’s impact on family life and to tell the story of a region and its people which are little known. Narynians were described as traditional and closely following family customs, which made me wonder to what extent migration affected closely-knit family life there. Naryn province was seen as remote, mountainous, and economically ‘behind’ the rest of the country. It was also often celebrated as a centre of ‘authentic’ Kyrgyz culture. Moreover, most Narynians were well aware of the increased migrations from southern Kyrgyzstan, which they saw as negatively affecting family life, but I wondered how Narynians faced their own realities of family members migrating. Sanghera and his colleagues’ (2011) study of family relatedness in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan proposed that the kinship and family obligations that were common during the pre-Soviet and Soviet times were today being considered as a financial burden and a social inconvenience. Hence, these scholars suggested that post-Soviet Kyrgyzstanis’ moral responsibilities were being ‘improvised’, recreating family belonging and judgements on responsibilities (Sanghera et al., 2011, p. 169). Ethnographic evidence of migration from Batken, for example, showed people’s pressure to compete with other migrants or members of community, such as neighbours, classmates, colleagues, and friends to perform the social position of family (Thieme, 2008a; Reeves, 2010b). In the context of Naryn, I was interested in how migration remittances competed with and penetrated the daily fabric of the family life.

Finally, literature on migration and family largely considered dyadic relationships within families; for example, between parents and children. I sought to approach family lives holistically by demonstrating family practices and experiences as enacted on both geographical sites and from both perspectives: those who leave and those who stay behind, by considering entangled relationships that form the fabric of families. While most sociological literature on family life ‘focuses almost exclusively on households or parent/child’, the kind of thinking that Carol Smart (2007, p. 33) called ‘narrow’ not to include ‘relatives’ into spheres of intimacy, Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (2000) have insisted that we go beyond families and talk about kinship. However, these authors also focus largely on the experiences of UK and Western European families. The vital challenge for these scholars was not presupposing that ‘the family’ existed (Gabb, 2010; Morgan, 2013; Mostowlansky, 2013), but I was excited by Smart’s (2007) suggestion for ‘a re-emergence of anthropologically inclined sociology as well as the influence of life-story methods, biography, and ethnographic styles of research’ (p. 182). Morgan’s (2013) ‘family practices’ encourage us to move on from considering families as ‘stable structures or sets of positions and statuses’ (see chapter 2). I will demonstrate how migration produces and reproduces family boundaries that are constantly negotiated by various
family members in daily life. The call for an inductive approach to understanding what families are is evident; we should not assume that family boundaries are fixed or known beforehand. Thus, in the tradition of an abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2000, p. 98), I intended to find out how the villagers interpret what they do, to grasp social reality as understood by villagers, and to observe the everyday knowledge used in their social interactions. In this light, I conceived of social reality as constructed by the people who live in it; therefore, it is my attempt to understand their reality, and not my own as a researcher (Fitzgerald, 2006; Amelina and Faist, 2012; Shinozaki, 2012).

My research is based on multi-sited ethnography conducted over a total of 10 months in Kyrgyzstan’s Naryn province (September 2011 – March 2012, and June 2012), where migrations started, and in Russia’s Yakutsk (March – May, 2012), the migrants’ destination. During my stay in Alcha, I interchangeably resided with three families. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with family members, relatives, neighbours, and other significant family acquaintances of all three families. I also met with local state representatives, local service providers, self-employed villagers, and schoolteachers. I wrote down daily observations and informal conversations in my diary. Taking photographs of the surroundings and weekly events helped me to remember details and daily moments that are prone to forgetting during the analysis. To offer a better sense of the ways in which family members maintained ties over distances, I followed the migrant children in two of the families and lived with them for three months in Russia. Focusing on the daily family livelihoods of those family members who stayed ‘at home’, the study addresses important gaps in understanding how families negotiate responsibilities and obligations transnationally and how they renegotiate their sense of belonging and meaning of home across two nation-states and over time.

**Ethnography and Fieldwork: From Alcha to Yakutsk**

Ethnography can be seen as an ‘adoption agency’, as Raymond Madden (2011, p. 45) writes in his book *Being Ethnographic*, where ‘the field becomes home’. Indeed, ‘home’ has a taken-for-granted quality. When I returned to Kyrgyzstan from Manchester, I had to visit my hometown Naryn first, where my parents and kin lived. I could in some ways relate to the lives of many migrants visiting home. At the time, I was in a transnational relationship dating my then-boyfriend across the Atlantic Ocean. These life experiences honed my awareness of the physical, emotional, financial, and cultural implications of distance on one’s family life. Equipped with local language skills and a native understanding of Kyrgyz culture, I confidently incepted my fieldwork only to
realize that familiarity with the place was not enough. As with Madden (2011), my interest in studying my ‘home’ country stemmed from ‘the fact that pockets of this putatively familiar region were unknown to me’ (p. 46). Thus, I looked at my ‘home’ region as a place with many questions, and I had to treat it as ‘an interrogative space’ (ibid., p. 46).

**Alcha**

During my first ‘taxi’ ride to Alcha from Naryn town, I learned that the state road stretching from the Kyrgyz-Chinese Torugart border post to Bishkek was under construction. The renovations bypassed Alcha and many other villages in the province; however, it was a long-awaited and welcomed sign of development about which many villagers talked. Situated between 2,000 and 3,000 metres above sea level, outsiders usually describe the province in negative terms. The region was known for its remoteness, harsh winters, and high-altitude living conditions, some of the reasons why Russians and other ethnicities were discouraged from settling there during Soviet times (Gullette, 2010, p. 10). This resulted in a population (nearly 10,000 people) that is overwhelmingly ethnically Kyrgyz (98%) and explains the root of the stereotype that Narynians are ‘true Kyrgyz’ for being able to retain their language and customs. Moreover, Narynians were also often described as ‘meat eaters’ because the region’s livelihood was largely dominated by agriculture, specifically by animal husbandry and herding, or pastoralism, as ‘an essential constituent of livelihoods throughout rural Central Asia’ (Steimann, 2011, p. 6; also see Farrington, 2005; Stammbach, 2009).

Residents of Alcha have always had to work hard to sustain their families. Using what nature allowed, villagers lived on self-grown staples (i.e., potatoes), homemade bread, jam, and butter [sary mai], and some families raised their own cattle for meat. According to Stammbach’s (2009, p. 84) survey of two villages in the Atbashy raion [district] where Alcha was located, households owned on average between 11 and 17 livestock units. Running a household was a real chore, requiring manual labour throughout the day whether in cooking or cleaning without indoor plumbing. And yet, the villagers valued their way of life as ‘better than city life’ considering their fresh air and spring water to be ‘ecologically clean’. Migration, however, was slowly bringing changes to different aspects of village life, which families did not immediately recognize, or necessarily tie to migration. Migrant family members’ remittances were mainly invested in the purchase of daily foodstuffs (sacks of flour and sugar, tea), the payment of utility bills, and procurement of basic clothing. but eventually they began to influence how villagers cooked, cleaned their households, dressed, celebrated rites of passage, and lived in
renovated and new houses. Without elaboration, villagers talked about the effects of ‘globalization’ on their lives, as families with migrants acknowledged their growing dependence on money sent from abroad. The older generation lived with nostalgia and memories of the Soviet Union when, in their words, ‘everyone worked and made for a living’ and leaders cared for the people. During the Soviet era, the family, seen as a social institution and examined ‘from strictly functional viewpoints’ (Tartakovskaya, 2010, p. 12; also see Yanitsky and Zaionchkovskaya, 1984), enjoyed the protection of the state in form of various social benefits granted to families with multiple children; in the post-Soviet period, state responsibility for the protection of the family weakened (Rahmonova-Schwartz, 2012, p. 12). Left with meagre governmental support and geographically remote from the centre, Alcha residents continued navigating through poverty, negotiating their social and cultural positions on a daily basis as social stratification increased. Some villagers used their social networks to follow kin and other significant ties of relatives, neighbours, and friends. Potential migrants were invited once their networks had secured jobs for them, sometimes covering the costs of airfare by accepting a loan to be repaid from their first month’s salary. Villagers generally felt confident about Russia as their destination given their shared linguistic and cultural affinities.

Migration was discussed as an escape from poverty, even though villagers also understood its damaging effects on family life. To wit, villagers agreed that migration could transform even the ‘troechnik’s life’ [a ‘C’ student]. My conversations with Mira’s boys revealed that all three brothers were not seriously invested in their studies, both because they were not pressed to study hard, but also because there was always work around the house that demanded greater attention. Growing up in the rough decade of the 1990s when Kyrgyzstan was beginning to implement a previously alien market economy, the boys learned early on how to support their family. They regularly walked to the village outskirts to gather firewood for cooking dinner, which eventually turned into a competition among neighbourhood children. Bringing home a donkey cart full of dry branches from a nearby forest was how one acquired status and measured it on the street. Eventually, this evolved into stocking the backyard with wood for winter. While girls’ everyday labour of cleaning and helping with household chores went unseen by the public, this was how boys established their power and authority, by being tyng [vigorous] and kyiyn [influential]. For them, this is why leaving their Kyrgyz village for Russia’s ‘chong ayil’ [big village], as one of the sons described Yakutsk to me, was scary, but manageable. Yet, there remained times of confusion when villagers could not make sense of how to react to Russia’s migration policies. The elderly, who grew up in the Soviet Union, the
home of the brotherly republics, found it particularly challenging to understand Russian xenophobia towards Central Asians.

During the course of my fieldwork, I walked Alcha’s streets, engaged with people in short talks, and shopped in kiosks and the village bazaar for bags of goodies to bring when visiting extended kin and potential interviewees. Most village yards offered stunning views, which were almost always interrupted by wooden out-house privies, a reminder that nearly all villagers still lacked access to the comforts of indoor bathrooms. Walking on unpaved streets – built during the Soviet days and never since renovated – my shoes habitually collected dust and dirt from the dry ground. I could feel the serenity so atypical of city life. Something about the blue skies and warming sunshine of the Indian summer on a late September day concealed the village’s impoverished landscape. Interestingly, I observed little on the surface suggesting that the village was affected by migration to Russia. Perhaps, I was expecting to see billboards advertising Russian calling cards and other changes that I had read about in the literature on transnational families globally. One exception was the increased number of regional bank offices where Russian rubles were exchanged as frequently as US dollars, but not as frequently as the Chinese yuan, for example.  

In fact, as the only province of Kyrgyzstan bordering China (its north-western Xingiang province), one of the fastest developing world economies, paradoxically, nothing in the village suggested that there is vibrant economic activity between these two neighbouring provinces. The lack of closer ties with neighbours was mainly due to linguistic differences; but also of China’s political sensitivity to Xingjiang and its strict labour laws. Despite China’s proximity, villagers looked northward to Russia to fulfil their aspirations, due to closer cultural ties, while providing inexplicable conspiracy theories and exhibiting fear of the closest neighbour.

My attempts to avoid my personal kin ties were hopeless; people found intricate ways of being connected to me. One of the first questions I was asked when meeting new people was regarding my origins. Most exclaimed, ‘Bizdin kyz turbaisyngby! [Ah, you are our girl apparently!], referring to my Naryn province roots. Village conversations often ended up in, ‘Tuugan turbaihyzby!’ [Apparently we are relatives!]. Even with the most remote ties, people found ways of concluding how connected we were. In one such conversation, a woman inquired about my mother, whose origins were from the broader region. By using my mother’s year of birth and the name of her secondary school, she was able to connect my cousin’s (on my mother’s side) in-laws to her relatives. This intricate determination of relationships upon first meetings almost always amused and surprised, often serving as a great icebreaker. Remembering Madden’s (2011) entreaty that

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28This information is based on my conversations with bank cashiers in Alcha.
‘familiarity of home has a way of disarming one’s sense of being ethnographic’, I maintained ‘an ethnographic perspective from a familiar setting’ (p. 44) by leaving it regularly (every two to three weeks).

I introduced myself as a sociologist conducting doctoral research [aspirantka]. I identified my affiliation with the University of Manchester and explained that I would use the information gathered towards my dissertation and hopefully the publication of journal articles in the longer term. Many of those with whom I spoke agreed that family issues related to migration were urgent and necessary to investigate. However, gaining access to migrant families was not as easy as I had imagined. Given the nature of my study, I planned to reside with families and become part of their households for an extended period of time. Once I located a family with a migrant, I visited their home, introduced my research, and left a printed copy of my research description. Most people needed time to decide and did not contact me until I reconnected with them. I experienced more enthusiasm about my research before I handed them official letters translated into the Kyrgyz language describing it. Perhaps the reticence stemmed from my insistence that my potential residence be discussed with all family members to make them aware, for which I was laughed at. I was told that I was acting like a foreigner, although I was perceived as a local. Early in my fieldwork, I stayed with second cousins while I looked for potential families. These connections were essential in meeting their neighbours and others livings transnational lives. To distance myself from kin ties, I met with Peace Corps Volunteers (PCV) teaching in local schools. During one such meeting in a local café, our conversation was hijacked by two men in their 30s who were curious about two non-locals speaking in English. Fortuitously, I learned that both had migrated to Sakha (Yakutia) for a short while and returned after exhausting their funds without finding jobs. ‘I’ll never go to Russia again, there is nothing better than home, no matter the fact I don’t have a job here’, Jyrgal spoke with relief that he did not lose his passport and that he did not become a ‘bomzh’ [homeless]. We exchanged numbers and agreed to meet later, but Jyrgal moved to Bishkek soon thereafter in search of a job in Dordoi market, the region’s largest wholesale bazaar.

My gender and age were discussed with most vivacity. Typically, responses were characterized by patronizing comments such as, ‘How long will you keep on studying! Marriage is more important! Jashyng ötüp ketet!’ [Your youth will pass you by!]

Nonetheless, most villagers valued higher education. Having arrived before the village administration elections, which created much clamour and discussion among villagers, I was advised multiple times that I should have investigated the elections. ‘It is all clear with migration’, I was told, and ‘elections are more interesting!’ The more we talked, however, villagers nodded in agreement that migration was ‘very important’ and even
encouraged me to deliver their messages to the government. To assuage people’s fears, I avoided situations which would make me appear ‘official’. Therefore, I rarely taped interviews in the beginning of my research to establish trust. I even reconsidered excessive note taking during casual discussions when I realized it made people feel uneasy. Instead, I jotted down notes during breaks and wrote brief reminders in a small notebook that I always carried in my pocket. When points were especially interesting, I found ways to leave the room and take quick notes, which I elaborated on before going to bed or the following day.

As a single female researcher conducting fieldwork in a conservative rural village, I faced additional cultural challenges in building relationship with both men and women interviewees. Over time, my status as a researcher helped to allay my fear of becoming the victim of bride kidnapping, a practice of snatching a woman to marry (cf. Kleinbach et al., 2005; Osmonalieva, 2005; Werner, 2009; Borbieva, 2012). Some invited me to meet single men in their extended families. One interviewee offered his hand and heart at the end of our long conversation about his life. Learning about my boyfriend who was not from Kyrgyzstan and with whom I regularly stayed in touch by phone, the families with which I stayed eventually took my long-distance relationship more seriously, and therefore, offers decreased. On another note, villagers told me that I challenged their stereotypes about ‘city girls’, expressing surprise at my modest dress that varied greatly from television’s portrayals of urban life. Although I was still viewed as a city girl, as an outsider, and as a guest, for a variety of other reasons, wearing appropriate dress allowed me to blend in and often served me well by making villagers more comfortable to approach me.

Conducting ethnography of family practices meant that I was interested in my research participants’ life stories. I started our conversations by requesting that they share their narratives. I eschewed large-scale surveys, as I was not searching for causal relationships or to make quantitative claims about the scale of migration. In Morgan’s words, ‘the practices approach – doing, relationality, fluidity – would almost inevitably demand some form of qualitative study’ (2013, p. 169). A greater depth in understanding social relations and cultural values was achieved by allowing my interviewees the opportunity to voice their perspectives and to explain how their families lived and worked as well as what family relations took place. Sometimes, participants were interested in what other family members had shared, putting me in tricky situations. My ethnography involved a range of methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews formed the basis of my study; I also conducted participant observations and engaged in unstructured conversations to gain an understanding of the world in which my participants lived. I primarily resided
with two families, spending extended periods of time with each, which allowed me to engage fully in these families’ daily lives. My ethnography involved ‘immersion in the context, the building of trust and rapport with agents […] and recognition of the complexity of the social world’ (O’Reilly, 2012, pp. 159-160). Interview data alone would not have provided the thorough understanding of family dynamics that my participant observations and our many daily conversations offered.

During my fieldwork, I continued searching for other migrant families in the village using a snowball sample for interview purposes. I accepted invitations for lunches and dinners from the extended kin and social networks of these two families, where unstructured conversations provided important context about family and community lives. The core of my dissertation is based on 52 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with migrant, non-migrant, and soon-to-be migrant family members within the networks of three families. The majority of these life stories were collected over the course of several visits and meetings. In village life, our interviews were often interrupted by sudden guest visits, phone calls, or attending to the needs of children and other family members. Some participants needed more time to share their stories, which extended over the course of several visits. Conversations with non-migrant community members, neighbours, shop owners, public service providers, and small-business owners also allowed for a rich description of the village life. During my stay in two field sites, I attended numerous celebrations with these families and extended kind networks (including weddings, birthdays, lunches, dinners, café get-togethers, feasts, funerals, and commemorations) whenever offered the chance.

Transnational families ‘encompass multiple national contexts’ (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011, p. 706). In recent decades, there has been a shift away from ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003) where migration research centred on units of analysis located in one nation-state. While this movement initiated after Marcus’ (1995) call for carrying out studies of families multi-locally, there have been recent arguments for conducting a single-site ethnography (Gielis, 2011). The multi-sited ethnography ‘provides insights into the complexity of transnational phenomena’, does not rely on particular theoretical orientations, and allows the researcher to develop a framework from the sites (Faist et al., 2013, p. 148; cf. Fitzgerald, 2006). The transnational perspective I employ is distinct from other approaches, such as the cosmopolitan (Beck and Sznaider, 2006), which ‘presupposes a priori the existence of the global societal space’. This transnational perspective considers ‘a global outlook as a positive phenomenon and does not sufficiently distinguish between empirical trends and normative desirability’ (Faist et al., 2013, p. 158). At the same time, multi-sited research is
limited by the inability of a single researcher to depict the simultaneity of transactions (Mazzucato, 2008; Faist et al., 2013) and the recognition that the current methodology is in the developmental stage.

**Yakutsk**

In my conversations with returned migrants, they assured me that Alcha life would not offer a complete picture of migration to Russia and its impacts. Askar was the first returnee who engaged me in long conversations about Yakutsk (see Map 2). At first, in the autumn, he did not believe that I would visit them in the spring. Askar explained that migrants were changing in terms of how hard they worked in Russia; they were forming new families on top of existing ones in Kyrgyzstan; migrants were starting new business in Yakutsk; the number of homeless and undocumented migrants was growing; and he outlined how migrants’ managed their money both ‘there and here’. Having arranged accommodation with Askar, I spent three months conducting fieldwork in Yakutsk, Russia between March and June 2012. During this time, I stayed in a house with Askar’s siblings, friends, and co-villagers, which provided ample opportunities to meet other Kyrgyzstani migrants. I engaged in conversations and in-depth interviews of Mira and Ermek’s children, relatives, colleagues, friends, and co-villagers residing in the same compound where I resided during most of my stay. Using snowball sampling, I interviewed other Kyrgyzstani migrants, Aidai’s colleagues, Askar’s brigade workers, and other people with whom family members interacted regularly. I was allowed frequent access to a barbershop near a busy market on the outskirts of Yakutsk, which was run by a Kyrgyz-Russian migrant family. This was a perfect place to meet other Kyrgyzstani migrants working in the market who used its services sometimes solely for the ability to explain their grooming needs in their native Kyrgyz tongue. Also, because I used an informal migrant-run ‘taxi’ services at times, I met and extensively conversed with Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants working near the market. Our discussions of my research inevitably led to meeting one of my many second cousins who was working in Yakutsk. Through the informal ‘taxi communication’ network, he learned of ‘a female researcher from Naryn’ and was eventually able to locate me.

One of the biggest obstacles in Yakutsk was navigating the city during its harshest season. In March, outside temperatures were circa -30C, but it felt much colder. While spending time in migrants’ houses was comfortable, planning travels within the city was often challenging. I quickly learned to use public transportation and at times used the services of private car owners who would stop to offer a ride for a couple of extra rubles.
Accessing male workplaces proved harder mainly due to my gender. I was denied interviews with male migrants’ Russian bosses. While no actual reasons were given, the migrants surmised that their bosses did not want to deal with researchers. Thus participant observation and informal conversations with migrants proved to be more fruitful. Migrants mostly worked without breaks and used their free day, Sunday, to earn additional money [shabashka]. I also experienced standing in lines with migrants as they waited for medical examinations, registered with local authorities, and organized the necessary documents to apply for a patent, a work permit. I tried to spend Sundays at the compound, as those were the only days off for most of the 14 resident migrants, who sometimes combined efforts to grill shashlik [meat kebabs].

As an ethnic Kyrgyz, navigating the city’s streets, modes of public transport, cafes, markets, barbershops, construction areas, elite dachi [summer houses], museums, and its outskirts was relatively easy because as one of my participants explained, ‘we were the same people with Yakuts once’. This was an important aspect for many Kyrgyz migrants that phenotypical similarities made them feel ‘at home’. One man in the compound was convinced that ‘fewer Kyrgyz were caught in police raids, as opposed to Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Armenians’. While I cannot prove or disprove his conclusion, such beliefs were reflected in their behaviour, especially those Kyrgyz migrants who did not carry their ID cards because they believed they easily passed for Yakuts. Such examples helped explain the Siberian cities’ alleged popularity among some Central Asian migrants, especially in contrast to the explicit xenophobia, discrimination, and attacks they faced elsewhere.

I emphasize the crucial value of conducting multi-sited research especially in the examination of transnational family lives. In my personal experience, the migrant family members with whom I talked in Alcha had much more to say from Yakutsk. Initially I considered only doing a single-sited ethnography given that I was interested in the effects of migration on the community of migrants’ origin, however, I am indebted to people who helped me to get on the track of multi-sited research. My fieldwork in Russia not only was one of the highlights of my academic endeavours, it revealed the aspects of migrant family lives that were unseen from Alcha. Building trust with families I resided with over time was essential in my ability to engage with the families’ children in Russia. The migrants I conversed with in Alcha had much more to reveal in our discussion from Yakutsk. While getting to know each other over time was a factor, there was something about being further away from home that allowed migrants to discuss their concerns in relation to life back in Alcha.
In Russia, most migrants wanted me to bring to attention issues around registration regimes. At the same time, some migrants also suggested that I should not reveal too much detail of how migrants dealt with their obstacles. For example, one female migrant spoke in detail how she opted to forge documents, because her case was not moving. While she was adamant about her experiences of dealing with Russian bureaucracy on a regular basis, she also worried that her stories would paint a negative picture of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia (cf. Aitieva, 2012).

**Dissertation Outline**

In chapter 2, ‘Situating Transnational Family Commitments’, I introduce key theoretical approaches that form my discussion of Kyrgyzstani transnational families that were studied multi-locally. Particularly, I will highlight the importance of rethinking the enactment of transnational families. There is no such thing as ‘the family’; there are diverse forms of families, and families are ‘done’ (Morgan, 2013). I will address how migrants can keep their feet in both places by preserving their loyalties to those remaining back home and participating in daily lives of receiving communities. But because families are complex phenomena, I argue the importance of studying families as ‘configurations’ (Widmer et al., 2008), demonstrating the social relations within migrant family networks in and outside the country. These processes show how family commitments, obligations, and responsibilities are contested and renegotiated transnationally, and are circumstantial in terms of which responsibilities kin acknowledge (Finch and Mason, 1993, p. 22).

Chapter 3 follows discussions with those staying behind around what it means to be ‘left behind’, how family arrangements are transformed, and how responsibilities and chores and reshuffled. I show that one way we can understand migration’s impact on stayers is by considering what they treat as meaningful (Montgomery, 2013a, 2013b). Using three different examples of ritual economy, I will discuss the ways in which migrants and non-migrants continue maintaining kin ties. Through migrants’ expenditures and investments, I will illustrate migrants’ changing conceptions of home through house projects, but also that migrants’ family practices are oriented towards the country of origin. *Tois* [feasts, or celebrations], in the rural context, are about sustaining social networks, however, decisions about allocation of limited financial resources on celebrations created strains between family members.

In chapter 4 on ‘His Kin, My Kin’, I continue the analysis of how family commitments are negotiated transnationally. By exploring the concept of *chogultush kerek* [we need to accumulate], I will explore the ways in which transnational kin relationships
are strained because of tensions between different sets of kin obligations. I will demonstrate how Kyrgyz families invest emotional energy and financial resources to kin-keeping across international borders. I will argue that there is a move towards migrants’ appreciation of the nuclear-type family relations valuing individual accomplishments rather than accommodating the interests of the big family.

In chapter 5, I investigate ‘Materialities and Moralities of Transnational Investments’ to focus on the role of migrant remittances, with a particular emphasis on investments into livestock and building of barns. While the scope of remittance expenditures is diverse, house building has been widespread. Yet, I argue that Narynians value livestock, thus, remittances also were invested into projects around barn building, renovating, and enlarging because rearing cattle is seen as a desirable form of investment. This chapter also addresses how remittances that are seen as material should also be seen as social and moral. While migration literature suggested that remittances make stayers dependent, my research shows that remittances can empower remittance receivers once again stressing on looking critically at the concept of the ‘left behind’.

Chapter 6 sheds light onto how caregiving responsibilities are arranged within transnational families. Care is overwhelmingly seen as women’s task; in fact, caregiving is tied to the availability of women staying behind. Viewed from the perspective of caregivers, I argue that while grandmothers and children are increasingly remaining behind, some grandmothers enjoy caring for grandchildren.

In the concluding chapter 7, I present my synopsis on transnational family practices between Kyrgyzstan and Russia. I argue that for my research participants the idea of family is valuable and worth maintaining despite migration’s propensity to divide and fragment family lives. In fact, migration can strengthen and perpetuate family relations through migrants’ remittance projects pivoting them to home. I show that migration has reinforced gender hierarchies by pushing women to strategize within subordinate positions of their husbands’ families. I explain how migration has a contradictory impact on family lives where on the one hand migrants wish to sustain their family and kin ties by supporting them financially, and on the other hand, migrants are increasingly realizing that such monetary relations create strains, which they have started avoiding. In this respect, I argue that while extended family relations are still valued, there is a tendency that migrants would engage in nuclear-type relations at the expense of their big families.
Situating Transnational Family Commitments

Figure 2.1: A non-migrant mother of three children feeding sheep and posing on *ugolok* [corner couch] procured with remittances sent by her husband, December 2011.

Reflecting on Families

Tension has long existed within the sociology of family life between grand generalized sociological theorizing and small-scale empirical research. Family sociologist Carol Smart (2007) suggested that broad theories of family life emerged ‘in relation to mainstream trends of sociological theorizing’, which have provided explanations for social change often based on large-scale surveys and social statistical analysis (p. 8). In their critique of the individualization thesis, Julie Brannen and Ann Nilsen (2005, p. 413) argued that empirical research, ‘designed to generate ‘grounded’ concepts’, can provide alternative ways of theorizing: ‘we may not only build concepts and theoretical insights, but equally importantly, contextualize them in understandings made at the analytic level of structure’. At the same time, qualitative research on family life tends to be small-scale and not generalizable, and therefore, minimally impacts sociological thought and methodology. Instead, empirical research is employed to test the grand theories explaining wider social forces, such as industrialization, individualization, or globalization (Smart, 2007). In their promising approach of *entourage*, moving beyond descriptions of the household by examining the family’s ‘contact circle’, demographers Bonvalet and Lelièvre (2008, p. 378) used quantitative methods to study family life. They concluded that the quantitative approaches used by demographers and sociologists face challenges in capturing ‘the spatial dimension as well as the dynamics of kinship relations’ (ibid., p. 391). While the grand general theories are more popular, they do not delve into the details of everyday family lives, and therefore, do not always represent all families or all aspects of family lives due to their deductive, rather than inductive, research designs. Smart (2007,
p. 9) therefore challenged such theorizations, which are often used to influence political and social policy processes. Recognizing the inherent differences between large-scale surveys and empirical research, I sought to engage with small-scale, local, and socially contextual cases of family lives, enacted between Kyrgyzstan and Russia. This understanding of everyday family practices where ‘relationships are forged’ (Gabb, 2010, p. 18) sheds light onto sociological thinking, transnational family practices, and the processes of negotiation transnationally.

In societies where migration has long been present, the family has been seen as a ‘contested and politicised terrain’ where migration can define ‘the composition of the family and restrict its flexibility, frequently reinforce gender inequalities, and truncate the cohabitation of generations’ (Kofman et al., 2011, p. 13). While family migrations diversified in the Western world, there were few attempts to address the relationship between labour migration, family structure, and gender relations until feminism focused on the role of women migrants (ibid., p. 17; cf. Boyd, 1989). In 2003, one of the classic textbooks on the sociology of the family made no references to migrant families (Kofman et al., 2011, p. 35). Subsequently, this focus gave rise to the transnational approach, which focused on the study of transnational family dynamics over space and time (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Guarnizo, 1997; Portes et al., 1999; Faist, 2000).

Scholarship on transnational families has largely addressed the economic impact of migration on children left behind, transnational motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Erel, 2002; Parreñas, 2005; Keough, 2006; Jingzhong and Lu, 2011; Boehm, 2012; McEvoy et al., 2012), the relationship between migrant parents and children left behind, the provision of care, and the moral and emotional aspects of care between family members (Alicea, 1997; Baldassar, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Leinaweaver, 2010; Merla, 2012; Raghuram, 2012; Winters, 2014). Another growing body of literature has examined how migration ties children to their grandparents or other mothers (Huang, Yeoh and Toyota, 2012).

**On family practices and family configurations**

There has been a shift in contemporary social science research on families away from conceptualizing ‘the family’ as a bounded, well-defined, biologically constituted, and institutionalized entity to ‘a variety of family forms’ (Gabb, 2010, p. 15; cf. Morgan, 1996, 2013; Wilk and Miller, 1997; Bryceson andVuorela, 2002a; Smart, 2007; Kofman et al., 2011). The family was considered as ‘a well-defined entity based on a legalized partnership and its biological offspring within a common residence’ (Widmer et al., 2008,
This institutional framework was rejected by Western family sociologists in the seventies and eighties, paving way to conversations about choices, commitments, and negotiations in families (ibid., p. 2). Janet Carsten (2004) showed that people can become family members through shared intimacies within same-sex partnerships, post-divorce arrangements, adoption, or reproduction technologies, further expanding our understanding of how families are constituted.

Sociologist Eric D. Widmer and his colleagues (2008), founders of the configurational perspective in family studies, also argued that people engage in caring relationships and commitment without a blood connection or an institutionalized partnership. These scholars maintained that family relationships are complex and ‘likely to remain highly patterned and embedded in the social structures of the late modernity’ (ibid., p. 3). The colleagues explain that, for example, questions of ‘care and conflict’ can result from ‘complex family groupings in which blood, love, disillusion, marriage, divorce and remarriage, and adoption, among other events and processes, intermingle’ (Widmer et al., 2008, p. 3). Thus, to encapsulate this complexity, these scholars proposed conceptualizing families as ‘configurations’ or ‘sets of directly and indirectly interdependent persons sharing feelings of family belonging and connectedness’ (ibid., p. 3). The core and the appeal of this approach lies in the ‘detailed description of the complexities of configurations’; it further develops the decades-old concept of relational sociology and its central orientation is that ‘social life is examined through actualized relationships’ (ibid., p. 5). Using this perspective, David H. Morgan (2008) proposed examining ‘acquaintances’ to further our understanding of the relational context of family practices, that is, the dynamics in which particular family relationships are ‘done’. His concept of ‘acquaintances’ includes ‘workmates and colleagues, neighbours, [and] professionals’ as these relationships have coexisted with the family practices (ibid., pp. 355-6). The importance of acquaintanceship emerged from the literature on the sociology of work where ‘quasi-familial terminology and practices’ were suggested to have developed between colleagues (ibid., p. 359). After all, research on intimacies at work suggested that many marital relationships start in the workplace (ibid., p. 357). Neighbours are another source of acquaintanceship, where a ‘good neighbour’ may be expected to provide informal care or assistance in difficult times (ibid., p. 361). This perspective is similar to Bonvalet and Lelièvre’s idea of entourage as both approaches stress moving beyond the nuclear family. These authors’ quantitative analysis limited the qualitative descriptions of family life, although their findings demonstrated persisting kinship relations, contrary to arguments about the decline of the family (ibid., p. 391).
Family sociologist David H. Morgan’s writings on ‘family practices’ (1996) and the scholarship that it generated in response to his ground-breaking approach ‘from a functional unit to relational connections’ (Gabb, 2010, p. 18) inspired my thinking about families. Morgan (1996, 2013) rethought the conceptualization of ‘the family’ by offering ‘family practices’, which Jacqui Gabb (2010) argued ‘shaped the framing and character of UK family studies analysis’ as it stressed the numerous ways in which families are created, disengaging from family responsibilities as ‘biological parenthood’ (p. 17). Morgan proposed that we should view family life as fluid, ongoing, and processual and that ‘processes of negotiation in families [are] central’ to understanding how family life, obligations and responsibilities ‘develop in practice’ (2013, p. 21). Although, structurally, families remain ‘the norm’ (Gabb, p. 17), thinking of ‘families’ in plural (Smart, 2007; Morgan, 2013) reminds us not to pre-define and presuppose what families are and where they start and end, which proved useful in shaping my analysis. More recently, Morgan (2013) argued that the configurations approach is less ‘radical’ than it first seemed because it does not represent a ‘significant departure’ from other approaches, such as the social networks approach, ‘except for the emphasis on time and history’, unless the word ‘configuration’ replaced the meaning of ‘family’, which is unlikely to happen (p. 43).

On family commitments, obligations, and responsibilities

In the context of transnational family lives, I see the task of sociology of family life as elucidating the way transnational families make sense and experience commitments, obligations, and responsibilities that stretch across and are enacted in transnational social fields. In their remarkable analysis Negotiating Family Responsibilities, sociologists Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993) argued that family responsibilities should be seen as ‘negotiated commitments’, not as following ‘rules of obligation’ (p. 33). Hereby, commitments are processes of negotiation that are practiced and developed over time, because family members can accept different levels of responsibility that are negotiated individually (ibid., p. 95). One of their most substantial contributions was demonstrating the processes of negotiation by engaging with multiple family members and thereby showing the dynamic configurations of obligations experienced and explained by different parties (within the same families). When geographical distance was added into the equation, in another study about maintaining transnational kin relationships, Mason (2004, pp. 421-2) demonstrated how people find ‘creative ways to perform’ daily tasks at a distance, especially in the context of contemporary information and communications technology (ICT). However, she
focused here on the physical co-presence of family members, that is, under what circumstance relatives meet up. Finch and Mason’s (1993) analysis of family responsibilities (and Finch’s work on *Family Obligations and Social Change*, 1989) was based on the UK society *en large* and the meaning of visiting home by migrants (Mason, 2004); these works do not, however, account for the effects of mobilities on transnational families’ day-to-day negotiations. Although they do not specifically foreground the transnational family, bringing the transnational element into the discussion of ‘negotiated commitments’ further develops questions about commitments in relationships. Thereby, I seek to contribute to the understanding of family practices in a migration context by extending the works of Finch and Mason (1993) and Morgan (2013), where transnational family practices are shaped by negotiated commitments.

Kyrgyzstan’s context is interesting as customary notions of family and family relationships are distinct due to enduring patriarchal characteristics. As noted in chapter 1, even in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, a ‘small individual family’ (Soviet notion of Central Asian nuclear family, see Kisliakov, 1969) could include three generations: parents, children, and grandparents. As many Soviet ethnographers depicted, Kyrgyz people lived and moved together as a grouping of yurts, sharing herding and other chores; sometimes, eating regulations could define a group of yurts as one family. In contemporary times, the father is considered the family patriarch, both parents are respected and cared for, and grandmothers are primarily expected to care for grandchildren. The order among male siblings matters greatly because the youngest son inherits caring responsibilities for their parents. In addition, unmarried siblings can reside with the eldest married brother if they have not established themselves, but also married brothers’ families could reside together. In the context of Kyrgyz migratory processes, I considered family to be a fluid and flexible social practice that is constantly contested, renegotiated, and reconstituted.

To introduce the theoretical concerns engaged by this dissertation, I offer three vignettes. These actual experiences, as told by migrant and non-migrant family members and observed by me, illustrate some of the key aspects of how transnational families are animated. They illustrate the diversity of responses in relation to family lives transpiring in transnational social fields (Faist et al., 2013). Herein, I demonstrate the culturally and socially contextualized complexities of transnational family practices by looking beyond nuclear families and the domestic unit to the configurations of interwoven relationships in space and time. The vignettes illuminate the tensions between different conceptions of families, where a focus on commitments and obligations raises dilemmas over how the boundaries of ‘family’ are articulated. I will describe how transnational families make
sense of commitments by offering episodes from the daily lives of migrant and non-migrant families that reflect on the role of remittances and their relationship with commitments and obligations, the nature of communication between family members enacted transnationally, and finally, on the experiences of ‘staying put’ versus being ‘left behind’. I argue that transnational family responsibilities are constituted through ‘negotiated commitments’ (Finch and Mason, 1993), where forms of negotiations often involve ‘non-decisions’ and ‘clear intentions’ rather than ‘open discussions’. In the context of transnational lives, migration intensified relations between siblings, parents, and children, between daughters-in-law, and between daughters-in-law and their mothers-in-law.

On Commitments

‘Instead of ‘looking bad’ in front of kin, it is better to help ‘enemies”

When Askar (whom we met in chapter 1) returned to Kyrgyzstan for his winter vacation, his extended family in Alcha received numerous invitations to gatherings centred around meals specially prepared for guests (see Figure 1.2). On one such occasion, his family was invited to dine with Dinara, a co-villager, whom Askar did not know, but whose husband, Tursun, worked with him in Yakutsk. When Askar insisted that I join them, I sensed that he wanted me to witness how his help towards a co-villager ‘worked’ and to see the life of Dinara, whose husband I was going to meet in Russia. In Askar’s words, Tursun baïke was in his early 40s, had three children whom he missed immensely, and desperately wanted to buy a car. Askar explained that Tursun was one of the villagers whom he helped find employment in his construction brigade in Yakutsk. Jokingly, he mocked Tursun, ‘He has been only working for seven months, but already wants to come home!’ Askar’s father, Ermek, interrupted, ‘Of course, tickets cost a fortune. He should work until next fall! That’s not enough [time] to earn for a car!’ Askar reflected that although Tursun was serious about returning home, his roommates persuaded Tursun to remain in Yakutsk until spring; for her part, Dinara hoped he would work at least until the following autumn.

The families’ apparent closeness implied that they were related through kinship ties. I was surprised to learn that the families were not, in fact, genetically related (or ‘close relatives’ as people in Alcha would say) and did not maintain reciprocal ‘relations’ [katyshabyz] for example, by reciprocating financially during funerals. The couple, Dinara and Tursun, lived beside Mira’s brother’s family. Dinara maintained close neighbourly ties.
with Mira’s sister-in-law, Amanat. Because Mira grew up in the house that her brother inherited from their parents, she knew of Tursun from childhood. Thus, Dinara and Tursun approached Amanat to serve as an intermediary in persuading Mira to convince her son Askar to help the then unemployed Tursun. Hospitality, such as this dinner, was a primary form of maintaining networks in the village, reinforcing existing ties, or forging new ones.  

In the kitchen of a two-room, well-heated house, Dinara welcomed us to be seated at a newly purchased kitchen corner couch [ugolok] and table heaped with food. The ugolok (see Figure 2.1) visibly represented Tursun’s ‘proxy’ presence (Dalakoglou, 2010), which Amanat strategically pointed out as we entered. Amanat’s display of Dinara’s recent expenditures of Tursun’s remittances on material goods in the house was recognized, welcomed, and praised by guests. Dinara cheerfully greeting Askar, ‘How was your trip?’ as she took our heavy winter coats into the second room. One could see the entire house through a hollow stove that equally heated both rooms as an economical rural heating system. I was offered to sit törgö [away from the door], a form of respect shown to older guests and single women, but I encouraged Ermek and Mira to move ‘up’ (into the place of respect) and negotiated to sit beside Askar to solicit details as the night evolved. Here, I learned that Dinara’s invitation was a way to thank Askar and his family, or as Werner (1998) would say ‘exchanging hospitality’, for the opportunity he created for Tursun to migrate to Russia. ‘Tuugan bolbosok da, jardam bergenigerve chong rakhmat’ ['Despite the fact that we are not relatives, thank you very much for helping us’], was the start of her address, as she passed on cups of bozo, a grain-based, home-brewed fermented drink. Dinara attended to guests by continuously narrating as if to avoid silence. 

I was introduced as a doktorantka [doctorate student] doing research on migration and planning to visit Yakutsk. Throughout the dinner, I kept a small notebook on my knees, where I jotted down numbers, phrases, and reminders. Because I had not received prior consent, the following dialogues were not recorded. I transcribed my notes immediately upon returning home from dinner, and while they are not verbatim quotations, they closely reflect the cultural meaning of the experience and topics discussed. When I subsequently interviewed Dinara over the course of several days in the new year, I received her permission to use these notes and develop our discussion. 

During the dinner, I was surprised by the ease and speed with which the topic of money was raised and discussed with non-kin:

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29 Also see C. Werner (1998); P.A. Michaels (2007) on Kazakh village hospitality, which closely resonate with Kyrgyz hospitality practices; and N.O. Borbieva (2012) on hospitality and gift exchange.
DINARA: The very first time Tursun sent us 20,000 [KGS; 285 GBP], I immediately bought this kitchen corner table (pointing at it) with chairs for 11,000. Then he sent us 15,000 [KGS; 214 GBP] a few times, so I bought this refrigerator for 19,000. I also bought some five sheep, you will see in the yard later. But the last time it was only 8,000 [KGS; 114 GBP]. I bought some coal for winter. <pause> I think his siblings have been asking for money, which is why he is sending less. <laughs> Oh, I do not know, maybe, he has gotten a second family there?

ASKAR: <grin> Of course, not. <pause> But he was talking on the phone with his kin. He talks a lot on the phone <pause> Tursun baike is very kind-hearted.

DINARA: Osho! (There you go!) His siblings have been apparently calling him and asking for money. And he would not admit that to me. (Dinara’s tone here implied discontent.)

ASKAR: But he also does not seem to have shopping skills. When we went to a grocery store together, he bought more than he needed. He does not seem to know how to handle money effectively. <grin>

DINARA: I think his siblings have been attacking him with money requests. He is unable to save money, he is too soft. And he is not used to do shopping for himself, of course, he is a man!

ASKAR: Eje, he spent much of his money on cigarettes and on his cell phone units. (He suggested that he called her, his wife Dinara, a lot.)

During the rest of the night Dinara and the guests freely discussed Tursun’s life in Yakutsk. At some point Tursun called Dinara’s cell phone, which she placed on speaker mode, ‘Even though I am not at home, I am sure my wife will show hospitality for the both of us’. Tursun’s voice seemed nostalgic, and he wanted to continue talking, but Amanat jokingly admonished him, ‘You should save your money!’ Everyone spoke at once, saying hellos; he did not seem to be accustomed to speaking to many people at once, so the talk was brief. Among the many topics discussed over dinner, the attention centred on financial support and the personal characteristics migrants needed to live well in Russia. It became apparent to me that Dinara lacked precise knowledge about her husband’s earnings; she was fishing for information without clearly asking Askar, who in turn volunteered the numbers, ‘Baike earns 6,000 rubles a week, making about 24,000 [500 GBP] a month; he gets it from the accountant, not from me’. Dinara’s facial expression revealed her surprise, but I was more amazed that she was willing to bring up these family matters with strangers (such as me) in order to acquire the missing insight about her husband’s life. Interestingly, in Yakutsk, I later learned that Tursun actually did not know his exact monthly earnings. He received his salary on a weekly basis, but the firm sometimes withheld one week’s payment, which he was promised to receive
cumulatively upon his departure to Kyrgyzstan. This situation sewed confusion between the couple, which Dinara wished to clarify with Askar. He confirmed that the firm maintained this practice for years, although neither of them believed they could question their leadership.

This discussion of Tursun’s financial status cannot be understood fully without the context of his wider connections and relationships in Russia, or without some biographical knowledge of the main protagonists. When Askar was asked by his Russian boss to invite three workers whom he trusted, Tursun was one of his choices. Later, standing over the fireplace, Askar explained his choice of Tursun. At first, he feared that Tursun’s age (in his forties) could put them in reverse subordinate positions, as Askar was 28 years old. However, Askar ultimately prioritized Tursun’s prior experience in Bishkek working cranes (derrick) over his age-based discomfort. His decision was not entirely altruistic. Askar realized that Tursun’s qualifications would enhance Askar’s reputation at the firm. In the village, it was important to Askar that his assistance ‘worked’ (i.e. was successful), as demonstrated by Tursun’s earnings and remittances to his family. While Askar might not have known the details of Tursun’s remittances, he felt a responsibility to encourage Tursun to send money home regularly. Askar’s devoted support towards this villager (among others) whom he barely knew shows that commitment, or ‘a sense of duty’, does not necessarily result from ‘a history of interaction and reciprocity’ within families, as suggested by Finch (1989) and further developed by Finch and Mason (1993). When at first Askar declined the dinner invitation, I had not realized that he felt uncomfortable ‘being thanked’, knowing that Tursun’s wife would prepare the table with her husband’s salary. As a migrant, Askar recognized the value of money earned ‘through hard work’ and often discussed with other migrants how their money is undeservedly spent on food for tois, instead of invested into something tangible. In this instance, he sacrificed his commitment for the cultural norms of hospitality. It was impossible for Askar to argue against his mother’s persuasion to accept Dinara’s insistence on cooking for them. Given their commitment to their established relationship, Dinara was in return committed to display hospitality.

The following day, I overheard Ermek, Mira, and Askar talking loudly, which was rare. Their relative, a herder, had lost one of their cows and taken months to replace it (discussed in detail in chapter 5). That day, Askar admonished, ‘You asked me why I help ‘others’, but not our own relatives [bir tuugan]. Well, you see, this is why’. Askar was becoming increasingly convinced that helping kin only created tensions between them. ‘Jaman kӧrünbӧi’ [not to look bad (in front of kin)], it is better to help the others [bashkalarga], the enemies [dushman], he referred to a proverb. The saying reveals the
Kyrgyz preference for maintaining harmonious relations with kin. While it would be understandable for tensions to occur between strangers, especially between enemies, they should not emerge between family members. Kin relations assume an allowance for commitments, excuses, and mistakes, as well as expectations for the aggrieved to forgive and let go. Thus, as kin relations have increasingly monetized, migration has fostered new relationships away from kin. Ironically, helping ‘others’ was seen as easier than helping close kin in order to avoid potential tensions with kin.

‘If not for her, his money would have been scattered’

A few weeks later, I was able to continue my conversation with Dinara in a more intimate setting to explore family commitments further. When I revisited Dinara, her house gates had a huge lock on the outside, so I stopped by Amanat’s house, who then called her cell phone to check if Dinara was actually not at home. Meanwhile, her dog barked, and two men entered the front yard and knocked on her door. These were ‘electricity readers’, whom Amanat sarcastically referred to as ‘raiders’. Amanat greeted them and showed them the house schetchik [electricity metre] and her last receipt. Immediately after they left, Amanat took me to Dinara’s house before anyone else came over – village lives were often hijacked by surprise visits. We crossed the street and entered Dinara’s house through the neighbour’s gates. As Amanat explained, ‘Due to the electricity ‘raiders’ [reiderler], she [Dinara] needs to pretend she is not at home’. Dinara and Amanat exchanged a few remarks, based on which I concluded that Dinara was not embarrassed about stealing state electricity. Dinara’s electricity metre box, set up inside the house, had a few external wires attached to it on one end and was attached to the street-side electricity post on the other end. Dinara was hiding because she feared being caught by the electricity readers, who had to read her metre before they could bill her for the electricity she used. When Amanat left, I asked Dinara about her life and how her husband was doing:

DINARA: Well, my husband grew up in a family without parents. He lost them when he was barely one. <pause> He had three brothers and one sister. One brother died in a car accident. The rest of his siblings live harsher lives [than us]. <pause> I think Mira wanted to help us out.

MEDINA: Do you get any help from your kin?

DINARA: We don’t get any help from our kin. We both are [the] youngest in our families. <pause> In fact, you heard last time that his siblings have been asking for help from my husband. <pause> So I asked him [Tursun] why are you sending
money to your kin without telling me? So he said that he had sent 4,000 rubles [83 GBP] to [his brother] and he believes that he will return it in the future. I told him that he will not. His brother drives a marshrutka [minivan] in Bishkek. His wife also works. <pause> Then his sister asked for 15,000 Som[214 GBP] to pay towards a toi with in-laws, and I said, ‘How are you going to do that!’ At least you could try sending 5,000 [Som], but 15,000 [Som] is too much! They have three grown up children! We have three small children!

Relationships forged in this configuration show how individual and group structures are interdependent, but also Dinara attached meaning to their age, position within the family, and sibling hierarchy. As Widmer and colleagues (2008, p. 6) argued,

[U]nderstanding choices, commitments, and negotiations that individuals make in their lives requires a clear understanding of the family interdependencies in which they are embedded, and on the other hand, understanding the interdependencies linking individuals requires insights about identity, choice, and commitments that individuals make regarding the family members.

Dinara’s example sheds light upon a number of ways in which migration reconstituted family lives and relationships. Showing me her fingers, she pointed at how rough they had become. She clarified that she had never worked outside the house when her husband was in Alcha. Her household chores tripled when she started tending after their increasing flock of sheep. Dinara also had to carry water from a nearby water pump several times a day not just for their own use, but also for livestock. Dinara did not expect her eldest daughter to marry after school, but her second daughter took over her sister’s responsibilities around the house and taking care of her toddler brother after school. Moreover, migration allowed Dinara to appreciate the freedom of independent decision-making and having money to spend. Dinara admitted the rare feeling of joy and elation in being able to go to the market, choose items for the house, and see the difference in the way their home looked. She imagined how slowly they could improve their house if she could convince Tursun to postpone saving towards a car. Dinara felt protective of her family’s goals when she learned that Tursun’s siblings tried to take advantage of his migrant status without her knowledge, creating tensions between his commitments to his extended and nuclear families. Dinara displayed her discontent that as the youngest brother, Tursun was not obliged to help his older siblings, who were employed and better off than his nuclear family.

Migration raises tensions over where families begin and end by exposing tensions between the nuclear and the extended families. Dinara’s primary discontent concerned nuclear family commitments. To her, their immediate family commitments were more urgent than those of his extended family, that is, his siblings or other kin. She disapproved of Tursun using their limited resources to help his employed siblings rather than caring for
his own family, where he was the only breadwinner. Moreover, Dinara could not justify Tursun’s actions given that his siblings did not reciprocate financial assistance before he migrated to Russia. For Dinara, her husband’s time working in Russia was a limited resource, which should be used efficiently, meaning only towards supporting his ‘own’ family – his wife and three children. While she was not averse to helping kin, Dinara not only doubted his loans would be repaid, but also prioritized their family’s immediate needs. Dinara expected her husband to exhibit personal characteristics of being **tyng** [forward, outspoken] in Russia. In turn, she sought to exhibit these qualities from Alcha maintaining important social ties in the village, for example, through hosting dinners to display her hospitality and strengthen her village networks (Finch, 2007). Amanat asserted to me, ‘If not for Dinara’s skills, *’tapkan akchasy chachylup ele ketmek’* [his earned money would have been scattered (into many small expenses)], praising Dinara’s emphasis on investing their money towards long-lasting tangible capital purchases. She preferred purchasing visible items [*kӧzgö kӧrингӧn*], literally things you can see with your eyes, to spending money on food or lending it to kin. Dinara clearly stressed the value of the support her family received from the wider non-kin networks as real and important to maintain. By my final interview with Dinara, Tursun had decided to remain in Russia for another year due to shifting family needs and responsibilities. This time, he was working towards the costs of their daughter’s unexpected marriage:

**DINARA:** He sent 8,000 [KGS; 114 GBP] to buy a sheep to celebrate with in-laws. Then he sent another 7,000 [KGS; 100 GBP] for food and clothes [for our daughter]. I was planning to renovate the house, he is thinking of buying a car, so I guess it’s going to be a car. <laughs> People say that two years is just enough, that I should tell him to come back, otherwise, he would want to stay there. <pause> But he has a son now, he’s been waiting for a boy, and I know he misses him, but work can lure you back. <grin> I don’t know how it goes. I think he will come back for his son, at least.

Months later in Yakutsk, I conversed often with Tursun about his continuously shifting commitments and expectations based on events happening in his family back in Alcha. During one such interview, he received a call from his brother-in-law, his only sister’s husband, living in Bishkek, which I quote here to address Tursun’s new perception of money as a means of ‘investment’:

**TURSUN:** Ah Kuban, it’s you. <pause> I got back from work. Same life here, just resting. <pause> It’s 10 [p.m.] here, ah, I call home twice a week when I miss my boy’s voice. <grin> <pause> Aaah, my money is in kassa [with the cashier]. I will get it when I leave work [for good], before I go home. <pause> Hey, Kuban (reassuringly), I haven’t gathered money yet. My daughter is graduating from high school, she’s getting ready for *’posledniy zvonok’* [graduation]. <pause> Hey, you see, my company keeps all the money, sometimes they don’t pay all of our salary
and will pay us before we leave. So my money is not even in my hands. <pause>
Don’t misunderstand me. The money is accumulating. Don’t be upset! Don’t you
think as if I became too cool [indifferent, uncaring] since I’ve been here in Russia.
[Taarynba! Rossiaaga baryp ele kchyrrap kalyptr debe.] I have to feed my family!
[Semiyany bagysh kerekta!] <pause> How is it a man like you doesn’t have
money? Don’t you have a rented out apartment? Aaah, I see… hey, if I had extra
money, you think I wouldn’t share!? … Ah, the weather varies, it’s grey and
sunny… I can’t promise you and feel guilty for not having money. How could I
promise money if it’s not even in my hands? … Ok then, yes, I called you three
times, you didn’t pick up. Ok, I don’t have units on my phone now. Davai! [Ok
then!]

Having witnessed Tursun’s conversation with his baja [brother-in-law], it was a perfect
moment to discuss his views on commitments. Clearly, Tursun learned to say ‘no’ over
time, but saying it made him feel uncomfortable. He knew by then that when kin called
from Kyrgyzstan, there was only one thing that they wanted, ‘It’s always about money, kin
don’t call me here [in Russia] to say hello’. And even then, Tursun’s voice was low and
apologetic, exhibiting guilt and remorse, as he expressed his inability to help his kin.
When I asked him whether he received many such phone calls from kin, he affirmed and
continued, ‘You help one, another [kin] will ask you. But you see I will get it back when I
go home. I will use it towards my car. Many people here do so. They lend money to kin
and get it back when they go home’. He genuinely believed that lending money to kin
killed two birds with one stone: he helped when his kin were in a difficult situation, but he
also expected them to return it when he would need money. ‘It’s like putting money in a
bank, but I’m not asking for dividends, because they are my kin. You see, instead of
money just sitting ‘there’, I’m helping my relatives’. When I asked why he would not send
his money to his wife, he expressed doubt, ‘If I send money home, it will be gone [i.e.
spent!]’ Our conversations revealed that Tursun was not just worried about his wife’s
inability to save his money, but also that he wanted to be seen by his relatives as someone
who helped [jardam bergendei bolup kalsynda]. Tursun’s feeling of dual commitment, to
his nuclear as well as to his extended family can be analysed through Howard Becker’s
(1960) analysis of ‘side bets’. Becker did not consider kin relations, but he contributed to
the development of the concept of ‘commitment’. Becker explained that a person commits
‘by making a side bet’ (1960, p. 32) and in the process it becomes too expensive to
withdraw, therefore, they become committed to that path. Using Becker’s approach, Finch
and Mason (1993, p. 95) stressed Becker’s analysis of ‘valuables’, which can be gauged in
both material and moral terms:

Therefore, just as some may lose out materially by withdrawing from a relationship
based on the exchange of material resources, so too they may lose a valuable
reputation if they withdraw support and let someone down.
In this case, it is important to recognize that people develop commitments over time (Finch and Mason, p. 167). Migration can foster new kinds of committed relationships. When Askar helped Tursun secure a job, Tursun’s family ‘thanked’ him by hosting a dinner. If this relationship becomes ‘committed’, they might engage in reciprocal ties over time. Tursun’s success as a migrant implicates not only his family, but it reflects Askar’s success, and by extension his reputation. In order to understand whether Tursun’s sister’s family will return his money, that is whether they are ‘committed’, we must understand what Tursun’s sister’s family stands to lose by withdrawing from the commitment to repay Tursun’s daughter’s wedding costs. These many small commitments can be invaluable in locking or unlocking people’s relationships.

Relations among co-villagers and neighbours could be seen as ‘acquaintances’, according to Morgan (2008). Reflecting on the concept of ‘configurations’, Morgan agreed that family relationships ‘need to be understood within wider networks which may include kin but also non-kin, especially friends’ (ibid., p. 367). In the context of a community, friends and acquaintances of other family members ‘may become our acquaintances’ (ibid., p. 368). One possible way in which a person can become an acquaintance is through engaging in gossip, where participation in gossip about the village community ‘can be part of particular configurations of intimate relations’ (ibid., p. 369).

According to Morgan (2013, p. 85) global migrations, or ‘high mobilities’, increase the space in which family practices are enacted, which impact the temporalities of migration. The impact of remittances on families has been contested by researchers. They can be a stable source of external assistance and ‘play a role of a critical social insurance’ (Kapur, 2004, p. vii), but remittances can also create dependencies widening the gap between those who receive them and those who do not (Faist et al., 2013). With the most recent Russian ruble crisis, one would expect a similar decrease in remittances as occurred during the 2008 financial crisis (Marat, 2009). Thus, family commitments of ‘getting on one’s feet’ depend on ‘complex contextual factors’ (Faist et al., 2013, p. 73), which is why Dinara’s strong commitment to attending to her nuclear family’s immediate needs reflects the risks of temporalities. The commitments do not stop; they merely change in shape (Kofman et al., 2011, p. 34).

**Negotiating Commitments: Non-Decisions and Intended Exclusions**

In the first vignette, we observed that transnational families’ commitments can extend beyond nuclear families. There is a growing sense among migrant family members
that they should avoid mixing kin relations and money, because financial bonds introduce strains into Kyrgyz kin relations that value harmony. In its allocation of limited financial resources, this transnational family prioritized nuclear family needs over extended family support; however, migrants still felt committed and expected to support their extended family members. In the next vignette, I consider another tension created by transnational family lives over the commitment towards the care of children ‘left behind’.

In spring 2010, Aidai was in her early twenties when she travelled to Alcha from Yakutsk with her two-month-old baby, who had been born in Russia. The purpose of her one-month visit was to leave her child to be cared for by her mother-in-law and other patrilineal kin. To travel from Kyrgyzstan to Yakutsk, most migrants chose one of two easier routes, either the Yakutsk-Moscow-Bishkek flight or the less frequent Yakutsk-Novosibirsk-Bishkek flight. Both options required nearly two entire days to reach Alcha. A cheaper option (by about 4,700 KGS [67 GBP] in 2011 prices) was to fly through Moscow to Almaty, Kazakhstan, but this route required crossing the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border, a five-hour ride from Almaty to Bishkek, and another seven-hour drive to Alcha. Driving from Yakutsk to Bishkek was possible, although in 2012 it took Askar and his friends approximately 200 hours and eight days of non-stop driving to reach Yakutsk from Alcha. Other travellers opted for a train from Almaty to Neriungi, a town on the trans-Siberian railway, from which one could reach Yakutsk over the Lena River in winter, or in one hour by bus after the river thawed.

For Aidai, returning ‘home’ meant living at her in-law’s home throughout her short stay, a cultural expectation of a married woman based on patrilineal descent (Ismailbekova, 2014). Also, to everyone involved, it was clear that her son Nurik ‘belonged’ with his paternal grandparents, as noted by Mira, ‘Bizdin balada!’ [(Nurik) is our son!], as opposed to with his maternal grandparents. Migrating for Aidai was fraught with tensions and contradictions that she could not talk about without shedding tears. Globally, migrants leaving their children behind became a widely practiced phenomenon (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Erel, 2002; Parreñas, 2005; Olwig, 2007; Castellanos, 2008; Boehm, 2012). This transnational family practice has been poorly addressed in the context of Kyrgyzstan’s migration, where 20% of its population migrated and 55% of migrants were estimated to be women (United Nations, 2013) (I discuss caregiving in greater detail in chapter 6). In this section, I offer the extended family members’ perspectives, including the grandparents (Ermek and Mira), the left-behind child’s parents (Askar and Aidai), the great aunt (Bilim), and the aunt (Baktygul) to demonstrate their involvement in directly and indirectly, implicitly and explicitly
negotiating the arrangements for leaving a child behind, which reconstituted this family’s responsibilities transnationally.

In our attempts to converse about her son Nurik, Aidai expressed anxiety over her mother-child bond. From the day she left Nurik with his paternal grandparents, she did not see him until he turned two and one-half years old. By comparison, she readily discussed the details of how she was kidnapped for marriage (cf. Kleinbach et al., 2005; Osmonalieva, 2005) and how she initially fled her husband’s home, declining his violent offer. At 19, she was cutting hair with her older sister in Bishkek, accumulating money towards furthering her education. During the courtship, Askar told her about his job in Yakutsk and how they could build a life together. Eventually, she relented and agreed to marry him. In Yakutsk, photo albums full of Nurik’s photos lined a shelf in her room with Askar. Aidai explained how she arranged for her son’s care during her two months in Alcha, purchasing baby furniture, clothes, and baby food with Mira, who, in her fifties, was relearning toddler care in the post-Soviet reality. Aidai found it difficult to admit that she was actively encouraged by her husband’s family, especially her mother-in-law, to leave her child in their care. Leaving their child behind was part of their family strategy, even if it meant they would not be able to witness their child’s growth for years. Visiting home was costly, which meant they did not know when they would next see their son, as Aidai recalled in 2012 (when Nurik was three years old):

AIDAI: We thought we would only work for a couple of years. <pause> Every time I bring up the topic of Nurik with him [Askar], he tells me, ‘Isn’t it better for him to grow up in Alcha rather than here [in Yakutsk]!?’ I agree with him. It would be hard to find a sadik [nursery]. We have to work all day, who would watch him? And then the weather is horrible, as you see. Nothing natural, all the food is khimikaty [chemically worked]. <pause> Recently, I asked him, ‘When are we going to take him back?’ He [Askar] doesn’t answer. <clears her wet eyes> Then he also said, ‘He has already become theirs [alardyn balasy bolup kaldy]!’ I was so mad with him for saying that!

In one of the first thorough sociological investigations of family obligations and responsibilities, Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993) argued that responsibilities among kin are not ‘the straightforward products of rules of obligation’, but they are products of negotiation (p. 60). In doing so, they suggested that family obligations are based on ‘persons’ not ‘positions’, meaning that kin help each other based on developed relations or on a history of interaction and reciprocity, not based on a ‘set of pre-ordained social rules’ nor on one’s position within a family tree. Furthermore, negotiations can be ‘implicit’, when commitments develop gradually, or ‘explicit’, when kin openly discuss specific family events (ibid., p. 61).
It is useful to consider Finch and Mason’s (1993) typologies of negotiations (open discussion, clear intentions, and non-decisions) in order to understand how people become committed to a particular set of responsibilities to individuals. I inquired whether family members openly discussed each other’s commitments in relation to changing family practices and responsibilities after Nurik’s birth. Their involvement differed. First, participants assumed that care would be provided by female relatives. All family members expected that Mira would be the primary caretaker and that Askar’s youngest sister, then 11-year-old Baktygul, would help her. Mira explicitly agreed to undertake the responsibility, recognizing that her daughter would facilitate the process. Mira and her children, however, intentionally excluded her husband Ermek from discussions about her potential caretaking ‘until the last moment’. Mira held a ‘clear intention’ of caring for Nurik, but Mira believed that Ermek would have opposed separating Nurik from his parents and recognized his ability to veto the decision if he objected persistently. Thus, Mira opted for a ‘conscious strategy’ (ibid., p. 72) of deceit to avoid months of arguments with her husband over Nurik’s fate. Finch and Mason (1993) argued that there is an analytical distinction between ‘exclusions which are intended to protect people’ and those that ‘are intended to disempower’ people (p. 71). In this case, Mira temporarily removed Ermek’s right to participate because she wanted to manage others’ time while this difficult arrangement was being negotiated transnationally. She manipulated her husband by keeping him without information. Instead, Mira agreed that Askar and Aidai would discuss it first and call her with their decision. Meanwhile, Mira ‘worked’ on Ermek by regularly raising the matter ‘without openly stating [she] would care’. Therefore, Ermek was ‘aware’ of the developments. Mira’s major concern was the-back-and-forth of negotiations, ‘I tell him [her husband] something, he screams at me [gets angry], he disagrees with everything I do. He has no idea how much [work] it takes to organize, but he will complain and disagree. So, I don’t tell him anymore all the details, I just tell him when it’s done’. Based on this vignette, we can extend Finch and Mason’s categories of negotiations by adding the transnational context, which they did not consider in their study. When family members negotiate responsibilities over geographic distances involving international borders and time zones, family groups on both sides of the transnational social fields identify intermediaries. In this family, the intermediaries of information were Askar in Yakutsk and Mira in Alcha. Thus, when essential resources (e.g. time, money, and energy) are limited, certain family members can play the role of intermediaries of information by implicitly or explicitly assuming control over decision-making.
Moreover, the vignette also illuminates the challenges of the adaptation and incorporation of daughters-in-law within their husbands’ families, a cultural complexity understudied in global migrations. The already complicated relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law would have been easier to navigate if Aidai could have left her child with her own mother. Instead, Aidai’s son was being cared for by someone with whom Aidai did not maintain close or intimate relations. Aidai’s subordination to her husband’s family in general and to her mother-in-law in particular made her transnational motherhood especially anguished. While leaving children behind is common among transnational families globally, some young Kyrgyz daughters-in-law feel pressured to relinquish care of their children to their patrilineal kin. To situate Kyrgyz transnational families within the global practices, it is useful to consider how transnational commitments are done elsewhere.

In Mayan migration to Cancun, women migrants, more than men, actively pushed for family reunification (Castellanos, 2008). In the poor households of Brazil, Claudia Fonseca (2003) studied child-raising dynamics and demonstrated that women used different ways of getting help in sharing their parenthood while they were away. These included leaving small children with older children in the neighbourhood or with grandparents, but also ensuring that their children had multiple co-fathers and co-mothers. Due to a high mortality rate in Brazil, some families baptized children several times making ‘official their shared rights and responsibilities in the child’s future’, which served as a ‘life-saving safety net’ (2003, p. 117). In a dissimilar strategy of ‘outsourcing care’, Jessaca Leinaweaver (2010, p. 73) illustrated how Peruvian migrant women in Europe engage in ‘child fostering’, which is an ‘informal and often temporary transfer of guardianship’ among poor and working-class families. Leinaweaver argued that child fostering allows migrant women ‘to meet their caregiving [sic] responsibilities not only as parents of young children but also as grown children of aging parents’ (2010, p. 69). In the Peruvian cultural context, a migrant mother’s choice to locate a child with an aging parent filled ‘the care slot’ that the migrant would be expected to fill otherwise. This arrangement transformed not only how children were cared for, but also how the elderly were cared for, an ‘efficient way’ to ensure ‘as seamless a dislocation as possible’ (Leinaweaver, 2010, p. 76). In the Caribbean, grandmothers exhibited a ‘readiness to assume responsibility’ for their grandchildren in poor families; they were viewed as an easy ‘solution’, because migration could ‘boost their status in the family and within the community’ (Plaza, 2000, p. 80).

What these studies do not address is a different kinship relationship evident in the Kyrgyzstani context: how being a ‘good mother’ to a child can be tied to being a ‘good
daughter-in-law’. Caught in the dilemma of simultaneously managing multiple roles, Aidai rationalized her separation from her child not in terms of the urgency of meeting her child’s needs, but rather based on the essentiality of meeting the ‘big family’ needs. While child fostering [amanat] is also practiced by Kyrgyzstani migrant families (Sanghera et al., 2012), it is not a ‘deliberate act’ as Leinaweaver suggested it was in Peru (see chapter 6 for further discussion). What is more deliberate in Kyrgyz migrant practices is giving birth to children in Russia in order to be eligible for Russian welfare support. Commitments to left-behind children are shaped by working and living arrangements abroad, but also conditioned by the normativity of grandchild-child caregiving relationships meaningful to Kyrgyz family experiences. Aidai and her husband Askar continued to buy presents each year for family members, but Mira’s present tended to be more luxurious (i.e. golden earrings, golden necklace, etc.). This is a vivid example of how Aidai sacrificed her maternal role, contributing to the normalization of the grandparent-grandchild caregiving practice, in order to fulfil prescribed expectations of attending to the needs of her husband’s extended family.

From the beginning, Ermek and Aidai’s options for caring for Nurik in Yakutsk were limited. Their dormitory living conditions were difficult, ‘We could have moved to a warmer apartment, but we wouldn’t be saving much’. The monthly rent for a two-room apartment was about 30,000 rubles [625 GBP; 1,000 USD], roughly what the siblings saved each month. Instead, they preferred to live in a shabby dormitory building in city’s outskirts for free. This allowed them to save their rent money. However, as their living conditions improved and as parents realised their return had been prolonged, other reasons arose that prevented them from bringing Nurik to Yakutsk. Both parents increasingly disliked the weather conditions in Yakutsk, where long winters and short summers would have kept Nurik inside the house most days. In our conversations in Yakutsk, Aidai also identified the perceived advantages of having their child grow up in Alcha with his grandparents speaking Kyrgyz language and learning the Kyrgyz values of respect towards the elderly. Their desire to have their child close to them falls under a type of negotiation that Finch and Mason labelled ‘non-decisions’, where ‘negotiations are most implicit’ (1993, p. 74). These are situations when people ‘cannot reconstruct consciously formulated strategy or identify a point in time when there was an overt agreement’ (ibid., p. 74). For Mira (and Ermek), it was clear ‘without discussion’ that Askar and Aidai would regularly send money home in order to help Mira fulfil her caring responsibilities. However, there were no overt discussions about exactly how their support would be rewarded.
On Remittances: Contesting ‘Staying Put’ and ‘Left Behind’

In the previous vignette, I focused on transnational mothers’ pressures around leaving children behind. While rationalized as getting on their feet, transnational parents, especially mothers, invest energy and hard work to display being ‘good mothers’, not only to their children, but also to those with whom they leave their children behind. The forthcoming final vignette demonstrates the struggles of non-migrant villagers in deciding between staying put versus leading transnational lives, which are often affected by other migrant kin or co-villagers’ lives.

In 2011, during my first month of fieldwork in Alcha, I entered one of the many shops in the village bazaar. In hopes of practicing local hospitality by bringing a bag of goodies as a guest, I was surprised to find a relatively small shop filled from floor to ceiling with television sets, radios, bootlegged CDs, and other technological devices. Realising that I could top up units on my cell phone, a service offered in many shops, I engaged in a discussion with Nur, the shop owner, while I waited for my refill confirmation. I found out she was related to Mira. I returned to her shop on multiple occasions to refill my phone, and I also visited her house. During one such conversation, having learned that I was studying migration, Nur opened up about her keenness to migrate to Russia, ‘Baryp ishtep kelsem bolot ele’ [I wish I could go work for a while], she said. In fact, Nur knew Askar and his siblings, and had other relatives and friends in Russia who could have helped her find a job. However, her husband told her that if she left, they would have to divorce, as he was not willing to look after their children alone.

Running one of the well-known home equipment shops in the village, the 35-year-old mother of three admitted their business was successful, but ‘not the same as it once was’. When clients entered the shop, we would stop conversing only to continue as soon as they left. One of them asked about the refrigerator standing in the corner, clarifying, ‘Kreditke beresingerda?’ [You would sell for credit, right?] Nur elaborated that working abroad would enable her to better accumulate her earnings. She complained that villagers did not have cash on hand and that most bazaar sellers waited until the middle or the end of the month when customers received pensions or salaries ‘to hunt after their debtors’. Nur showed me her thick worn-out notebook where she kept track of sales, including villagers who purchased items ‘on credit’ and still had not ‘closed’ them. Between customers, she dialled numbers from her notebook only to hear endless dial tones or villagers promising to pay her back when they were paid. When nobody answered, she was sure they were hiding from her. Nur seemed to have partially accepted her situation, not displaying the frustration or anger I would have expected under such circumstances:
NUR: It is hard to accumulate money here. For something big. We have been thinking about buying a car, and building our own house in Bishkek. My oldest son graduates from high school next year. We have to pay his tuition, his clothes, and food. Our business is fine here, but our customers only can pay in multiple payments. You see, we sell big stuff, but we don’t get the entire sum right away, but in small instalments. Some villagers still hide from us for some purchases they made years back. Then my second son graduates. We should move there [Bishkek].

With a business that generated ‘a good income for a village life’, Nur’s family was relatively well off in Alcha. To my curiosity about who would look after her family if she migrated, Nur responded, ‘they [her sons, aged seven, 15, and 16] could look after each other’. She was more worried about her sons’ upcoming tuitions and expenses related to living and studying in the capital. Then, Nur disclosed private details from her family life which added to a more complete understanding of her situation and to her desire to migrate. She explained that her husband was an alcoholic; in fact, she assumed I was already aware of this. When he binge-drunk over continuous days and the whole street (and bazaar) talked, she fought shame and powerlessness, continued to work alone, and dealt with ‘koshmar’ [horror] throughout the binge period. Nur had experienced this ‘horror’ for most of the 18 years they had been married, and she was ‘exhausted’ [küchüm jok]. ‘I am left to myself, his parents don’t care’, she explained, but she ‘had no choice’ and was afraid of the consequences of leaving her family behind. However, this did not stop Nur from occasionally talking with Mira about her desire to migrate. With her husband’s cousins working in Russia, she wanted them to convince her husband to let her work in Yakutsk for a season, because she feared having that conversation openly and face-to-face with her husband. Nur preferred to migrate alone, because of her husband’s drinking problems, but she was scared her husband would retaliate.

In her study of migration and experiences of ‘staying put’ in southern Kyrgyzstan, Madeleine Reeves (2011c, p. 557) argued for the relational dynamic of mobility in Central Asia, where she suggested how ‘the ways in which the mobility of one person or group can constrain or shape the mobility of others: how the temporary absence of a husband, for instance, alters the way in which female mobility within and beyond the home is morally evaluated’. In doing so, Reeves referred to Archambault’s study of women ‘stayers’ in Tanzania where Archambault (2010, p. 920) argued that the label of ‘left behind’ can disguise the way in which staying can be an ‘empowering strategy’ which allows women farmers ‘economic autonomy and social well-being’ in the absence of their husbands. While Reeves primarily looked at the staying women whose husbands had left for labour to Russia, I extend my discussion to those ‘left behind’ in general,
including other family members. Nevertheless, Reeves’ (2011c, p. 558) analysis of this ‘complexity’ provided insights into understanding the diverse meanings that can be attached to these concepts, such as ‘left behind’ [tyshtap ketti, biz artta kaldyk]:

With the term ‘staying put’ I seek to gesture to this complexity: for if staying suggests an active maintenance of continuity, being put reminds that for many women whose husbands depart, the experience is less one of liberation than of emplacement and confinement – an emplacement, moreover, that can reflect and intensify a broader position of subordination within the marital home.

The departure of one family member is enabled by another staying behind (Reeves, 2011c; Isabaeva, 2011). In my research, I have seen diverse combinations in which staying and leaving are related. For Dinara, in the first vignette of this chapter, staying behind with three children was not just her choice, but an inevitability, which empowered her in her husband’s absence. While Tursun earned to sustain his growing family and accommodated shifting family dynamics (e.g. his daughter’s unexpected marriage) by staying in Russia longer than he had planned, their migration strategy allowed them to fulfil socially expected obligations (e.g. covering wedding celebration costs). In Tursun’s absence, Dinara continued to run the household by tending after their increasing heads of cattle, taking care of their three children and purchasing household items with the kind of autonomy that such transnational family arrangements fostered. While leaving children and grandparents behind has become a popular public discourse (Ablezova et al., 2008; Trilling 2010; Toktonaliev, 2014) in vilifying transmigrants, for those who stay behind, the meanings of ‘being left’ or ‘staying put’ can be more ambiguous (Reeves, 2011c). For the families with whom I stayed in Alcha, they perceived their lives in the village as ‘quality life’ where, as Mira elaborated, they could get up and go to bed when they wanted, walk on their land, eat nutritious food, and speak their own language – as opposed to the stories of migrants struggling in Russia. As Nur contemplated departing for Russia, she acknowledged that if she worked hard in Alcha, she could earn the same money that her migrant neighbours make in Russia. She recognized that although she already works hard ‘here’, in Russia she would have to work even harder and risk becoming a divorcee, ‘What if I lose everything!’ Similar responses were expressed by other participants in the study. Dinara did not want to migrate with Tursun even if she could leave her children behind, as she associated Siberia with atrocious living conditions. Some returnee migrants swore they would not return to Siberian Russia again, mainly because after having travelled abroad, they appreciated the value of being home.

Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2011) suggested that in the times of globalization and world migration, there has been a rapidly growing variety of transnational families, ‘such
as long-distance relationships, transnational couples, binational couples, marriage migrants, multi-racial families, immigrant families, transnational adoption, transnational divorce tourism, transnational forms of reproduction tourism’, which have not received enough attention (p. 192). With growing interest on the diversification of migrant family structures, there is also a lack of empirical research that pays attention to those who remain at home (Evergeti and Ryan, 2011), or compares migrant and non-migrant family forms (Kofman, et al., 2011, p. 35). My empirical data were distinctly different from the public policy and social media research that offer a snapshot view of family lives and practices without demonstrating how negotiations of responsibilities are produced over time. In their report titled The Impact of Migration on the Elderly People, Kyrgyzstani scholars Ablezova, Nasritudinov and Rahimov (2008) rightly asked whether the ‘sacrifice’ of migration is ‘necessary’ and whether it is ‘possible to find paradise for the whole family in their own village’ in reference to increased cases of grandparents and grandchildren left behind in rural Kyrgyzstan. For example, the authors’ findings revealed that ‘many’ of the left-behind grandparents were ‘happy’ that their children found jobs far away with approximately 62% of grandparents considering migration to be ‘positive’ (ibid., pp. 21-22). Instead of explaining the support of a majority of grandparents for migration, the report largely outlined why the researchers believed that migration negatively affected Kyrgyz families. My empirical data showed that grandmothers are active members of transnational families who consciously engage in caregiving responsibilities. In this respect, we need to move beyond a narrow rhetoric that does not take the agency of those at home seriously. We have seen in examples in this and the previous chapter that non-migrant villagers find ways to sustain their lives and need to further examine the different ways in which migration can reconstitute families.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to pave the way in which significant empirical findings from my multi-sited ethnography could be approached theoretically. To do so, I tried to present evidence through a multi-local ethnography, with a concentration on family members staying put, in order to explain how transnational families make sense of separated lives as they continue forging dense ties. Moreover, I argued for looking beyond nuclear families by combining several approaches emerging from the sociology of family life and migration studies, specifically the transnational perspective. In studies of family migration and transnational relationships, we need to consider the actual diversity with which people migrate through kinship groups (Evergeti and Ryan, 2011), but also
‘acquaintances’ (Morgan, 2008) such as neighbours, ex-classmates, or co-villagers. Migration fostered non-kin commitments as migrants increasingly avoided monetary relations with kin.

Proponents of the individualization thesis in sociology have painted a gloomy picture for families. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995 quoted in Smart, 2007, p. 19) offered a pessimistic vision for the future of the families, suggesting that future was ‘bleak’ due to modern social conditions that will pull families apart, such as divorce, women’s employment, equality, demands for flexibility, and mobility in labour markets’. Similarly, Beck (2002 quoted in Smart, 2007, pp. 19-20) placed family in a ‘zombie category’ suggesting that ‘family is dead even if people live their lives as if it were still alive’. Transnational caregiving and commitments, evidenced in the examples discussed in this chapter, have attested to the importance of today’s family ‘here’ and ‘there’. These families separated for the precise reason of maintaining a common transnational strategy of getting on their feet.

Following Finch’s (1989) analysis of family obligations and Finch and Mason’s (1993) discussion of negotiating family responsibilities, I argued that family obligations stretched over borders, therefore, do not stop, and develop over time. In order to understand better how commitments are developed, maintained, and made sense of by different family members and transnationally, I looked at family configurations, multiple family members’ perspectives, and the interwoven relationships. These vignettes demonstrated that family commitments have not stopped due to migration, but they are changing forms (Kofman et al., 2011, p. 34). These ethnographic episodes demonstrated the interlinkages between these three different families where in the first vignette Tursun and Dinara were distant neighbours and co-villagers with Mira and Ermek’s family, while Nur’s family in the third vignette were Ermek’s extended kin. Askar was willing to help other villagers, rather than his relatives, in order to avoid the potential for remorse and conflict with relatives. The described vignettes depicted daily life situations specific to these families, but they also reflected the kind of issues community members encountered regularly. When faced with problems and crises, family and kinship support was convenient. However, there were also situations when villagers knew they would not receive any assistance from their immediate family, as in Nur’s case, but instead they received support from other networks of in-laws, friends, and neighbours. Now, there is a commonality among all of these stories. The interlocking thread is how family relationships are managed because of migration and how it raises new questions about commitments, relatedness, belonging, being left behind, the value of remittances, and staying put. In these cases, people reflected on changing family roles, sense of duty,
obligation, or commitment, emotional experiences, and forms of providing support to one another, whether they were movers or stayers, related or not. For we might ask, why is it important to understand how migration is affecting and reconstituting families, and how should this influence, in turn, help us understand the contemporary life strategies of transnational family and kin practices between Kyrgyzstan and Russia?
3 Doing Transnational Family Practices: Negotiations of *Tois* between Movers and Stayers

![Figure 3.1: A distribution of meat at a *toi*, November 2011.](image)

**Contesting the ‘Left Behind’**

In the previous chapter, I showed that despite being separated by distance, transnational families continued to forge dense ties transnationally. I offered three examples of the roles of negotiated commitments in helping community members, supporting family members staying behind, and contemplating a potential migration. These examples each demonstrated that families may be changing in structure in Kyrgyzstan, but they still exist and are valued, in contrast to Western scholarship on family studies asserting the family’s decline due to the processes of industrialisation, globalisation, and urbanisation leading to individualisation (Beck-Gernsheim, 2011).

In this chapter, I will examine the daily lives of non-migrant family members or, as some scholars have defined them, as the ‘left behind’ (Ablezova et al., 2008; Khalaf, 2009; Hegland, 2010; Silver, 2011; McEvoy et al., 2012; Bennett, 2013). Although many scholars have used ‘left behind’ uncritically, there have been exceptions (Archambault, 2010; Reeves, 2011c; Silver, 2011; Boccagni, 2013a). Many migrants leave their children
behind, and in such cases, children rarely have decision-making power (cf. Jingzhong and Lu, 2011). Alexis Silver (2011), for example, consciously chose to use the term ‘remaining in their countries of origin’ instead of ‘left behind’, because she acknowledged that non-migrant family members ‘remain in close contact’ with migrant family members and that non-migrants are not ‘forgotten or stranded’ (p. 3). While Silver’s analysis hinted at the importance of non-migrants’ personal choices of staying in their original residences, I extend this approach further. By examining different ways in which stayers engaged in the local ritual economy, I argue that stayers have been robbed of their agency. While I may, at times, use the term ‘left behind’ (because of its brevity) to refer to stayers, I believe there should not be any bias against those who stay behind. The dense ties between stayers and movers, or between ‘present’ and ‘absent’ family members should be a reminder that these categories are related, because when families are separated, those who leave, or absent, also experience a great level of strain. Finally, I argue that migration reconstitutes families by producing family relatedness through the transmission of money, the exchange of goods, and maintaining obligations.

I begin by examining family practices during the busiest season in Alcha, the autumn. One late October morning, Mira’s day started before the rooster’s call. Mira awoke at 6 a.m. with her grandson Nurik, fed him, milked their only dairy cow, and released her to graze independently in the village streets. Mira and Ermek’s migrant children invested their remittances in livestock housed in the nearby alpine pastures of the Tien Shan Mountains. This year, they insisted on keeping the milking cow at home because milk products were difficult to acquire in the village. Another regular family practice was a question-and-answer game with the three-year-old, ‘Who bought the cow? Say, ‘My daddy’! ‘What is your father’s name? Say, ‘Askar’. ‘What is your mother’s name? Say ‘Aidai’. ‘Where are they? Say, ‘In Yakutia’. Everyone felt the need to train Nurik, perhaps because his parents, whom he had only seen in photos sent via cell phones, would be visiting in December.

The demanding task of caring for livestock physically tied family members to the house. In this family, Mira shouldered the burdens of cattle feeding, milking and manure cleaning, tasks she inherited from her absent migrant sons. Meanwhile, Mira’s daughter Baktygul, her cousin Kyial, and I neatly stacked heavy duvets and blankets against a wall – a twice-daily routine of making beds – and joined Mira for her second breakfast (see Figure 1.2). Mira had also started a fire under a massive kazan [pot] in the backyard to

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30 The family owned roughly 50 sheep, two horses with a colt, and five cows with two calves – purchased over years with money sent home by migrant children. Every spring, most livestock was sent to pasture and cared by a kin herder, who was paid per animal per month for tending.
heat water for laundry. Hand-washing two weeks’ worth of clothes worn by the family of five consumed an entire day. It was during these daily family activities and events, such as drinking tea, preparing meals, getting water from a spring, listening to international cell phone conversations, and tidying up around the house that family members’ relationships could be observed and interpreted as ‘family-like’ (Finch and Mason, 1993) in the context of Kyrgyzstan’s rural livelihoods.

In this dissertation, I highlight the doing of transnational family practices because literature on family practices has paid insufficient attention to ‘doing family practices’ transnationally (cf. Boccagni, 2013a) and to the doing of family in the context of protracted separation due to migrations. There is a need to foreground family practices in the framework of transnational lives happening ‘here’ and ‘there’. An analytic framework focused on family and personal lives would pose a valuable frame for understanding everyday habitual practices (Smart, 2007). As mentioned in the introductory chapters, the starting point of my analysis is the acknowledgement of David H. Morgan’s (1996) family practices, where families are constituted by doing family things rather than being a family, by rooting our understanding of how families are done in the routine of the everyday. The routinized aspects of everyday family lives can become ‘easier’ as we take for granted family routines (Phoenix and Brannen, 2014, p. 12). Family life should be seen as ‘a set of activities’ and individuals can be seen ‘as doing family’ (Morgan, 2013, p. 6). Given that a multi-local existence is less routinized, this form of engagement implies that family members would have to negotiate these activities over distance. Family practices are embedded in culture, linking biography to history, but they can be reconfigured over time. Therefore, they are ‘a site for both family change and reproduction in that myths, scripts, and stories that are repeatedly retold serve to maintain a family’s ethos and idealised notion of itself and facilitate change towards the ideal’ (Phoenix and Brannen, 2014, p. 13). For Morgan (1996, p. 190), practices ‘are often little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken-for-granted existence of practitioners. Their significance derives from their location in wider systems of meaning’. My task is to interrogate how family relationships are maintained and enacted in a context where migrant families live multi-locally, often without ‘direct social interaction’ (Finch, 2007, p. 75). Morgan’s analysis of ‘doing family things’ was further developed by Janet Finch, who argued that families are also ‘displayed’, a ‘process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain actions constitute ‘doing family things’, and thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships’ (2007, p. 67).

I believe that one of Morgan’s contributions was to stress that family practices are not limited to some physical location called ‘the home’, but the boundaries of family
practices are fluid and can transcend the household. Seymour (2007), also using Morgan’s ‘family practices’, offered a fascinating case of ‘dual location as a site of family living’, whose reference to Gillis (1996) phrased it well: ‘the doing of family life is revealed as a process of combining the pragmatic demands of the specific situation people find themselves in (the family they live with) with the aspiration of producing […] the ‘imagined family we live by’ (xv, in Seymour, 2007, p. 1099). In the opening vignette, Mira, a grandmother in her 50s, wakes up every morning to feed her grandson Nurik, performing actions that have become routine, and her actions convey and are understood by others in the wider family to be family practices. She regularly trains her grandson’s sense of being and belonging to a family where he is raised by his ‘grandparents’ and aunts while his ‘parents’ are far away [alysta]. The literature on ‘staying behind’ misses a critical point by denying stayers’ agency. These families and their stories demonstrate how ‘absent’ and ‘present’ members are not a simple dichotomy between ‘gone’ and ‘left behind’, with often negative connotations implied about those who are ‘left behind’. Rather, my empirical data show that stayers are not passive.

Thus, I see my rethinking of misleading notions and portrayals of the ‘left behind’ as a contribution to knowledge about the sociology of transnational families. In doing so, I critically look at the role of the ritual economy as site of a particular kind of cultural remittance investment that enables sustaining affective kin ties. By attending to David Montgomery’s (2013b, p. 476) insight that in order to better comprehend ‘the complex ways Central Asians create lives worth living’, we need to look at ‘what Central Asians hold as meaningful’. The ‘need to locate domestic calculations within local structures of value’ was also foregrounded by Madeleine Reeves (2012b, p. 18) in her ethnography of migration in southern rural Kyrgyzstan. The family practices around toi remittances are active processes of doing: continuing relations, making new and sometimes cutting old ones. Reeves (2011c) warned us of ‘modernist overtones’, referring to Caroline Archambault (2010, p. 557), who suggested that non-migrant Tanzanian women should be seen as ‘empowered’ rather than ‘left behind’ because they gain economic autonomy in the absence of their husbands. Reeves (2011c) also referred to Doreen Massey’s work (1994), which showed that people were differently placed depending on their ability to benefit from migration. Therefore, the stress should not be placed on who moves and who does not, but rather on ‘power in relation to the flows and the movement’. In other words, as a result of migration, some assume more responsibility than others, some move further than others, some receive more than others, and some are ‘effectively imprisoned by it’ (Massey, 1994, cited in Reeves 2011c, p. 559). Therefore, I further offer a look into
migration’s intensification of family relatedness by enabling the maintenance and production of ties of mutual obligations and commitments.

**Head to Toe in Tois: ‘Toidon Bash Chykpaıt’!**

Autumn in Alcha placed family hospitality on display. Countless celebrations, locally referred to as tois, form ‘a mainstay of the Kyrgyz social calendar’ (Rubinov, 2014, p. 187). Alongside the celebration of significant births, anniversaries, and even purchases, village life was also punctuated by commemorations paying tribute to relatives the year following their passing [ash]. In fact, it is custom among the Kyrgyz that the dead are remembered on the third, seventh and 40th days after their burial, when kin and neighbours visit, often without invitation. In the post-Soviet realities, these practices have been transformed and diversified, often shaped by family status and social networks. I highlight these family practices as embedded in local structures of value as we delve into how Alcha families can find themselves fully immersed in tois, or literally, ‘head to toe in tois’.

Having placed sliced bread on the kitchen table, Baktygul – the family’s only non-migrant child – brought cups of homemade apricot jam and butter [sary mai]. Mira instructed her niece Kyial to bring the ustukan [a take-home bag] from the refrigerator. Kyial was a ‘temporary’ resident attending Baktygul’s high school, where she transferred from Bishkek after her parents migrated to Yakutsk for ‘a year or two’. The content of the plastic bag – boiled lamb chunks, bread, boorsok [fried dough pieces], and candy all packed together – was emptied and separated onto plates as we sipped hot tea with milk from tiny cups.

When Mira’s cell phone rang, she answered immediately, interrupting our ongoing exchange. Short greetings later, she attempted to excuse herself from attending another toi to which she was being invited that day. Mira explained she was busy with laundry, but

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31 Guests often took food bags from celebrations. Intended as tokens of thanks, these bags also serve as meal for children at home waiting for parents to be fed. The concept of oozi tiygiz [literally to ‘mouth-touch’] means hosts wish for many people to try their celebratory food. For instance, visitors would be invited in for tea; and in haste, hospitality would be shown by offering to _try_ bread. Locally, ‘that’s how it is done here,’ a way of acknowledging one’s visit and showing respect that has become habitual and expected. Once visitors are seated, hosts would put out almost everything they had in the house. This tradition stretches from the past when Kyrgyz were nomads living in yurts. They welcomed strangers to their yurts whenever they passed by their territory, offering rest and food. Families I visited often shared their ustukan telling me which celebration they got it from, how opulent the feast was, whether the meat was up to their standards, and whether alcohol was served or not, etc. With or without ustukan, one could not avoid talks about festivities involved excitement, anxiety and fuss.
her body language revealed otherwise. Apologetically, Mira smiled, informing the girls that laundry was postponed, ‘There you go! It’s always like this over here. Toidon bash chykpaits! [You can’t get your head out of a toi!]. You can never finish if you start anything around the house these days! <pause> Would you like to come with me to see a new bride [kelin körgöngö]?’ she combined her subtle excuse, change of plans, and an invitation in one utterance. This expression, which I heard multiple times from villagers conveyed ambivalent feelings of both wanting to attend and being exhausted from tois. Mira explained her non-attendance would leave her feeling uiat [shame], as I followed her to select a jooluk [headscarf] as a gift for the bride. She grumbled that her husband regularly protested attending tois, so Mira often represented her family alone. I also realised that my status as a researcher living with the family was convenient for Mira in justifying another trip to her husband.

A toi invitation was not always welcome. Like many villagers, Mira and her husband Ermek were embedded in a web of tois they were obliged to attend due to reciprocal obligations that stretched over decades. Tois also served many functions, the most important of which was allowing opportunities to catch up with kin and friends; thus, these get-togethers made kin and social network ties visible, allowing villagers to perform being a good relative, neighbour, or villager. Cynthia Werner’s (1998) study of neighbouring post-Soviet Kazakhstan showed that gifts and festivities create the relations of ‘mutual indebtedness’ among kin, processes that also reflect Kyrgyzstani kin practices with insignificant differences. Attending numerous tois in close proximity was costly and inconvenient for the family, who were expected to bring gifts or contribute cash. The following conversation highlights a number of competing features about blurred distinctions between ‘here’ and ‘there’, the importance of maintaining kin ties and social networks and the monetization of family relationships:

MIRA: Whenever we need money, because we need to go to that relative, or visit this relative, I call them [children in Russia] up and ask them for money. <pause> I always ask [for] only the amount needed, never too much, and they wire it. […] During tois, his [husband] and my relatives help us, and the same way we help them. We have raja [cash contribution] with relatives for big tois such as weddings

Girls happily discussed resuming their Korean series marathon. Borrowed from neighbours, they needed to return a bootlegged CD copy sooner with all twenty-something episodes in one, which could be bought for 100 KGS (1.4 GBP) apiece.


Perhaps, scheduling here should not be understood in its Western sense when people schedule weddings, rites of passage months to years in advance; in Central Asia, often kin are only informed days, or a few weeks at most, before the tois.
and funerals, for each we bring 2,000 [KGS; 29 GBP] and get the same [amount] back. Most of the time we get money from [our] sons, but if we need some immediate money, I [can] ask one relative, <pause> but we have to return the money to her within two days. Besides her, there is nobody who can readily [lend] me money. <pause>

You see, who would like it [migration]?! Who would like it when your children are so far away <pause> when they cannot see how their own child is growing up <pause> any parent would like to see how they [children] grow up. <pause> Also, they [live] in another land, with other people. Of course, they cannot make themselves ‘at home’ [kak doma], they cannot [feel] fully free <pause> that aspect of migration makes me feel pity for my children. I get to see one of our children every year, or I see each of my children once in two years – one year I see one son, another year, another son. <pause> Especially during celebrations, birthdays, the New Year [celebrations], I wish I could be with my family, together, but that is what migration does, [it] divides our family [bölüp koet eken].

Stories of family members physically being ‘here’ and ‘there’ reflect the anticipation of ‘home’ being one place or the anticipation of togetherness. In reality, transnational families continue living simultaneously transnationally. In her ethnography of ‘working and waiting’ about Kyrgyzstan’s male migration from Sokh, Reeves (2011c, p. 557) advised us to recognize ‘the relational dynamics of mobility’. We need to recognize not just the fact that migration is gendered, but also that ‘the mobility of one person or group can constrain or shape the mobility of others: how the temporary absence of a husband, for instance, alters the way in which female mobility within and beyond the home is morally evaluated’ (ibid., p. 557). This entangled relationship between mobility and immobility is evident in Eliza Isabaeva’s (2011) study of rural southern Kyrgyzstan, where she stressed the necessity of ‘maintaining social continuity’ in villages where the absence of some family members and their money transfers allowed those in the village ‘to participate in reciprocal social relations’ (p. 548).

Recent scholarship on post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan’s migration suggested remittances have affected the ritual economy (Rubinov, 2010, 2012, 2014; Isabaeva, 2011; Reeves, 2011c). Igor Rubinov’s (2010) research, based on the experiences of northern Kyrgyzstani migrants, showed the remittances were ‘directly’ invested into feasts and celebrations contributing to the so-called ‘toi economy’, by monetizing gifting. A similar trend of the

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35 I. Rubinov (2014, p. 201) stressed that remittances towards daily expenses are ‘impossible to disentangle’ from expenses towards a ‘toi economy’, the ‘investment in feasts and ceremonies based on life-cycle events calling upon reciprocal exchange within social networks’ (Rubinov, 2010, p. 4). His analysis demonstrated that ritual expenditures among northern Kyrgyz transnational families’ migrants’ large purchases were often tied to celebrations, and thereby ‘reinvested’ into social and symbolic capital of migrants (ibid., p. 4). While I find Rubinov’s argument that monetization of gifting has become a ‘dominant trend’ and was supported by increasing remittance flows to be especially
monetization of relations was evident in Gulzat Botoeva’s ethnography of hashish making as ‘surrogate money’ (2014, no page), demonstrating that village life was embedded in a ‘cash deficit economy’. If, in the past, family and kin offered reciprocal assistance in the forms of manual labour, gifts of clothing, or promises of cattle, the monetization of *tois* fostered and boosted social stratification, increasing the gap between families. This threatened to potentially push poorer families out of existing kin relations and social networks, if they were unable to reciprocate. Botoeva argued that in rural Issyk-Kul province the inability to reciprocate within existing social networks drives villagers out of social relations (cf. Kuehnast and Dudwick, 2004). However, what these studies do not address in thorough detail is how family and kin relationships are sustained over time as a result of the altered mode of living across nation-states where ‘relationships need to be worked at in order to be sustained’ (Finch, 2007, p. 70). Referring to Smart and Neale’s (1999) analysis of post-divorce lives, a similarly diverse group of family lives when compared to transnational families, Finch (2007, p. 69) reflected on the fluidity of families over time:

[…]

the fluidity of family life is not defined by shifting membership so much as by the continually evolving character of the relationships – how individuals talk to each other, act towards each other, and the assumptions on which their relationships are conducted. Thus the question ‘Who is my family?’ is really a question about relationships – ‘Which of my relationships has the character of a “family” relationship?’

One way of interrogating transnational family practices lies in understanding how migration shapes the daily livelihoods of those affected by international migration. The emphasis on ‘doing’ the family was also stressed by Silva and Smart (1999, p. 5) who argued that family members do not just ‘passively resid[e] within a pre-given structure’, but the doings of family members create and reproduce family life. Given that transnational families are separated spatially, emotionally and temporarily, how are ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ experienced ‘here’ and ‘there’?

In contesting the perception of non-migrants as ‘left behind’, I articulate three key points: 1) Although dependent on migrant money, those ‘left behind’ do not lack agency. While navigating their own communities, stayers find ways to deal with poverty using existing networks. 2) Stayers did not consider themselves to be ‘losers’, but in fact, felt pity for the migrants abroad. They often described their lives as ‘being at home’ versus ‘living in someone’s land’, considering the former a privilege or an advantage. 3) Migrants often depended on non-migrant stayers to fulfil responsibilities they could not fulfil in significant, one could infer from his discussion of the ‘*toi* economy’ a misleading conclusion that every remittance leads to a celebration.
their absence. This dependency committed migrants to home through obligations to remit, which as a result empowered them through the autonomy of decision making. Thus, the dualisms of ‘gone’ and ‘left behind’ and ‘absent’ and ‘present’ become prescriptive and create false assumptions about the relational dynamics of families. Such labelling does not allow us to appreciate the complexities of family practices where they demonstrate the continuity, fluidity, and permeability of family life actualized in transnational spaces. By looking into daily family practices or ‘the micro-level of the day-to-day activities’ (Seymour, 2007, p. 1098), such as family and kin festivities [toi], seasonal preparations, and other daily routines that constitute family life (e.g. having meals, watching television, or conversing on the phone), I argue that transnational family practices are constituted through strong moral, emotional, social obligations, and responsibilities superseding pure economic deliberations, which are nonetheless not entirely insignificant. Migration produces and strengthens family relatedness through monetary relations, gift giving, and feelings of obligations that are contested and renegotiated.

**Understanding Festivities in Family Life**

The following discussion examines different ethnographic examples from the everyday life of transnational families. It illustrates at what points migrant family members become visible to non-migrants back home and at what points non-migrants actively avoid toi remittances. Considering how family life in the village is animated by celebrations, seasonal preparations, and the domestic activities of daily life, I will show: a) how migrant family members’ remitted financial resources are essential for enabling the family to maintain kinship obligations, b) how hosting festivities is socially and morally obliging, but also economically justified by kinship payments (raja, köründük, koshumcha), and finally c) while economic considerations do not necessarily supersede social and moral kinship obligations and commitments, debates over the allocation of remittances put family members in stressful and conflicting relations over the role of festivities back home. To initiate this discussion of how transnational family practices are maintained, I begin by considering why celebrations are integral to Kyrgyz sociality and how these are sustained in the context of protracted family absence.

**On meat, hospitality, and ‘being Kyrgyz’**

During my stay with Mira’s family, I accompanied her to many kin and communal celebrations in Alcha and nearby villages. Her family also hosted guests; witnessing
celebrations and helping with preparations was advantageous in gaining a richer insight into the how and why various celebrations were organized. Living in my mother’s village of birth also meant that some cousins invited me to attend various life cycle events (birthdays, weddings, children’s rites of passage, etc.). Although I had not been in contact with my extended kin for years, I took advantage of these invitations. Together, these opportunities shaped my understanding of villagers’ sense and practice of mutual obligations, commitments, hospitality, and the importance of family ties, while also revealing their feelings of resentment and anger over the inescapability of kin practices. I used my ethnographic observations, interviews, and conversations to make sense of what was at stake in relationships ‘at home’, what makes a family – ‘family’, and what enables particular kin relations to become constituted as ‘family’ transnationally.

Village ritual life throughout late autumn and winter was eventful for three reasons. First, Kyrgyz families religiously obsessed over the quality of meat and obeyed the ‘must-serve meat’ rule. Livestock was sent to pasture from the spring to the winter to gain highly valued weight and fat. When cattle returned in November or December, many purchased fresh meat by weight or animals by piece in local markets. Generally, meat comprised the highest expense of any festivity. In 2011, one could purchase a well-fed and cared-for sheep for between 6,000–8,000 KGS [85-114 GBP] in Alcha’s Sunday livestock market (see Figure 3.2), while one kilogram of lamb was sold for 275 KGS (4 GBP). Mira felt lucky that her brother and sister-in-law sold meat in Alcha. Every Saturday, they sold beef by weight, which Mira could ‘reserve’ by calling her sister-in-law, Amanat. She explained the high demand for fresh meat:

These celebrations included kelin korüü [seeing a bride], chach öörüü [braiding bride’s hair] kuda tosau [meeting in-laws], tushoo toi [baby’s first step celebration], bala korüü [meeting a baby], birthdays, tülö [getting blessings from elderly and kin], sherine [reciprocated group dinners], ash [one year commemoration of a relative’s death], weddings, and funerals. Also see Mikhailov, G. (2013), which summarizes Kyrgyzstani parliamentarians’ initiative to introduce legislation limiting expenditures on festivities. K. Talieva (parliamentarian) asserted in a speech that Kyrgyzstani citizens spend 41 million USD (2 billion KGS; 28.5 million GBP) for various festivities including weddings and funerals. Mikhailov expressed scepticism that the initiative would succeed because he believes it would violate citizens’ constitutional rights and be challenging to implement. (If passed, Kyrgyzstan would become the second country, after Tajikistan, to adopt such legislation. ‘On Squaring Traditions and Rites’ (2007) to ‘imposes strict limitations on the scope and expenses allowed for ceremonies concerning life and death’, but also on other life cycle rituals (See ‘Tajikistan: Enforced Austerity Sweeps Nation’, 2007).

Perhaps serving meat, especially in large quantities, was a significant difference in celebrations from other parts of the country. For example, plov, a Central Asian rice dish, could be equally considered a dish appropriate for celebrations. However, in Naryn, boiled meat chunks served with homemade noodles and fresh broth, besh barmak, was expected to be served at any celebration.

On the importance of fat in Central Asian cuisine, see Zanca, R. (2007).
AMANAT: People call me on my cell phone asking to leave certain parts [cuts of beef] for them. I ask if they are going to pay for it. I do not sell otherwise. Often they ask how it [slaughtered cow] turned out [whether it is fat enough], they explain that it is for guests, so I put some aside for them. And still, I have many villagers who owe me money.

In a village with limited jobs, Amanat and her husband Kerim sustained their livelihood by purchasing a cow locally, hiring men to slaughter it, and selling the meat. She assured me that by the time they slaughtered the next cow, they almost always managed to sell all of the meat, including the intestines, skin, legs, and head. The business sounded simple enough, and I wondered why others had not reproduced it, to which Kerim responded:

KERIM: It’s not easy! You constantly need to hold on to cash [akchany karmash kerek]. A fat [semiz] cow costs around 50,000 [KGS; 714 GBP]. Also, you need good connections in the village to get spravka [document from a veterinarian] for cattle. Doing it twice a week would be nice. We tried it when we had money, but it’s stretching it.

Being connected and having a good reputation were essential factors in the village meat business. In Kerim’s words, the ability to hold on to earned money was challenging due to low cash flow in the village. Toi obligations induced loans and debt (Rubinov, 2014). Amanat mentioned that their business often conflicted with their social life. Because weekends were traditionally market days for the villagers, those with market-based business often could not attend kin celebrations scheduled on weekends, the most profitable market days. Since the village life revolved around the weekend market, it was becoming more common to hold celebrations during the week.

In another example, for Burul, a grandmother in her late 60s (see Figure 6.2), access to fresh meat affected her choice of a café in which to host festivities. Burul had been playing ‘chernaia kassa’ [‘the black cash box’] with her ex-colleagues in order to help pay for her grandchild’s university tuition. Chernaia kassa is a support network based on participants’ contributions of an agreed-upon sum of money that is contributed each month into ‘rotating credit practices’ (Rubinov, 2014, p. 200), when one person receives a sum each month until the sequence ends. This network consisted of 13 friends, which meant that each contributed 1,000 KGS (14 GBP) per month in order to get 12,000 KGS (171 GBP) all at once within the 13 month period. Whomever received the kassa money that month, was however, obliged to ‘celebrate it’ by hosting a meal. This group’s celebration was moved to a café – a popular city practice reproduced in the village – due to the relative ease of organization and lower cost:
BURUL: I suggested holding the kassa in cafes <pause> we used to do it at home. I suggested adding 200 som [2.8 GBP] on top of 1,000 som kassa money to cover our café food. <pause> You see, some have daughters-in-law, others don’t, so it’s much easier for everyone, too much fuss doing it from home. But 13 women means 13 opinions, we had to change our café because some preferred the fresh meat regularly purchased from the market, offered in another café. Women in the kassa often comment on the food. If something goes wrong [with meat quality], those wishing to go back to traditional form of guesting speak up. Although they joke about it, so far nobody went back to the old style.

Burul’s example demonstrates important shifts in communal relations. The display of hospitality moved from domestic space into cafés due to practicalities (the absence of daughter-in-law’s help), experience (pleasure versus service), and calculation (fixed expense). While hospitality displays have continued at home, celebrations are also condensed by combining several events (Rubinov, 2014). Burul earmarked part of her monthly pension for this kassa, serving as a powerful example of the way that the elderly stayers’ contributions are equally as important as migrant children’s remittances to the family’s well-being.

The second reason why the toi season occurred late in the year was tied to the harvest season. Ample affordable vegetables and fruit were canned en masse to enjoy throughout the year as well as to display on the table [stolgo koigongo] during tois.
Children of the families with whom I stayed often pointed out how unfair it was to serve the best food for guests, ‘I’ll be lucky if any candy is left. Today villagers sweep everything [off the tablecloth] before they leave’. Autumn also began the school year when adults and youth returned from summer getaways, ensuring their presence at toi and the availability of children’s labour in preparing to host them. Mira explained how summer celebrations were rare because of summer school-off season and duties in the fields. Finally, migrants’ visits home were considered ‘deserving a celebration’, or causing a ‘toi obligation’ in a ‘desire for social recognition’ (Rubinov, 2014, p. 203), which peaked during the winter holidays.

Rubinov (2014) proposed that we consider the toi as ‘a set of practices weaving ideas, moneys, and objects’ where ‘social bonds and economic imperatives’ in communities can be seen as ‘migrant assemblages’ (p. 186). He suggested that migrant remittances in Kyrgyzstan have contributed to a ‘toi economy’ where the ‘tangible investments’ go side-by-side with ‘corollary investment, which are demonstrated in forms of feasts, gift exchange, etc. (ibid., p. 202). Money can strain relations between stayers and movers. Transmigrants often became resentful, angry and bitter over how their money transfers were spent ‘back home’:

ASKAR: We barely save money to plan something for the future. We do not have extra money to spend. We have too many ‘tois-pois’ here [in Alcha]. That is why we left here, to make money <pause> then mom asks for money and what do you do? Of course, we send her money! <pause> No, we always call and ask whether üidöökülör [ours at home] need anything, you know, food, clothes, we send money for that all the time. It is all good. We don’t want them to be in need. But we have too many tois, I do not know, Kyrgyzbyzda! [Because we are Kyrgyz!] <pause> Keregijokta osho! [We don’t need those [tois] really!]

These stories demonstrate ambivalent, contradictory, and transformative feelings held by migrant family members whose lives are simultaneously happening in two different localities and who are embedded, as Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) suggested, in ‘transnational social fields’. It is useful here to think with ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of belonging’ that these authors claimed migrants combine ‘in specific contexts’ (2004, p. 1010). Askar, his siblings and their wives (family’s daughters-in-law) demonstrated ‘a conscious connection’ (ibid., p. 1010) to their home. They were highly invested emotionally and psychologically with family projects and daily life in Alcha and how their monetary transfers were utilized. Instead of saying ‘we send, you choose what to do,’ migrant siblings maintained deliberate regular contact with ‘home’, exhibiting a particular way of belonging despite physical absence that we might conceive of as a kind of pivoting

39 During summer, children tend to spend time with extended kin.
relatedness. Elaborating on this idea, Levitt and Glick Schiller also suggested that ‘transnational attachments are not binary opposites’ (ibid., p. 1011):

Instead, it is more useful to think of the migrant experience as a kind of gauge which, while anchored, pivots between a new land and a transnational incorporation. Movement and attachment is not linear or sequential but capable of rotating back and forth and changing direction over time. The median point on this gauge is not full incorporation and homeland or other transnational ties mutually influence each other.

Stayers often redirected remittances sent for basic necessities toward external needs. This often triggered tensions between the senders and receivers. Peggy Levitt’s (2001) ethnography of Miraflorenos in the Dominican Republic migration to Boston in the United States offered similar dynamics on the dependence on migrants. She argued that migrants ‘reinforce non-migrants’ skewed understanding of U.S. life and perpetuate their unrealistic expectations of migration’s rewards’ (ibid., p. 89). Levitt explained that migrants know they need stayers to look after their children and to manage their affairs, thus, migrants and non-migrants ‘ensure their continued commitment to each other’ (ibid., p. 89). This interdependent relationship redistributes power relations within the household by changing the division of labour across borders, which are ‘constantly being renegotiated’ (ibid., p. 90). Most importantly, these family dynamics affect ‘the locus of control’ as migrants become the breadwinners. When those who stay behind become more dependent on remittances, migrants acquire more power. It is especially interesting to note the relationship between parents and their adult migrant children: the former are ‘beholden to children who go abroad’ and the latter feel responsibility for decision-making, but their decisions can be defied by parents’ better judgment (ibid., pp. 89-90). Similarly, Kyrgyz migrants in Russia emulate social role models, which transform their identities and self-images. The daily practices of going to work were often distinguished from their compatriots’ lives in Alcha. ‘We work hard there in freezing temperatures’. ‘Villagers forgot how to work hard’, ‘biz churkap ishteibiz’, ['we work on a running mode, non-stop']. When they talk about their experiences and achievements, they are often compared to how life is ‘easy’ in the village ‘back home’. Migrants continued to emphasize how money was earned through hard work in Russia and wanted acknowledgement by those who remained at home. However, as Levitt (ibid, p. 91) explained, migrants cannot ignore ‘the social sanctions’ that they would have to face had they turned their backs on their families.

In order to further illustrate this point I discuss three different tois that family members attended and hosted over the period I lived with them. Toi remittance dynamics received little, but growing attention in the study of Kyrgyzstan’s migration (cf. Rubinov,
Remittances portray the diversity and complexity of family and kinship relations and how transnational practices ‘ebb and flow’ reacting to specific incidents in family life, illustrating how family dynamics must be studied ‘as a process, not an event’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1012). These cases show that culture is ‘the conduit enabling remittances to be invested into local spaces’ (Rubinov, 2012, p. 139). However, in my research, even though tois, feasts, and celebrations are seen as meaningful in local relationships, some villagers continued to find ways to forge kin ties without asking migrant family members for remittances and sometimes actively avoided remittances. As the following cases show, lifecycle events constitute and perpetuate transnational family lives and practices. They demonstrate the dependence-independence balance between the stayers and the movers, by materializing family connections in the absence of migrant family members, and by affecting the social status of movers, creating new identities and unsettling gender- and age-based hierarchies.

**Toi in a Village: Maintaining Ties with Kin despite Being Cashless**

Mira was offered a ride to a distant kin’s wedding celebration in another village, which she could not have afforded to attend on her own. Although these villages were only an hour’s drive from each other, Mira spoke with regret that ‘these days’ only celebrations such as these or funerals brought kin together. She often compared conditions to the Soviet times when, in her view, life was easier with regular affordable public transportation facilitating more frequent visits to kin. Her brother picked us up and drove us directly to a local market where other guests were preparing their gift packages. Three more women entered the van, and I was introduced to them as ‘our girl’. Following the greetings, the women briskly discussed the contents of their bags. One of the elder women (in her late 50s) said she brought a ‘good’ headscarf and brought 1,000 KGS (14 GBP) as her koshumcha [additional money] because her husband had visited the newlyweds and celebrated the night before. Because he had not brought anything with him, she stressed that her ‘bag’ and money complemented her husband’s visit. Another woman planned to give 200 KGS (2.8 GBP) köründük [payment to see the bride] and a bag of goodies, and the third woman intended to give much more because she had been selected to be the young couple’s ökül apa [godmother]. She brought several kilograms of candy as chachaar [confetti] to throw on the newlyweds before and after the bride’s hair would be

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40 Ermek attended tois selectively. Mira often argued with Ermek, trying to convince him to go together. However, Ermek believed that one person could equally represent the family. He also seemed to have also avoided tois because of the potential alcohol consumption, which was often abused, and therefore affected his condition for days.
braided [chach öörüü] and two wedding bands, which was an atypical but growing practice for godmothers. Mira, on the other hand, discussed and negotiated with the other women what she should do as she did not have any cash. Her bag was composed of a bottle of vodka and some candy from home, a jooluk [headscarf] borrowed from kin, and a box of cookies borrowed from her sister.

I was wary about Mira’s cashlessness although she had four migrant children. She rejected my offer of cash. I began to realize that cashlessness was a daily reality for many in the village, and yet women found ways of preparing bags by borrowing, exchanging, or using domestic resources. The women’s discussion revealed that the headscarf was the only common denominator in their gift bags. Often women had a repository of headscarves from various celebrations, which meant that many re-gifted them. However, the amount of köründük women presented to a host was based not only on their financial situation, but also on the nature and history of kin, family, and social network relations between participants. Family and kin often reciprocated what they received in the past, but each tie was specific. The festivity brought together about 70 women and children, most of whom lived in the same village. While it was a celebration only for women, about a dozen men were outside the house boiling meat and cooking plov [rice and meat dish] in a 20-litre pot. After a daylong consumption of food and celebration, each woman was given an ustukan bag full of leftover food from the host’s table including bread, plov, boiled meat, and candy. Barely awake, Mira only then remembered and expressed hope that her family was doing alright in her absence. She fretted, ‘This is how fall is here! It is a season of festivities; it is much harder to cook regularly during this season, we end up eating food from guesting’. Mira admitted her husband’s recent scolding of her not having cooked ‘hot’ meals, especially during the chilly autumn. As someone who rarely cooked, Ermek relied on his wife and children for meals. Mira was able to balance her absence by bringing the ustukan to her family. But these days, she was torn between multiple visits, sometimes several per week, which strained her family relations, postponed her household chores, and burdened her financially as well.

This case demonstrates how maintaining kinship relations was considered imperative in the village. It also shows that even actual cashlessness did not prohibit one’s opportunity to stay in touch [katysh] with kin. We might then ask why, given the stress and the cost, villagers nonetheless consider it vital to participate in tois. Many people in Alcha stressed that not attending kin’s celebrations were fraught with uiat [shame] for ‘dropping out of existing ties [katysh]’ of kinship and communal networks in which villagers were embedded. But also, it was the kind of ‘everydayness’ that Lefebvre and Levich (1987) suggested leads to ‘mundane’ and ‘banal’; these numerous tois defined the
families’ daily realities and the meaning of life that made them content. In fact, towards the end of the toi, Mira openly expressed her discontent to the hostess, a distant kin, over her missing of Mira’s toi in previous years. In a monologue that made the hostess uncomfortable in front of the few remaining guests at the end of evening, Mira expressed her displeasure that the hostess did not attend either of her sons’ wedding celebrations although she had been formally invited. Then Mira stressed, ‘It’s the gesture that matters; I did not expect you to bring anything [jön ele kelseng bolmok], but just to be present’, suggesting that she should have come empty-handed, assuming that was her kin’s reason for her absence. The display of emotions speaks of quickly changing conditions and normative structures for family and kinship kaytsh [relations]. The next day, over cups of tea Mira explained that ‘it is how we, Kyrgyz, are!’ clarifying that relatives ‘have to’ show support to each other, otherwise you drop out of the network. There is a visible shift and ambiguity in belonging to kinship networks, a form of ‘relativizing’ that Bryceson and Vuorela (2002b) offered. It is used to refer to ‘the ways in which individuals establish, maintain, or curtail ties to specific family members’ when ‘individuals actively pursue or neglect blood ties’, or how needs push individuals to ‘strategically choose which connections to emphasize and which to let aside’ (p. 14).

This picture does not portray the migrants’ immediate presence. Some days, life back home flows without a single mention of migrant children, without a call from them, or without discussing them over meals because families are carried away with the daily routines of cooking, preparing and cleaning the table as visitors appear, taking care of younger children, preparing for classes, making beds, etc. Although Mira mentioned that she asked for money whenever she needed it for celebrations, I often noticed how she thoughtfully negotiated her coping strategies in cashless situations. Although she could understand her kin’s inability to come celebrate due to a lack of resources, Mira highlighted the importance of and reinforced the traditional values of giving blessings [bata berip] during toi, the primary expectation of invited guests. The fact that Mira found herself in the analogous situation of not wanting to attend a toi empty-handed and yet she found a way to do so explains her powerful resentment. Mira’s speech was a rare instance of an open articulation of a problem between kin. It reflected the recognition that kinship relationships should be fluid. It was not just identifying that you have kin, but it was about, as Finch (2007, p. 70) said ‘demonstrating that relationships between individuals are effective in a family-like way’. This case vividly demonstrates how non-migrants also actively avoid making demands of their migrant children, negotiating their own ways through loans, debts, or the economy of favours (cf. Ledeneva, 2006). This case serves as an important contribution to our understanding of non-migrant’s agency, where
the lack of resources creates situations when maintaining the balance between dependence and independence (cf. Finch and Mason, 1993) among stayers and movers becomes challenging. The stayers find ways to show ‘resiliency’ that allow them to survive, as Montgomery (2013b) argued in his reflections of how Central Asians’ lives are made meaningful. His protagonist Janibek explained how, when times are difficult and uncertain, he would adapt to changing circumstances, but while he could not find a job to sustain his family, he did not give up, but showed his ‘contentness’ in having ‘friends and family’ and in the fact that ‘we live’ (ibid, p. 482).

### An In-law’s Anniversary Toi: Manifesting Migrants’ Proxy Presence

One night, during dinner, Mira informed her husband Ermek that Askar’s in-laws from Kel village invited 15 of their kin to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their *kuda* [male in-law], Askar’s father-in-law. Mira warned me that the conversation might be unpleasant:

**ERMEK:** Who would go? It’s too far!

**MIRA:** There are plenty of kin willing to go. (*Winking at me, Mira paused waiting for Ermek’s response who continued dining.*)

**ERMEK:** Why fifteen?! We could just go the three of us! (*Two of them and their grandson, then corrected*), ‘well, [my] nephew could drive if I will drink.

**MIRA:** They invited to a restaurant. After the celebration, they invited to stay with them overnight to celebrate their newly built house. (*She accented on the toi.*)

Ermek openly criticized his wife for assuming that 15 kin would have time and resources to celebrate. Mira did not confront him openly. Later, she explained, ‘I know my husband well by now’, realizing that too much talk meant further confrontation – they rarely agreed on things right away. Over the next two weeks, I observed how their discussion unfolded. Mira spent hours on the phone with her kin and migrant children actively preparing, even discussing details with neighbours. She admitted planning was difficult without Ermek’s support and knowledge. For that reason, she spent most days in the girls’ room, which Ermek rarely entered. Mira was driven by her ‘moral calculus between shame and pride’ (Rubinov, 2014, pp. 192-3) as she convinced kin to attend the *toi*. Ermek’s concerns oriented towards alleviating the pressure placed on kin, a similar moral calculus, but differently evaluated. This was not an obligatory rite, such as a funeral, but a matter of
choice based on existing histories of kin obligations. Attending the toi required over four hours of travel to Kel from Alcha, as well as the inherent costs.

Family practices are embedded in power relations. There is a ‘complex intersection between personal losses and gains that any analysis of power within transnational social fields must grapple with’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1013). Kyrgyz often refer to the proverb: one suggests ‘a man is the family head, but a woman turns his neck whichever way she desires’. There are many interpretations of this common saying, but it powerfully implies the woman’s key role in shaping family practices. Likewise, the following case is a testament to Mira’s indispensable role in her household. Her husband, Ermek, was nominally the family head, but planning, organizing, and executing anything in the house was managed by Mira. Riitta Jallinoja’s (2008, p. 107) analysis of togetherness, would define Mira as the ‘intermediary of information’, holding a special position in family configurations. This role of intermediary did not stretch over borders; in Yakutsk, her oldest son performed the role. Although Mira talked on the phone with other sons as well as both daughters-in-law (and her sister in Yakutsk), it was Askar’s decisions that made things happen, and only Mira seemed to exert noticeable power over him.

Her son Askar was also against all 15 kin attending the toi. He was fretful, calling regularly from Yakutsk to express his discontent. This ambivalence raises the question of why Mira was organizing her kin to attend an optional toi if she did not have the money to attend. During one such talk, Mira hung up on him when Askar started explaining how they [migrant siblings] envisioned spending their saved earnings towards an upcoming important project. Soon after, I learned that Askar’s situation was more complex. Not only did Askar feel obliged to remit toward his parents’ toi expenses, but his wife (Aidai) and sister-in-law (Jyldyz) were simultaneously sending even more money to their parents in Kel for the organization of the anniversary. This case offers a powerful image of a young migrant family, where each partner remits from Russia to their ‘families of origin’ in order for their parents to celebrate together in Kyrgyzstan. The next day, Aidai called Mira from Yakutsk, ‘apologizing’ for her husband Askar’s manners, explaining that he felt bad complaining about money and was affected by his mother’s reaction. Mira disclosed to Aidai that several kin were going to participate in the toi. Mira’s task was tricky in that she needed not only to determine her kin’s availability, but also to ascertain their prospective contribution of raja [reciprocal payment] or koshumcha [additional money] for the toi.41 Once Mira confirmed a total sum of 10,000 [143 GBP], Aidai offered to send the amount from her own savings (see Table 3.1) because Askar refused to touch their ‘barely

41 Raja is an agreed upon sum of money that kin, neighbours or colleagues agree on reciprocating in cases of major rites of passage such as weddings, funerals, etc.
accumulated’ joint savings. Mira, however, needed cash immediately for the preparations. She had to purchase gifts for the in-laws and presents for the housewarming, but once she collected the *raja* from her kin at the *toi*, she could pay it back to Aidai and Askar. Thus, it could be compared with a personal loan or a credit card transaction that would be eventually repaid, although without interest. It is key to understand the complexity of these arrangements. Mira prepared to attend her in-law’s anniversary without a single Somin her pocket, but she invested hours of emotional energy and numerous phone units to ‘decently represent our relatives in front of the in-laws, this is a matter of namys [pride]’! Aidai, on the other hand, was also interested in maintaining her husband’s family’s reputation, and she therefore helped not only her own parents, but also her husband’s parents.

Gifts were more affordable in Bishkek’s ‘Dordoi’ market, well-known as the biggest bazaar in Central Asia. Mira therefore asked her sister, who lived in Bishkek, to assist her with the preparations. For a full day, they communicated via mobile phones as her sister purchased gifts while Mira directed the process, ‘*Jakshyraak jooluk al!* [Buy a better headscarf!]’ without flowers, with ornaments, according to latest fashion *stay away from the Chinese stuff*. Mira had agreed with Aidai to wire the money directly to Bishkek to avoid paying double bank transfer fees. Meanwhile, Mira also continued confirming kin attendance by phone – nobody used text messaging or emails. Although she had invited more than 15 guests, she hoped that eventually people would drop out. At one point, she realized that she had forgotten to invite her second son’s in-laws. Somehow she knew from other villagers that they would be engaged in another celebration that day, but it was still important to call and formally invite them, ‘It is up to them whether they come or not, but we should invite them regardless’. When I asked her ‘why she continued calling kin while she already had 15 confirmations’, Mira explained that it mattered to extend personal invitations to avoid potential blame, accusations, and grudges in the future. Until she had received 15 confirmations, Mira did not discuss any of the details with her husband, fearing and hoping to avoid his harsh reaction. When Mira finally disclosed the details during dinner when he was seemingly in a good mood, she received an angry response, ‘You invited all those people, now you find transportation for all of them!’ Often it seemed that Mira and Ermek lived in different realities, although they lived under the same roof and spent the majority of the time in the house together. Mira manipulated her husband by keeping him distanced ‘here’, while her family members ‘there’ were well informed of the developments, in a well-managed transnational alliance. Ermek remained unaware while Mira ‘took care’ of things surreptitiously to avoid conflict. And yet, it was the expression of his opinion that Mira considered conflictual, not the
actual content. Resolving things peacefully was her ideal way of dealing with family matters.

In Mira’s words, Kyrgyz people try to maintain ‘respectful’ relationships with in-laws, which means keeping them at arms’ length. Nonetheless, Mira’s deep investment in this event speaks to a case where relations were made visible, remembered and spoken about. In-laws also can join reciprocal support relations of most important life-cycle events, especially funerals. Visiting the in-laws happens rarely, but when it does, presents and gifts are carefully chosen (see Table 3.1). Living with Mira’s family allowed me to track how the family prepared for meeting with their eldest son’s parents-in-law. The celebration was organized in the absence of their children, who were financing it. Both Aidai and Askar were in Russia, calling daily after work to check on progress. Although the celebration could have been postponed until their arrival in December, Aidai’s parents were also keen on celebrating in late autumn to take advantage of the ‘good meat’ and fresh harvest.

| Table 3.1: The List of Gifts Brought for an In-Law’s Anniversary Toi |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| **Remittances**                  | **Gift Item**                         |
| 2,500 KGS (36 GBP)              | Coat for male in-law *kuda* (Aidai’s father) |
| 600 KGS (9 GBP)                 | Kalpak [national male hat] for male in-law |
| 1,000 KGS (14 GBP)              | Coat for female in-law (*küdägïï*, Aidai’s mother) |
| 350KGS (5 GBP)                  | Jooluk [headscarf] for female in-law |
| 500KGS (7 GBP)                  | Jumper for eldest in-law (Aidai’s brother) |
| 600KGS (9 GBP)                  | Jumper for second in-law (Aidai’s sister) |
| 600KGS (9 GBP)                  | Jumper for third in-law (Aidai’s sister) |
| 1,700KGS (24 GBP)               | Food bag (candy, cookies, 6 litres of vodka, bread) |
| 200KGS (3 GBP)                  | Cell phone units for Mira’s sister |
| 400KGS (6 GBP)                  | Lunch for Mira’s sister while she shopped |

**Total Remittances: 8,450 KGS (120 GBP)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-remittances</th>
<th><strong>Gift Item</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6,000KGS (85 GBP) market price</td>
<td>Sheep (one, alive) from the barn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9,000KGS (128 GBP)</td>
<td>Carpet for the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000KGS (143 GBP)</td>
<td><em>Raja</em> [kin’s reciprocated sum for the toi]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total non-remittances: 19,000-25,000 KGS (357 GBP)**

**Super Total Expenses for the Toi: 33,450 KGS (477 GBP)**

This case demonstrates how transnational family relations are made visible in two particular ways. In the context of life-cycle events, family commitments are negotiated over time. First, feasts acted as a way of constituting migrant members’ presence by proxy. Migrant support was displayed by non-migrant family members to the wider community present at those tois. Mainly, migrants were remembered during the uttering of toasts, for instance, when ‘thanks’ were verbalized and stories were told of their ‘hard lives’ in Russia, their successes, and of their provision of family support. Eliza Isabaeva (2011, p. 544) offered an interesting discussion of how Sopu Korgon migrants in southern
Kyrgyzstan were referred to as ‘being in the field’ [talaada versus talaalap ketti] pointing to how the boundary between migrants’ ‘wandering about’ and ‘wandering off’ was ‘dangerously thin’, suggesting that while migration opens a space for possibilities, it also offers uncertainties. While toi provided sites for praising migrants as ‘do-gooders’ [ananayin, or molodets] (Rubinov, 2014, p. 194), such gatherings also tested kin relationships. Because feasts gathered a wide configuration of kin, tensions, strains, and gossips were clarified and contested in the presence of kin. Thus, feasts served as a site for migrant life to be on display.

It is useful to think with Finch and Mason (1993), who questioned whether ‘in practice, family responsibilities emerge from a process of negotiating’ and whether they are implicit or explicit (p. 64). They argued that negotiation is important in developing family responsibilities; yet, their examples represented a range of methods of negotiating from fully explicit to fully implicit, including a mix of both. In the context of transnational lives, my findings showed that kin negotiated by forming transnational alliances, or unions, when certain family members formed tighter ties and others were dropped from the circle of negotiation. This contrasts equating negotiation with talk, and as Finch and Mason suggested, we need to understand what the presence or absence of talk might mean in the context of specific negotiations (ibid., p. 66). Mira’s exclusion of Ermek from the discussion of the toi preparations, in her words, was an attempt to protect her husband from being worried. At certain points, Aidai also dropped Askar from discussions. Ultimately, Mira and Aidai strategized, bypassing their husbands in order to manage the domestic patriarchy. In her study of male-dominated societies, Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) argued that women ‘strategize within a set of concrete constraints’, engaging in what she called ‘the patriarchal bargain’ (p. 275). By mobilizing specific sets of kin, and dropping others, women managed patriarchal structures actively and passively resisted their subordination.

Although migration from Kyrgyzstan is more gender-balanced (Rubinov, 2010; Reeves, 2011b) than the Uzbek migration to Russia (Aiupova, 2012; Abashin, 2014) and the Tajik realities (Hegland, 2010; Bennett, 2013), Aksana Ismailbekova (2014) argued that ‘the patrilineal order is maintained in the absence of men by their brides’ (p. 385). While I agree that younger daughters-in-law struggle in negotiating their positions within their husbands’ families, Ismailbekova’s portrait of kelins denied them of their agency. Initially, Aidai also excluded Askar from decision-making when she collaborated with her mother-in-law; these women felt greater responsibility in exercising control over the organization of family events. Aidai was equally invested in making sure that her husband’s family was represented well in front of her ‘own’ family to boost her standing
in front of her natal family. It is essential to note that Aidai, and her younger sister, Jyldyz, who lived and worked by her side in Yakutsk, were also sending money to their parents in Kel to assist their preparations to host their in-laws. In fact, Aidai’s parents had recently moved in to their newly built house using ‘remittances of their younger daughter’. This detail was stressed for a reason. Although Aidai initially helped her natal family, eventually it became her younger sister’s responsibility when Aidai’s married status shifted her expected loyalties and responsibilities. However, it does not mean that Aidai completely stopped sending money to her parents, but when it happened, it was done without her husband’s knowledge.

In total, a one-day celebration in Kel required a month-long investment of monetary and emotional resources from both sides. Mira invested physical and emotional energy and time to organize her kin and to deal with her husband. Overall, she felt happy that she received the expected support from the kin who attended the birthday toi. The 10,000 KGS (143 GBP) that Aidai sent for the toi preparation was recouped in the form of rajas from kin. While I could only guess how much Aidai, or more likely Jyldyz, sent their parents in Kel to prepare for the visit, I estimated that Mira’s family spent at least 33,450 KGS [477 GBP] in toi preparations, which could have been more without kin support (see Table 3.1). This sum could have been much less if kin had brought clothing and presents from home. Mira, however, stressed the need to purchase gifts ‘according to the latest fashion’ because it would be uiat (shame), which in turn, facilitated remittances, and monetized the gifts. When she began planning this toi, Mira did not know how much support she would actually receive, and she personally negotiated with each invitee. Mira did not have to display her family in front of her in-laws as they had migrants in their family as well, but it was a way of doing family practices that ‘worked’. She stressed, ‘That is what you have to do when visiting in-laws’. ‘We showed respect to them, and they showed us respect in return’, she concluded. In brief, Mira felt she had to demonstrate to her son that the celebration was not just about ‘expenses’, but also about kin support and money ‘coming in’ at the time when they needed it, ‘that’s what relatives do’, as the three quarters of toi expenses were contributed by kin and friends. All in all, five migrants’ salaries in Russia contributed to two sets of families exchanging presents over an opulent anniversary dinner during a one-day toi in a Kyrgyz village. Hence, this vignette clearly demonstrated the puzzle of transnational families’ investments into celebrations often seen as ‘wasteful’ and ‘irrational’. It critically showed that celebration should be seen as a set of meaningful and important ways of sustaining and forging kin ties. In doing so, the vignette identified how women absent and ‘left behind’ took charge of the organizational and emotional aspects of celebrations. These women negotiated the important decisions
regarding who would attend and what gifts they should bring, critically demonstrating that women are powerful agents of transnational family relations. Most importantly, women strategized and juggled their tasks by actively resisting their subordination within families, reinforcing the extended family values. Finally, money physically materialized family relations in the context of physical absence.

‘Tülö emes ele toidoi boldu’: Constructing Homes Multi-locally, Materializing Remittances

An increasing body of migration literature has noted the global tendencies of house-building projects by migrants in their home communities (Levitt, 2001; Pellow, 2003; Pribilsky, 2007; Gardner, 2008; Thieme, 2008b; Dalakoglou, 2010; Boccagni, 2013b). In 2005, Bichsel and colleagues’ study of Sai village in Batken province of Kyrgyzstan established that little money was spent on house building as remittances primarily covered household subsistence needs and fulfilling social obligations of lifecycle feasts. Years later, Madeleine Reeves’s (2011c, p. 570) captivating analysis of Sokh migrants in the same province of south-western Kyrgyzstan reflected on ‘home as a space of socio-spatial continuity’. Reeves offered numerous examples from her ethnography of how domestic spaces were lived by women in absence of their migrant men to demonstrate ‘the importance of houses as sites for the investment of remittances’ (ibid., p. 570). ‘Home’ can be seen as a ‘space’, ‘domain’, and ‘place’ where ways of being are enacted, where family rituals are done, and where migrant transfers are materialized – all of which are essential family practices that in turn require rebuilding, restructuring, doing remont [upgrading], and adding rooms in addition to building or purchasing new homes. In this section, I present another set of combined celebrations that accompanied the purchase of a flat in Bishkek and commemoration of migrant children’s visit home. I argue that ‘the remittance house’ (Lopez, 2010), in this case, the remittance flat, marked migrants’ enduring attachment to the country of origin (cf. Dalakoglou, 2010). Transnational family members’ house projects should be seen as ‘home-making’ (Riccio, 2002; Rosales, 2010; Boccagni, 2013b) practices. This particular case facilitated family and kin ties through ritual economy.

Migrants’ home visits were highly anticipated on both sides. Askar returned from Yakutsk to Alcha in chilly mid-November. The entire family tracked his air travel from Yakutsk to Bishkek via Moscow. The family greeted him with his favourite meal.

42 Literally, ‘it was not just a ritual (a modest observance), but it was like a toi (a decent celebration)’.
Everyone wondered how his three-year-old son would react to their first meeting and whether he would accept him as his ‘papa’. Nurik was well prepared, but shied away from his father. Over dinner, Askar eloquently talked about Yakutsk and how it had been actively developing: roads, new houses, airport, railroads, shops, and bridges over the Lena River were being rebuilt. His photographs mainly showed him with brothers and friends at work in a construction firm and in front of buildings in Yakutsk they claimed to have built. His stories painted life in Yakutsk as very difficult due to weather conditions, but as adjustable [könös bolot]. Tasting only a portion of his bazarlyk [presents from afar], a half-metre of frozen smoked fish and caviar, Mira made sure that the rest was put aside for kin and neighbours to try when they dropped by over the next few days to greet Askar.

Migrants carried presents, parcels, and wads of cash. I learned that Askar brought a large amount of cash – to save on bank transfer fees – camouflaged under heavy winter clothes. He discussed with his father plans to complete their half-built houses in Bishkek’s new settlements [novostroiki], where two years earlier the boys had bought land and started building the future homes of Askar and the second son Rahat’s families, to which it was anticipated the sons would return. In stages, they sent money to buy materials, arranging with kin and friends to build the foundation, erected fences, and the house walls. Finally, following the latest trends [akyrky moda menen], colourful roof-tiles completed the structure, which was considered ‘done for now,’ while the brothers repeated the process with the second house. In 2012, when my fieldwork was ending, I witnessed Mira and Ermek’s ashar, communal assistance (relatives, friends, and neighbours) to start the house construction by laying the foundation of their dream house in their yard. This new house would replace their current house, where the youngest son Janat would be married and live together with his parents.

Temporary visits home also temporarily reconfigured household responsibilities. Askar’s presence in the family was immediately felt as he took over many of the external household chores. One snowy day, I joined him and his neighbourhood friend (who had been to Yaktusk before) tending cattle in the sarai [barn]. Dressed in fufaika [warm outerwear] he had brought back from Russia, Askar was gratified with the livestock-feeding routine he had missed and longed for in Yakutsk. Scraping off fresh dung from the barn ground, collecting it in buckets, dumping it near the potato fields, gathering fresh hay from stacks to refresh depleting food, and taking the cattle to a spring in the backyard – this had been mainly Mira’s routine in the absence of her three sons. Standing in the middle of their renovated sarai, Askar explained how it was one of their largest

43 Yakutsk was planning to host Asia Children’s Games (‘Deti Azii’) in 2012, thus, city construction was in full force.
investments before buying land for houses. Rebuilding the barn was essential for several reasons. First, built in the 1940s by their grandparents, the previous barn collapsed because it was never renovated. Second, they envisioned a much larger and more ‘modern’ barn to hold their cattle, which they expected to increase in number. Migration’s effect on pastoral livelihoods and animal husbandry in southern Kyrgyzstan was ‘an important source of income for [the] rural population’ (Schoch et al., 2010, p. 212). Talking to many villagers with cattle in Alcha and nearby, I learned that buying cattle cheaply, fattening them, and reselling them was a typical village enterprise. However, many factors affected its success: the length of winters, the hay harvest, seasonal hay prices, and cash flow. To my questions about whether investing in houses was typical among migrants in Yakutsk, Askar recounted that ‘many have been buying houses there in Yakutia’ and doing the ‘same back here’. What he said next proved to be a theme throughout many of our discussions, ‘People [Kyrgyz migrants in Russia] see their future back home here in Kyrgyzstan eventually, but for the time being they are trying their best to earn as much as possible there’.

Besides two half-built houses in Bishkek, Askar and his siblings decided to invest in an apartment in Bishkek. Askar brought the equivalent of nearly 40 thousand US dollars in Russian rubles, which this family’s migrant children pooled together over the years. Mira was elated at how her children dreamt about owning their own place in Bishkek ‘because when they travel [to Bishkek] they are dependent on relatives’, stressing how ‘today it is much harder to stay with relatives for more than a couple of days’. ‘Batpaisyang’ [you do not fit], she emphasized, ‘you fit one day, but the second day is already stretching it, therefore, [my] sons agreed among themselves that getting a common apartment would be appropriate’. Mira and Ermek had little involvement in making these decisions, which was a fascinating example of children’s agency in strategic planning. However, what followed with the purchase of the house was fully in Mira’s hands. During her two-week trip to Bishkek in search of the apartment, I stayed with Baktygul and Kiyal in Alcha while we remained in touch with Mira over the phone. Just a week after they moved into the apartment in Bishkek, she planned and hosted a tülö, which is a ritual that can be conducted for many reasons. In this case, it would be a housewarming party to commemorate the purchase of a home because they were not ready to celebrate a ‘tam toi’ [a house toi], Mira felt expected to commemorate by soliciting their close kin’s blessings. Because moving into the house coincided with her son Janat and daughter-in-law Aidai’s visit from Yakutsk, Mira felt obliged to invite kin for a small gathering, a tülö. For the

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44Built in 2011, the barn was completed for approximately 50,000 KGS [715 GBP] including the purchase of materials, and hired human labour.
migrant family members, however, the tülo would still incur unnecessary expenses. This situation caused tension between Mira and her children, which she explained in detail. Upon return to Alcha, to my inquiries about how the festivities went, Mira responded that because kin could not all come in one day, they hosted guests over four consecutive days:

MIRA: Everything went well. Tülo emes ele toidoi boldu. It was not just a tülo, but it was almost a toi. The table was full of food; it was well done. Aidai has learned many good recipes. They also brought some caviar from Yakutia, there were many people at the table who have never tried caviar before! (She expressed her surprise, but also pride over how diverse the table was prepared.)

MEDINA: How wonderful!

MIRA: Also, I came out on a winning side. I don’t owe anything to my son. I returned every tyiyn [penny] borrowed from my son for the housewarming parties!

Mira wrote down item-by-item the gifts they had received for the housewarming parties throughout the four days. She also counted the amounts of money [raja/koshumcha] given by kin ‘on both sides’, which I transcribed (see Table 3.2). The table below does not intend to offer a thorough economic analysis of tois, gifts, and reciprocity, but it demonstrates the paradox of tülos. First, although tülos are seen as modest observations of a ritual, Mira admitted they had a ‘toi-like’ tülo, meaning that the family displayed hospitality engaging in a conspicuous consumption of food, and the celebrations extended for four days, instead of the previously planned two days. Second, a mother borrowed money from her migrant sons to host a tülo, welcoming migrant children as well as conducting a culturally expected and valued ritual, because she believed she had to reinforce the traditions. It was an example of how migrant and kin support of tois reinforced ‘mutual indebtedness’ in which Kyrgyz families remained embedded (Werner, 1998). Mira balanced her dependence on money by performing the tülo as she saw appropriate for her family, which was to display her migrant children and her family’s successes in front of extended kin. Such celebrations should be studied contextually as there can be regional variations in how tülos are conducted. Generally, families invited those kin, neighbours, and friends with whom they had established ties over the years. Tülos were primarily hosted to bring kin together, especially the elderly, and receive their blessings and good wishes for a variety of reasons (new beginnings, illness, accident, reaching ages that are multiples of 12, etc.). Commemorations took the forms of sacrificing an animal, remembering the dead, and asking for blessings from the elderly. These events provided opportunities for kin to reciprocate the raja money among kin.

In a cash-deficit economy with high unemployment, the monetization of gift giving (Botoeva, 2014; Rubinov, 2010, 2014) was evidenced by Mira’s open articulation of a
preference for cash, instead of housewarming presents for the apartment. The number of sets of dishes received spoke to the circulation of gifts widely practiced among Kyrgyz families, but also to the inability to pay in cash. And while the family preferred the cash, material gifts were also acceptable. Money clearly had a transformative impact on family relations. Nonetheless, there were kin who brought presents. Rubinov (2010) noted that *tois* could be done with a calculation that the hosting household could be repaid for hosting the event; and yet, *tülös* were not organized for profit. However, Mira’s case was fascinating, as it demonstrated new forms of family negotiations around money. Monetary dealings between family members strained family relations, but they also were justified when used strategically and calculatingly to achieve combined family goals.

To demonstrate why a mother borrowed money from her son to conduct a *tülö* for the new house, we need to understand the strength of kin obligations. Rubinov (2014, p. 193) explained this phenomenon eloquently, when as if built homes, in this case, purchased apartments, ‘could not be lived in’ without having celebrated it communally. While Ermek expressed reservations, Mira once again was adamant about commemorating the joyous safe return of their children and receiving family blessings before inhabiting the house. Thus, while she shared her financial arrangements with me, she was not prepared to publicly disclose them to others, because Mira agreed to the discreet arrangement of borrowing money in order to fulfil her parental and communal expectations. Mira openly borrowed 25,000 KGS (357 GBP) from her son Askar, who managed the siblings’ combined earnings. She displayed pride and relief that she ‘had promised and returned every *tyiyn* [penny] of it’ disproving of her children’s initial scepticism:

MIRA: Now we need to do *tülös* here as well for *tuugandarga* [relatives] who could not or would not go to Bishkek.

MEDINA: But why would you invite [kin from here] if they are not going to see the apartment, [is not that the goal]?

MIRA: Well, they will see it when they will come to Bishkek [in the future], but it is *yrym* [a customary practice/law] to have a *tülö* regardless of whether they actually see it or not. They will give us their *bata* [blessing], that is what is important! <silence> For example, if I invited all the guests to Bishkek, very few of them would have come, or only one person per family would go to Bishkek even out of those families who would be able to travel that far. But if I invite guests here, [kin] will come and be together with other relatives [*tuugandar menen birge*]. It is also such a good chance for kin to see each other if they have not met each other for a long time and have a merry gathering together than [each visiting] separately.

Mira’s accent on ‘returning what’s owed’ to her migrant children to allow them to fulfil their planned projects spoke to the moral challenges that money posed for families. Mira’s
ability to spend exactly the amount of money that she collected from kin in the forms of *raja, koshumcha*, or gifts suggested that families were endeavouring to display hospitality without overcommitting financial resources. Thus, *toi* remittances facilitated the fulfilment of culturally expected communal *toi* practices, with careful attention paid to being able to repay the loaned sum.

Most definitely, *toi* cultivated ‘active kinship’ and were meaningful in two important ways for Kyrgyz families. First, get-togethers brought *tuugandar* [relatives] together allowing them to witness kin *rites of passage*, the socialization of young and old relatives reinforcing their ancestry and belonging. Mira pointed out that kin were dispersed and had been challenged in regularly seeing each other, therefore, she felt compelled to create suitable conditions for them to gather, for *yrym*’s sake, to *actually* get their blessings and wishes. These were the moments that made relations ‘family-like’ (Finch and Mason, 1993). Morgan’s family practices usefully explained ‘a greater appreciation for time and space’ because of its emphasis on doing (2013, p. 89):

Deeds and activities take place in particular temporal and spatial settings. Throwing a ball can take place anywhere and at any time but only with the aid of a particular pair of spectacles can it become a family practice, something conducted in the park or the garden or on holiday between family members.

Mira accommodated kin’s circumstances by re-inviting them for the third and fourth day. It was a ‘family display’ (Finch, 2007) in that despite her migrant children’s desire to rest upon their return from Russia, Mira wanted them to reconnect with wider kin and to be in touch with kin in order to make their proxy presence real. My research findings demonstrate that the transnational family can be very broadly conceived and spatially dispersed, absent over a period of time, but in need of active physical unification. In her study of managing kinship over long distances, Mason (2004, p. 427) argued that the visit is important ‘symbolically and practically’ for two reasons: for one, it ‘facilitated the cultivation and demonstration of active kinship networks’, and it ‘helped to confirm a sense of belonging’ to homeland; visits also involved ‘sensitive sets of negotiations and practices’.

Second, an official invitation to celebrate or commemorate implied that hosts performed their hospitality by offering a special meal, which in turn compelled guests (i.e. relatives) to reciprocate *raja* based on the existing strength of ties and the histories between wider *tuugandar* [relatives]. It is important to realize here that the absence of an invitation to a celebration meant that relatives with existing monetary ties might not necessarily reciprocate *raja* or *koshumcha*:
Table 3.2: List of Tülö Expenditures versus Monetary and Non-Monetary Gifts for Tülö

### Day 1 Ermek’s Kin as Guests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount spent</th>
<th>Description of Expenditures</th>
<th>Amount received</th>
<th>Description of Proceeds/Returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10,000 KGS (143 GBP)</td>
<td>Beef purchased in Alcha</td>
<td>8,000 KGS (114 GBP)</td>
<td>Raja (kin payments, varied between 500-3,000 KGS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400 KGS (5.7 GBP)</td>
<td><em>Toi boorsok</em> [pastries] made by a neighbour</td>
<td>400 KGS (5.7 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: set of dishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 KGS (143 GBP)</td>
<td>Foods bought for the festive table</td>
<td>600 KGS (9 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: set of dishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin-made</td>
<td><em>Bulochka</em> [rolls] made by Mira’s sibling’s family</td>
<td>3,500 KGS (50 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: one-half of an entire sheep (pre-cooked)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin-made</td>
<td><em>Bozo</em> [10-litre drink] made by Ermek’s sister</td>
<td>2,500 KGS (36 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: oven-baked bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family-owned</td>
<td>One sheep, market price: 7,500 KGS (107 GBP)</td>
<td>4,500 KGS (64 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: carpet (2x3 meters)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Day 1 Expenditures: 20,400 KGS (291 GBP)  
Total Raja Received: 8,000 KGS (114 GBP)  
Total Estimate with Kin Support: 27,900 KGS (399 GBP)  
Total Estimate if Gifts were Monetized: 19,500 KGS (279 GBP)

### Day 2 Mira’s Kin as Guests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount spent</th>
<th>Description of Expenditures</th>
<th>Amount received</th>
<th>Description of Proceeds/Returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2,000 KGS (29 GBP)</td>
<td><em>Kem karchy</em>, additional produce to renew the table</td>
<td>20,000 KGS (286 GBP)</td>
<td>Raja ranging between 1,000-3,000 KGS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11,000 KGS (157 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: set of dishes (120 pieces)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Day 2 Expenditures: 2,000 KGS (29 GBP)  
Total Raja Received: 20,000 KGS (286 GBP)  
Total Estimate if Gifts were Monetized: 31,000 KGS (443 GBP)

### Day 3 Mixed Kin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount spent</th>
<th>Description of Expenditures</th>
<th>Amount received</th>
<th>Description of Proceeds/Returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2,000 KGS (29 GBP)</td>
<td><em>Kem karchy</em>, additional produce to renew the table</td>
<td>3,000 KGS (43 GBP)</td>
<td>Raja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2,500 KGS (36 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: set of dishes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Day 3 Expenditures: 2,000 KGS (29 GBP)  
Total Raja Received: 3,000 KGS (43 GBP)  
Total Estimate if Gifts were Monetized: 5,500 KGS (79 GBP)

### Day 4 Mixed Kin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount spent</th>
<th>Description of Expenditures</th>
<th>Amount received</th>
<th>Description of Proceeds/Returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>500 KGS (7 GBP)</td>
<td>Additional meat purchased</td>
<td>600 KGS (9 GBP)</td>
<td>Gift: set of dishes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Day 4 Expenditures: 500 KGS (7 GBP)  
Total Estimate if Gifts were Monetized: 600 KGS (9 GBP)

TOTAL Expenditures for 4 Days: 24,900 KGS (356 GBP)  
TOTAL Raja Received: 31,000 KGS (443 GBP)  
TOTAL Estimate with Kin Support: 32,400 KGS (463 GBP)  
TOTAL Estimate if Gifts were Monetized: 56,600 KGS (809 GBP)
MIRA: While our kin live here [in Alcha] and in Naryn, *alar ümtötööt-ta*, they will expect an invite, at least a tülö, if not a huge celebration.

MEDINA: Could you not do it at all?

MIRA: No, it would be a shame [*uiat bolmok*] not to. You can’t do that. You don’t have to do a toi if you can’t afford it, but a tülö is a good thing.

Although these customary kin obligations have undergone transformations due to growing poverty, unemployment, and economic instability, a simple obligation to acknowledge a purchase of a home remained important. Returning to Morgan, there is no such thing as ‘The Family’ (2013, pp. 2-3), families are what they do, and family roles can be enacted in different ways. It was especially true in those circumstances when families ‘were constantly undergoing change’ that it was unfair to reify concreteness; thus, families were studied as ‘family lives’, as ‘family events’, ‘family processes’ and ‘family practices’ (ibid., p. 3). But this act of doing was complicated by the economic and social conditions of many village households that lacked a fixed income. The 31,000 som *raja* that Mira collected fully covered the expenses for *toi* (see Table 3.2). However, as simple and as straightforward as the accounting might appear in the table, the complete process of *doing* these tülös was challenging physically, emotionally, and financially to the organizers, and the arrangements were continuously contested, negotiated, and re-negotiated between migrant children and parents. Initially, Askar and Janat were furious over their mother’s decision to invite ‘too many’ kin, which in their calculations was directly tied to considerable expenses and loss of their free time. That that they did not anticipate costs being ‘covered’ spoke to how little they understood about kin obligations and commitments. The *raja* gathered for the anniversary *toi* in the previous case, Mira used towards the household’s winter preparations. This time, in the presence of her sons, she was expected to return the collected cash given that the sum was lent to her, but also because her sons had ear-marked the money for other projects from the beginning. Askar’s plea for a symbolic tülö with ‘the closest kin, the elderly’ was initially accepted, but then transformed into ‘toi-like’ events with a ‘conspicuous consumption’ of food. The sons had many projects in mind – procuring primary construction materials for Janat’s house in Alcha, putting a roof on Rahat’s house in Bishkek, and arranging (i.e. paying bribes) for Rahat’s continued university enrolment in Naryn despite his absence. The apartment’s purchase was accompanied by emotionally charged arguments among family members over what to buy with the remaining funds. Janat and Aidai brought the equivalent of 30,000 KGS (429 GBP), which Janat envisioned spending on a television set, a refrigerator, and a sofa with armchairs. However, Mira insisted that instead of furniture, they should purchase good-quality curtains for both rooms, which led to days of
arguments over what was more important. Having purchased a tall sovremennyi [modern] refrigerator for 18,000 KGS (257 GBP) and a flat-screen television for 5,000 KGS (71 GBP), the boys could not resist their mother’s push for elegant curtains, as she told me jokingly, ‘He [Janat] apparently wanted a sofa to lie down on it and watch television, but the apartment needs to be presentable if we are expecting guests’. This deliberation represented a clash between the more traditional view held by Mira, who considered beautiful curtains covering the flat’s large windows to be far more important than having furniture. She prioritized the appearance of a well-appointed apartment in the eyes of potential guests and visitors over the comfort of soft furniture, rationalizing that in a Kyrgyz house, Kyrgyz guests can sit low on tŏshŏks, the customary way (see Figure 3.1). From his perspective as a resident of the apartment, Janat would have preferred comfortable furniture for resting. Migrant children might be earning salaries, but their parents still exercised power and influenced their decisions over how to spend their earnings.

The preceding three examples of tois that this particular family members attended, planned, and hosted demonstrated that relations practiced in familial and communal spaces and territories were valued (cf. Montgomery, 2013a). These three tois were different celebrations of family events that were meaningful and worth attending, organizing, and hosting. Some of the family and kinship responsibilities and obligations were performed with or without direct monetary support of migrant family members using support networks or accumulated sources. From the first example, we learned that relationships can be worked out, with or without resources, because keeping up kin relations is culturally expected and important. Although lacking resources at the time of the toi, Mira used her kinship network to reinforce her ties with the hostess and reminded her that relations can be maintained with little capital.

Family relations can be stretched and practiced transnationally. In line with Morgan (2013, p. 77), ‘spatial dimension of family practices is not confined to the place identified as home’ meaning that doing family was not limited to one physical location, but family practices can ‘extend beyond the home’. Performance of the family practices ‘does not always require a physical co-presence of the other’, homes can be ‘imagined’ due to disruptions as migration, war, or natural disasters (ibid., p. 77). Hereby, I challenge Morgan’s family practices by suggesting that this ethnography demonstrated that in the context of transnational family lives, transnational family practices have a way of anchoring migrant family members to home, and while the idea of the home can evolve over time, it remains a specific place to which they can return.
Conclusion

Transnationalism researchers admitted that narratives and practices of kin who stay in the countries of origin were important for understanding transnational families, but they were insufficiently analysed. Theoretically, the difficulty in defining this group, which varied from ‘non-migrants’, ‘stayers’, ‘left behind’, ‘home-based’, and ‘homeland kin’ indicates a gap in scholarship (Baldassar, 2007a, p. 279). I argue that (except for cases of children who do not always exercise agency in decision-making in Kyrgyz culture) non-migrant family members, pitied as ‘left behind’, were denied their agency in the media and in academic scholarship. By centring my analysis of toi celebrations of the remittance flat through Morgan’s theory of family practices, my empirical research demonstrated that in the context of Kyrgyzstani migration to Russia, family practices were oriented towards a physical location, contrary to Morgan’s argument. Kyrgyzstani transnational families divided across borders maintained ties through family projects that pivoted migrant families home, serving as a marker of their commitment to home. Engaging in multiple house-building projects, or owning flats in which to live, materialized families. Migrants constructed a physical place to which to return. After all, üi [house] was not just built to live in, but to start an üi-bülö, a house with its members, parents, and children. This explained the urgency of building siblings’ houses simultaneously.

Furthermore, family projects diversified remittances, creating a strain between stayers and movers over remittances’ allocation. Major remittance investments were seen as essential to celebrate with kin through hosting tois, or tülö. On the one hand, while the stayers may have seemed dependent on money transfers, due to their presence at home, stayers made important decisions and exercised their power, thereby challenging the notion that those ‘left behind’ are somehow ‘powerless’. On the other hand, women felt strongly about maintaining customary rituals displaying family relatedness in front of extended kin; thus, they were seen as persisting agents in stretching families transnationally. When important decisions needed to be taken, embedded in their subordinate positions within husband’s families, women exercised their power by withholding information from their husbands and manipulating ties with specific family members forming transnational alliances.

Migrants in Russia considered Kyrgyzstan to be their ‘home’ no matter how long they had lived in Russia and a place to return at some undetermined point in the future. This feeling of temporality was experienced by villagers who believed ‘they will probably stay there’. Even those who obtained Russian citizenship maintained ties to ‘home’ by continuing their presence in the forms of occasional remittances and by staying in touch.
over mobile phones. Despite challenging life conditions in Russia’s Yakutia, migrants and their families continued forging relations with families back home while they worked hard towards reaching set aims back in natal home. Going back to our question of what becomes of ‘home’ for Kyrgyzstani migrants, Ruba Salih (2002) described the current realities for Moroccan migrants in Italy, where similarly, transnational practices such as ‘transferring money, buying land and houses, or investing in other signifiers of symbolic and economic capital in their country of origin’ have been a defining characteristic of Moroccan international migration (p. 52). She quoted Grillo (1998) who suggested that the restructuring of the global economy ‘urges migrant[s] to be transnational’, therefore, ‘transnational relations do not always seem to forge the sense of belonging simultaneously to two countries. On the contrary, they may paradoxically reinforce migrants’ feelings of living in more than one country but belonging to ‘neither’ place’ (Grillo quoted in Salih, 2002, p. 52).
4 His Kin, My Kin: Remittances, Overstretched and Competing Family Obligations

In the previous chapter, I explored how migration transforms family arrangements, reshuffling non-migrants’ domestic chores and responsibilities. I suggested that one way we can understand migration’s impact on stayers, or non-migrants, is by considering what they treat as meaningful in their lives (Montgomery, 2013b). In rural Alcha, life-cycle events offered an invaluable picture of daily lives. Three different celebrations, or *töis*, demonstrated the importance of maintaining kin ties. These cases also shed light on changing meanings of home for visiting migrant family members who continued investing in houses (and flats) back home because these family migrants saw themselves living in Kyrgyzstan ‘in the future’. When monetary resources were limited, it forced family members to negotiate between ‘social remittances’ and ‘material remittances’ (Van Hear, 2002, p. 216). This chapter continues the analysis of how family commitments and obligations are negotiated transnationally. I argue that family and kinship obligations, experienced and enacted from abroad, are overstretched due to competing commitments. In doing so, I emphasize how remittance negotiations by and among migrant families in Russia can be gendered, have generational differences, and may spark family conflicts.

**Transnational Kinship and Remittances**

Transnational migrants can possess multiple loyalties to places, and thus the meaning of home for them can be ‘complex and multi-dimensional’ (Al-Ali and Koser,
When migration is a household strategy, we can assume that decisions about remittance utilization are made commonly and not individually by migrants (Van Hear, 2002) or non-migrants. When a migrant remits money, decisions concerning ‘how much’, ‘to whom’, and ‘why’ can help us understand what becomes of ‘family’. Nicolas Jonas and Marie-Clémence Le Pape (2008) explored the works of the American sociologist Mirra Komarovsky, one of the pioneers in the analysis of couples’ relations, who wrote how lineage can affect harmony in conjugal relations. The authors suggested that Komarovsky (in 1950) revealed how the strength of wives’ ties to their families of origin ‘are sometimes so strong that they can undermine the smooth functioning of a couple’ (Jonas and Le Pape, 2008, p. 156). In another study of ‘kinkeeping’, influenced by functionalists Parsons and Durkheim, Carolyn Rosenthal (1985) found that in 74% of cases, respondents identified their family kinkeeper to be a woman, representing the so-called ‘pivot generation’, aged between 50 and 60 years old (in Jonas and Le Pape, 2008, p. 160). Consequently, in their own study in France, Jonas and Le Pape argued that couples’ kin relations were tilted towards the wife’s kin because the husband ‘[made] less of an effort to stay in touch with his own family’ (2008, p. 160). However, in the Kyrgyzstani context of patrilineal descent (Thieme, 2008a; Ismailbekova, 2014), married women’s belonging is overwhelmingly defined by their subordinate position to their husband and within their husband’s family. However, these studies do not address migration’s transformative impact on women’s ability and display of loyalties to their ‘families of origin’, which they negotiate implicitly and over time.

Based on ethnographic accounts from Russia, I argue that Kyrgyz family and kin relations are intricate, and migration has transformed women’s strategies of dealing with their subordinate position within families. In order to demonstrate the complex composition of kinship ties, I illustrate several cases from Yakutsk that exemplify contested gendered kinship ties. The internal daily family politics of migrants’ lives, which were veiled to me in Alcha, became partially visible in Yakutsk. Here, I propose that family and kinship ties are strained by the politicized and moralized nature of money transfers. In this context, it is essential to examine the relationship between money transfers and commitments-to-care in family practices. Focusing on migrants’ experiences around decisions made and strategies employed regarding sending money home, I show how Kyrgyz family relationships are structured around gender, age, and marital status, as well as socially and culturally ascribed roles based on positions held within the ‘family’. There are culturally bound roles and obligations based on who you are in a Kyrgyz family – that is, eldest son, youngest son, single or married daughter, daughter-in-law or son-in-law. In other words, monetary support and obligations vary between particular family
members during different stages of their lives. However, these roles, in practice, are not fixed, but they carry expectations that evolve over time.

This chapter is not primarily about money or remittances, but rather about family and kinship obligations. By looking at how families handled money earned by migrants, I foreground relationships within the family and kinship. In Finch and Mason’s (2000, p. 2) examination of inheritance in England, the authors noted that individuals ‘do not simply make use of their relationships to acquire items of property, whether large or small’. Rather, it was ‘in the process of handling the transmission of property, the character, and quality of those relationships is revealed, understood, and remade by the participants’.

How money was handled by family members living in geographically distant spaces, but simultaneously sustaining families in multiple countries demonstrates the contours of kinship and ‘the power structure within those boundaries’ (Finch and Mason, 2000, p. 3). Hence, I focus on how kinship and family relationships can be hierarchically ordered through the process of sending of money and how sending money can produce implicit relationships.

**Living Arrangements that Enable Accumulation**

In 2010, Ainash moved to Yakutsk from Bishkek with her 24-year-old son Sardar, who took an academic leave from university, while her husband Bakai joined them a year later (see Figure 4.1). When they arrived in Yakutsk, they shared one room of a two-room apartment with another migrant family from Kyrgyzstan. It was far cheaper to pay half the rent and share a common kitchen and bathroom with another family of four than to find alternative accommodation, which could range between 25,000–30,000 RRU (800–1,000 USD) per month, roughly the average salary to which migrants could aspire. Ainash quickly found work in a convenience store. Having learned how to navigate the bureaucracy of local registration, Ainash applied for temporary residence. She then searched for a ‘legal’ job, which would transfer her taxes to the social fund and would eventually make her eligible to receive a pension when she became a Russian citizen. Ainash was offered better paying jobs, but not all employers were willing to document her employment status and pay the appropriate state taxes. Instead, she chose to work legally as a cleaning lady [uborshitsa] in a hair salon, receiving 10,000 RRU (350 USD) per month, but satisfied with having her paperwork in order. Moreover, her boss occasionally allowed her, a semi-professional masseuse, to earn shabashka [untaxed cash] by offering massages to salon workers for 500 rubles rather than the standard 2,000 ruble price charged in Yakutsk’s spa salons.
In 2011, Ainash learned that she had breast cancer during a medical examination conducted in conjunction with her residence application. The family’s entire savings paid for treatment and hospital expenses, affecting their goals and future plans, forcing her husband to join the family workforce. Hence, in 2012, the family decided to move into a communal house with Ainash’s nephew, Askar, who also assisted Sardar with finding employment in construction. Although her husband and son were not thrilled to share a house with more tenants, the decision was necessitated by the savings it would enable.

Sitting in a small (nearly 3x4 metres) room the three inhabited, Ainash admitted they lived here ‘illegally but for free’. This meant that they were not officially registered at the house address, but kept their valid registration in their previous apartment. They would not be able to register in the communal house, because her nephew ‘arranged’ the room without his boss’s knowledge. For them, the opportunity to save 15,000 rubles per month was worth the risk, making them ‘tishe vody, nizhe travy’ [‘quieter than water, lower than grass’], as the Russian saying goes.

All three were employed, although it was initially much harder for Bakai to find a stable job, and for months he would ‘disappear with friends in bars’. Because Ainash was the only naturalized Russian citizen in the family, for some time she was the only person with a stable income. In Ainash’s words, women were more willing to take any job opportunities, while men picked what suited them. For example, Bakai, in his 50s, refused to work in shops or waiting tables in cafés, where most service jobs could be found.

Ainash shared her dream of retiring in Russia when she reached the eligible pension age of 55, returning to Kyrgyzstan, and travelling to Russia occasionally to collect her pension. However, as a naturalized citizen, she would have had to work for 10 years to become eligible for a pension. Ainash spoke with irony comparing her previous profession as a university sports trainer to her present job, ‘Here I am an uborshitsa in my 50s’, showing me her hands irritated by frequent use of detergents, an allergic reaction due to chemotherapy. A month later she admitted that they had come to Yakutsk ‘out of

45 The ‘communal house’ was used as a dormitory for the firm’s foreign workers. It was located in city’s outskirts and there was no rigorous monitoring. In Askar’s words, the house was unliveable, until they built in the heating system with co-workers. His close ties with his manager who overlooked the ‘communal house’ made it possible for all of them to live fee free. Ainash and her family moved into one of the empty rooms without the ‘big boss’s knowledge’. Aksar’s manager was Kyrgyz, but Askar clarified it was their reputation as hard workers that gained them free accommodation.

46 Ainash worked in a salon on a two-day shift. She preferred this option to not working at all, which is what her family encouraged after being hospitalized twice in one year. She made 10,000 rubles per month, although she knew she could earn three times more. However, due to the social ties at her job and the enormous support her colleagues provided in making connections to hospitals, she was able to gain access to doctors
desperation’ in the hope of ‘getting back on [their] feet’ after they lost their business in Bishkek. Having made the unfortunate decision to lend large sums of money to friends and kin during the tumultuous 1990s, they went bankrupt and eventually had to sell their house in Bishkek’s city centre. By working abroad, the family hoped to get ‘at least [their] house back’.

The Car Quarrel: Competing Commitments

‘Quick, quick’! Aidai shouted and ran inside the house one April morning in Yakutsk. With her younger sister, Jyldyz, we were already getting dressed, a challenge in a mixed-gender bedroom. A special curtain, hung in a corner, served as a changing room. It was 7:30 a.m. We hurriedly blew on hot cups of tea, quickly brushed our teeth, gathered our stuff, and ran out as Aidai exclaimed that Bakai baike had agreed to drop us off on his way to work. Every morning, Bakai ran his car engine for several minutes to allow his car, frozen overnight, to warm up. We ran to the car, as one would in -20C temperatures. It was waiting outside the fence with steaming vapour wafting from the exhaust. Our alternative would have been walking to the main road to catch a bus, which would have taken us to the Stolichnyi market, where the girls worked. A 15-minute ride and nearly an hour-long commute were incomparable in those temperatures.

As the car began to move, I immediately sensed tension in the air. Bakai rolled down his window and lit a cigarette. Breaking his silence, a heated dialogue ensued:

BAKAI: Give me 6,000 [RRU; 125 GBP]

AINASH: Why do you need it?!

BAKAI: I will send it to [our] daughter, the rest she will give to <pause>. Err…

AINASH: Why?! When do we stop sending? When do we start saving? I am sick and tired of sending!

BAKAI: Che ty krichish?! [Russian: What are you screaming at me?!!]

AINASH: Did we come here to earn, to accumulate money [akcha chogultkany], and leave earlier?!

BAKAI: Aah, what’s the difference! <pause> Ah, ne nado! Berbei ele koichu! [Ah, never mind! Don’t you bother!] When it is about your kin, you give [money] to everyone, and when it is about my kin, then you are like this!

without standing in lines, Ainash did not leave the salon for two years to show her appreciation.
AINASH: Well, of course! My kin have helped us when we needed it!

BAKAI: Then get the money that your brother owes to us!

AINASH: No, we are not going to!

This emotionally charged argument was awkward in front of kin and outsiders. Bakai’s plea started with a low voice directed at Ainash in the back seat, but her voice displayed her irritation, interrupting him and raising her voice with each of Bakai’s responses. Her rhetorical questions showed her frustration that their saved earnings would be spent once again. The couple could have avoided the public quarrel, but once one party expressed discontent, the other felt obliged to make their side of the story heard. In the words of Aidai and Jyldyz who discussed it after we were dropped off, Bakai must have been offended by the public attack, but they acknowledged the difficulties facing Ainash. Once Bakai accused Ainash of helping ‘her kin’, but of not being willing to help ‘his kin’, Ainash reminded him of the history of monetary transfers in their family. She laid out her justification for assisting her kin: mutual reciprocity justified financial support. In essence, they argued about saving or sending – the challenges of collectability of money. Kyrgyz family arguments are often well hidden from the eyes and ears of their kin. Nevertheless, this short dispute was demonstrative of a number of themes that are useful to unpack in order to explore the relationship between migration, money, family, and kinship. In the aftermath of the argument, I talked to Ainash and Bakai separately and together, but I also heard from their kin living in the dormitory to delve further into the role of money transfers in migrants’ lives. If Kyrgyz people valued kin ties, I wondered why families had strong gendered sentiments around money transfers and how transnational families negotiated competing obligations on both sides of kin.

The following day, speaking less angrily, Ainash admitted how ‘tired’ she was of sending money home. As she was upset with a specific case, here she referred to sending money in general. In fact, she made clear her reluctance to send any money home, to kin or friends. According to Bakai, half of the money transfer (63 GBP; 100 USD) was designated for their daughter Kyial’s birthday, who was living with her aunt in Alcha (see chapter 3). Ainash was frustrated that sending any money home eventually amounted to a significant sum as it risked the failure of their agreement to accumulate money to purchase a home in Kyrgyzstan. She emphasized that during most of the first two years, the family only ‘sent and spent money’ in Yakutsk. Bakai felt he could not fail to send a ‘present’ for Kyial to buy what she needed for her birthday. As a mother, Ainash was divided between showing that she ‘cared’ for her daughter and sticking to their longer-term goals. She did not hide her infuriation with their inability to control the collectability of their earnings,
‘Katuu ishtep, bat akcha tabyp, chogultup, bat üigö barysh kerek da... je jüröoberebizbi?!’

[Working hard, quickly making money, saving it and going back home sooner – is not that what we should be doing… or will we be here forever?!] She stressed, ‘we came here to save money’. Although Ainash did not actually say so, I wondered whether she felt guilty for getting sick and felt even more responsible for making sure that the family saved enough money towards the house. Her sense of urgency and temporal constraint was also triggered by her and her husband’s age, as she regularly compared themselves to younger nephews in the communal house signifying that ‘they can live here forever’, but her family was less flexible in time and less durable in health.

I first met Bakai in Alcha when he had come to say goodbye to Kyial before migrating to Yakutsk. His in-laws gossiped about his drinking habits and expressed their hopes that near his wife and son, he would ‘behave’. Out of a few potential places, Kyial’s parents chose her aunt, Ainash’s sister, Mira’s family, where Kyial’s co-residence with the same-aged cousin Baktygul would work best. Bakai searched for a decent job for half a year through family networks in Yakutsk until he resorted to driving a taxi. Most migrant taxi drivers rented cars because purchasing them locally was relatively expensive compared to Kyrgyzstan. Siberian weather required warm parking, which added an additional cost. Many migrants sustained families by driving taxis, but eventually Bakai gave up, ‘to make lots of money, you need to work kruglye sutki [24/7]’. In our conversations, Bakai stressed the importance of ‘living’ rather than ‘surviving’ in their migrant life. ‘First of all, it was my daughter’s birthday, we had to send her some money’, he started. ‘Yes, we should save, but also I have family back home, siblings… I didn’t go bury my father <pause> that’s how we saved money’. His frustration was evident. When his father passed away, he decided to send his kin the money he would have spent for the airplane ticket as a contribution to cover the costs of his father’s funeral. As the eldest son, he felt responsible for caring for his aging mother and helping his siblings. This was not welcomed by Ainash, who thought that his siblings were ‘old enough to care for themselves’ and that her husband should care for his immediate family. Moreover, she opposed her husband’s desire to attend his friends’ life-cycle events:

AINASH: He’s strange. Our [in Yakutsk] acquaintance’s brother passed away somewhere in Bishkek, and he wanted us to go köz körsütüp [pay condolences] here. I say ‘why should we do it, biz katyshpasak’ [if we are not in tight relationships], you know, seriously, I got tired of this in Kyrgyzstan <pause> going here and there, and every time we go somewhere, we have to spend money for bags we bring along <pause> here it is going to cost at least 500 [RRU; 10 GBP]. If we are kin, I understand, but why do it with acquaintances we made here? I am tired of him. We have been fighting for some time now. He likes to drink. When he does, he doesn’t work the next day from [his] hangover. It saved him before, he
was a taxi driver, but now he has a serious job where he needs to be ready any time. I feel so much better now that we are here [in Yakutsk], we can actually save money because at home you have to go here for celebrations, you have to go there when people die, when anything happens, you end up spending too much money that you cannot earn there. I don’t know how people do it. <pause> You know, I lived this long to understand it now that you have got to live for yourself. What do we have now? We sold our house in Bishkek’s centre, mainly because we wanted a bigger house, but also because we wanted to live in the outskirts of the city to avoid hosting relatives all the time. All children on both sides grew up living with us as university students. We spent for food every day because we always had extra people living with us. Moreover, we both had big families and colleagues, so that meant that many events and celebrations to attend, that many expenses. That’s how Kyrgyz families are. Really, I feel relaxed here and relaxing from it here and have no desire of attending to our ary-beri [here and there].

MEDINA: How would you like your family to be?

AINASH: How? I’d like to come home, have food on the table, relax when necessary, have your own space, you have to have both parents working, only then you have a better life back home, otherwise, it’s impossible to sustain a family.

Ainash maintained a clear mission of cutting monetary ties in Yakutsk. She explained how there are many couples her age who go out dining together and host birthday celebrations. ‘Bakai used to have good jobs, good money, and many possessions in Bishkek’, Ainash continued, reflecting on why he was having difficulty adjusting to hard work in Russia. Their friends ‘are here to stay, they became Russian citizens, own apartments in Yakutsk, and are taking care of children in Yakutsk’. Because her family intended to return to Kyrgyzstan and did not intend to establish roots in Yakutsk, she believed that her family should not engage in relations that would not be reciprocated. Cutting ties with local compatriots was a reflection of their temporal belonging, their sense of belonging was temporary in Yakutsk. This temporal belonging was reflected in the constant self-reminder that their ‘real’ relations were in Kyrgyzstan, and they should do here what they came for – to work. In this particular temporal and spatial context, Ainash’s motive for halting all relations was to be able to care for their ‘own’ family of reproduction, while, for Bakai, it was about saving ‘little by little’, caring for both families, his ‘own’ and that which he was ‘born into’, but also living well and enjoying life. In his early 20s, Sardar did not have a strong voice in the family; but he had a vested interest in going home as soon as possible and therefore sided with his mother about saving and moving back to Kyrgyzstan. As their only son, he was well aware that he would eventually inherit the apartment they bought (outside of Bishkek) and that he was working towards his future home. More importantly, the successful end of his family’s migration was tied to his own independence. His parents also wanted him to marry sooner rather than later, hoping to ‘drink tea out of their only daughter-in-law’s hands’. While
Sardar recognized the utility of migration in accumulating funds for a larger purchase, he was against ‘family migration’ and moving back to Yakutsk with his future wife. He believed he could earn a similar salary in Kyrgyzstan after graduating from college. Sardar was working towards his family’s goals while in Yakutsk, and he swore he would not return again, and also expressed that he would never agree to his younger sister becoming a migrant.

‘Chogultush Kerek!’ [We Must Accumulate]: The Second Wallets

Monetary support was crucial for families to maintain their sense of belonging to each other (Thai, 2012). Kyrgyz families are bound by reciprocal and non-reciprocal monetary assistance. This was not created by migration, but these monetary relations existed long before migration. Families often keep track (both in written form and in memory) of how much kin, friends, neighbours, and colleagues gave during various celebrations of rites of passage. Most families were loyal to raja payments, fixed and agreed upon sums of money that were paid within family and kin networks, especially towards funerals. Other important life-style events also involved exchanging gifts based on the strengths of existing reciprocal ties. Often giving money was accompanied by bringing bags of food, which involved additional costs (cf. Werner, 1998).

Many recalled how maintaining kin ties was easier when salaries were secure during Soviet times. Growing post-Soviet stratifications due to high unemployment affected family ties hampering their ability to maintain reciprocal obligations, which often caused kin to hold grudges against each other. Many migrants admitted that by being away from ‘home’, they were able to save money because they could avoid celebrations of kin and friends due to geographical remoteness. The negotiation of the physical absence from home and disengaging with kin’s continuous life-cycle events could be analysed through Finch and Mason’s (1993) concept of ‘legitimate excuses’ (p. 97). They argued that it was important to understand ‘the processes involved in not becoming committed,’ a way in which some can ‘legitimately avoid becoming committed’ (ibid., p. 97). The only times when migrants felt obliged to send money home or visit home were related to death and funerals of immediate kin (cf. Mason, 2004). In Ainash’s words, ‘everything else could be excused’. For Bakai however, their inability to help his kin, whom he used to support, regularly, and the common expectation of migrants to remit, meant that he fell short of realizing himself as a son and oldest brother. His commitments to care were overstretched. In reality, he was not the brother with a successful business and a large house where kin could visit and send their children during holidays. Despite living in a situation where his
family of procreation needed help securing a roof over their heads, Bakai’s inability to provide for his natal family increased his sense of failure. For him, not sending any money home to his kin was unacceptable.

This section discusses the specific tensions created by money. We can speak of several dimensions causing tensions within the families of senders and receivers. First, senders debated how much and how frequently money should be transferred home. The more frequently migrants remitted, the less ‘quickly’ they could achieve their goals. Ainash rationalized that their ‘own’ family, that is their nuclear family, should be prioritized over kin. Also, sending any money, no matter the sum, risked setting a precedent, ‘sending would never end, kin regularly call us up asking for money, so if we give to one, another would ask’.

Secondly, tension existed over to whom money should be sent. The accent in the dialogue on whose kin should receive financial support requires a deeper look into the dynamics within Kyrgyz family and kinship relations. At its root, this is a question of how Kyrgyz couples and families practice family finances, which has implications for economic inequality within marriage. Most married migrant women admitted they were taught from early ages that they would be married into their new family, which meant they would become part of their husband’s families and ‘guests’ in their families of birth (cf. Abramzon, 1971; Ismailbekova, 2014). Kyrgyz men grew up knowing they would become their family breadwinners – both for their family of origin as well as their family of procreation. Nevertheless, married migrant women recounted to me how they helped their natal family without revealing it to their husbands, especially their husband’s families. In a study of Vietnamese transmigrant women, Hung Cam Thai (2012) was puzzled by a similar paradox. Single Vietnamese women were expected to contribute to their family of origin with whom they lived until they were married. However, transnational marriage created financial obligations and expectations from the transnationally married daughters, that is, compared to daughters married locally, ‘not because they are daughters, but because they are married internationally’ and women intended to support their families regardless of their husband’s objections (Thai, 2012). In the context of Kyrgyz migrant women and their families, Russia was seen as a more developed country, but there were no such cultural expectations, as there were in the experiences of Vietnamese transnational families. Instead, they felt obliged to help because being labelled as migrants came with normative assumptions that they had access to surplus money.

In numerous cases, when women could not obtain money from their husbands through open discussions, married migrant women started what I call ‘second wallets’, separate savings funds intended towards supplementary needs. One such alternative was
through the practice of starting a *chernaia kassa* (see chapter 3) with other interested women. When Aidai’s brother’s family needed help, she first asked Askar if they could lend him money, but Askar ‘found reasons to decline’. In turn, Aidai started ‘a black cash-box’ with four other work colleagues with the payment of 1,000 rubles (20 GBP) per person per day. Given that haircuts cost between 150-200 rubles for men and up to 500 rubles for women, hairdressers could collect the agreed the *kassa* sum in a day. This allowed women to acquire a lump sum of 4,000 rubles (83 GBP) instantly, which could be sent home or used to purchase more expensive items, such as jewellery, clothes, or presents. Because the hairdressers did not have a fixed salary and because their earnings were based on the number of clients they served, Aidai could obscure her actual earnings from her husband in silent resistance to his control.

Thirdly, although families practiced lending money to kin, these relationships were fraught with lack of trust over its eventual return. Many migrants spoke regretfully about money lent to kin and friends as they were not confident it would be returned when needed. For example, Ulan, a single construction worker in his late 20s, listed loans given to friends in Yakutsk and never returned. He spoke regretfully, ‘all together I could have bought a car when I would go back’. Largely, money lending was accompanied by fear and the risk of its non-return [*kaira kelbeit*] or incomplete returns. In most cases, lenders and borrowers agreed that the loan would be returned ‘upon arrival back home’ or ‘when requested’. Ainash lent money to her elder brother when he was in need and was confident that he would repay the borrowed sum upon their return to Kyrgyzstan. She felt obliged to help him because his family had helped her family financially. When I asked her ‘why then she did not want Bakai to help out his siblings’, she responded that his family was not well off and that his siblings would not be responsible to return what they owed. Bakai’s siblings thought of him as their older brother who is ‘supposed to help for free’. Ainash was only willing to ‘invest’ money into trusted networks. Unfortunately, Ainash and Bakai learned this difficult lesson by losing their house due to loans unrepaired by their good friends. In the mid-1990s, they sold their house and were planning to move to a bigger house. While they were searching for a new house, they loaned the proceeds from the sale to friends, who in turn lost their business and could not return any of their money.

Although the couple could have saved their earnings in Ainash’s Russian bank account, Ainash still chose to lend money to her brother, which was the basis of Bakai’s resentment expressed in the car. Ainash exercised her power by controlling the deposits and withdrawals as much as decisions around whom to lend and whom *not* to lend. Ainash thought of their remittance to her brother as a way of repaying or thanking her brother for his family’s previous support. The remittances also served as savings until they were
returned and were seen as ‘investments’ into their sibling relationship, which hopefully would be returned as agreed. Thus, remittances are ‘two-way exchanges’ (Van Hear, 2002, p. 221) because they served both sides’ needs. She reciprocated and maintained her commitment to a trustworthy relationship with her brother in Alcha, rather than her husband’s kin who had no means of returning money, because of his higher economic status and presumed capacity to repay the loans. Compared to younger migrants, Ainash and Bakai’s case demonstrates that they could rely on established social and kin networks over a lifetime, which Morgan identified as ‘strongly bounded or weakly bounded’ family practices (2013, p. 82).

All in all, chogultush kerek, the concentration on saving money conflicted with continuing strongly bound ties with kin back home. At the same time, migrants felt compelled to explain and justify regularly their decisions and goals to their kin, requiring much emotional strength, moral reasoning, and conversational skills to say ‘no’ when kin called asking for money. In my presence, many migrants preferred to let their phones ring silently if they did not recognize the numbers to avoid ‘uncomfortable’ conversations and ‘not knowing’ how to potentially say ‘no’. When physically present in the same locality, the inability to help financially could be resolved through other forms of support: through hospitality, manual labour, emotional support, etc. Over time, migrants learned that in order to accumulate funds, some of their strongly bound kin ties should be temporarily weakened.

**Money and Tensions: What about ‘My Kin’?**

Migrant married women in Yakutsk eagerly discussed their husbands’ overwhelming discontent regarding their desire to help openly their (side of) kin. Despite their husbands’ objections, some found creative alternative ways. One such discussion developed at the apartment of Asel, Aidai’s colleague on maternity leave in her mid-30s, who lived in Yakutsk’s well-known ‘ChBs’, or so-called ‘partially convenient’ wooden houses. Asel lived with her husband, a Kyrgyz migrant whom she met in Yakutsk, and two young children in one room of the two-room apartment. The second room was occupied by her sister, her adolescent niece, and adult brother. Being unemployed for months, she admitted, was difficult for her as she was a ‘social person’ and yet she felt privileged to enjoy motherhood and to care for her child herself.

47 ‘ChB’ is an abbreviation, meaning chastichno blagoustroennyi [dom], that is, a prefabricated house, built during the Soviet years. The city administration has plans to completely destroy them to build new apartment complexes to accommodate increasing population migration to Yakutsk from within the province and externally.
Their catching up was disrupted by a cell phone call from Amina, their boss at the barbershop. Aidai agreed to lend Amina 10,000 rubles (208 GBP), promising to bring it the next day. ‘So she didn’t get it then?’ Asel asked. ‘No, he [Amina’s husband] didn’t give [money to] her,’ replied Aidai, and giggled when she saw my puzzled face:

AIDAI: You see, Medina eje, her [Amina’s] husband [Talant] did not give her [the] money. <pause> She wanted to send [money] to her brother back home <pause> but when he needs to send his brothers, he does so easily.

MEDINA: Why not?

AIDAI: Such are our men!

ASEL: All our men are like that! <pause> Remember how Talant would tell us how much [money] he sent his brothers, and now Amina’s brother asked [them] to lend part of the money needed to buy a car because he has the rest, but he would not even lend the money. <pause> Of course, then, we become smarter, we are not stupid. I do not argue with my husband now. I used to before, but now I find other ways of helping my own kin. I do it behind his back.

AIDAI: Yes, you should write about it, that we, women, are getting smarter about it!

ASEL: I agree!

MEDINA: How do you mean? Do you mean that your husband does not want you to support your family?

AIDAI: Aaah, come on, men want to support their own side first and then they say, ‘When there will be extra money in the future’ [we will send it to your kin] but there is never extra money, right? Of course, men don’t want us to ask money for our [extended] kin.

MEDINA: Could you, for example, agree to reciprocate, one time – [helping] his kin, then your kin?

AIDAI: Oh, no! Rarely men would do it, rarely <pause> most of the time it is the family helping men’s kin as if we [women] don’t have kin.

This dialogue revealed critical issues around how women juggle competing sets of kin obligations transnationally. Migration has an empowering effect on women’s work abroad where in some families and the nature of work organization and structure, women can maintain control over their earnings. Women can also challenge their belonging to patriarchal structures through resistance (Thieme, 2008a). After Amina collected 30,000 rubles (625 GBP) from her colleagues, she learned that her brother changed his mind about buying a car. Afraid of having her husband discover her plan, Amina instead deceived Talant into believing that her colleagues gave her koshumcha [additional] money as a way of seeing them off before their visit to Kyrgyzstan. This deception was
symptomatic of the patriarchal family structure where men controlled the collection and distribution of family resources and women felt powerless even at the level of discussing family capital and budget allocation. At the same time, women told me it was ‘easier’ not to talk to their husbands about their problems and plans, but to act ‘behind their backs’ in order to avoid confrontations and ‘extra headaches’. Some, like Asel, developed skills and strategies of juggling their multiple obligations through deception. Keeping information private from their husbands was essential in achieving their goals. These hairdressers took advantage of the unpredictability of their daily earnings to start ‘second wallets’ oriented towards goals that were meaningful to them. Other migrants told numerous stories of how Kyrgyz migrants cheated the system to generate additional income to accumulate larger sums of money.

On another occasion, Aidai revealed some of the difficulties involved helping her natal family as a married woman:

AIDAI: Recently when we were in Bishkek he [Askar] asked me to ask my brother to return money that he borrowed [from us]. My brother had told us that he would return by spring, so my husband knew it, but he insisted that ‘he must return [it] now’. That hurt me, you know, how many of his kin we help and lend money to, he did not ask them [to return money], but asked only my kin we helped. That made me so angry, so furious. <pause> We used to fight about it all the time, you know, especially in the beginning, during my first year I used to send money to my parents also as much as he sent to [Alcha] I would inform him when I made a transfer. Later I started concealing from him that I was sending money [to my parents] from money I earned. I started finding ways to send money without telling him because it turned into talks and fights where I had to explain, ‘why I sent’ once again. Only after my sister got here, I stopped sending home big amounts, and told my sister that now that we take care of her accommodation and documentation here, she needs to take care of our family and ever since then it has been Jyldyz helping my parents for the past two years. I told her that I have a family now and she understands. My mom does not ask for money either, she instead tells me ‘support your family you are part of now, not us’, and yet, why can’t I support my family when I want to?! That makes me mad. <pause> Also, I got really upset when I asked Askar that I wanted my only brother-in-law to join us here, you know <pause> Askar helps all kind of people – villagers, friends, ex-classmates, and I asked [him] to help my brother-in-law to come here, but he rejected it. He spoke with apa [mother-in-law] and they decided together. I was really upset, but I did not show it of course, what you are going to do!

Finch and Mason (1993) demonstrated how women are ‘particularly good at certain kinds of family responsibilities’ when they act as family’s ‘kinkeeper’ showing personal care and emotional support by negotiating for her kin (p. 108). Aidai’s frustrations with her husband’s family lie in what she saw as injustice. Aidai clarified that she did not want special arrangements for her kin when she negotiated assistance for them, but she found it difficult to understand how her kin did not receive the same consideration that Askar showed to his co-villagers, neighbours, classmates, and friends. For instance, when she
started arranging Jyldyz’s migration, Askar initially opposed it, arguing that overseeing a single woman’s life in a big city would become his burden. Although Aidai insisted that she would be responsible for her younger sister, it was the agreement that Jyldyz would assume Aidai’s familial responsibility that eventually made Askar consent. In practice, however, Aidai continued to support silently her family by contributing to her sister’s remittances.

To gain a fuller picture of negotiations around kin relationships of assistance in this family configuration, Askar’s perspective demonstrates his growing sense of loss of trust for relatives in general. Arriving as one of the first migrants in his social network in 2006, Askar helped numerous cousins, classmates, friends of siblings, neighbours, siblings’ course mates, and other villagers to find jobs and establish themselves in Yakutsk. He became embittered about how some relationships failed:

ASKAR: We have helped many migrants in Yakutia. In return, we didn’t even get a ‘thank you’. Those whom we helped in the beginning were nice to us until they got their first salaries, after then they would say things like ‘I could’ve earned this money at home driving a taxi or in the bazaar’ <pause> they were not appreciative. They are nice and simple when they arrive here, begging for a job, asking and calling for days to find them a job, to bring them here, however, when they get here, they change. They want to make money out of anything and everything. The biggest fights and disagreements in Yakutsk, I had with my cousins. Because they worked with me in a firm and I suggested my boss to hire them, I was responsible for them. My older cousin said ‘he came here jerdi, eldi kӧrüp’ [to travel and meet people] and he couldn’t handle me watching after him, he said ‘you are not my wife’ when I tried to control his drinking habits. These kinds of habits should be forgotten here [in Yakutsk], otherwise, you don't save up at all if every day or every week you feel like you need to go play pool there, or go to that bania [bathhouse] there, or this cafe, and that disco. Friends always invite us out, but I’m strict with my brothers and tell them not to. Those others who like going out to disco bars and pool houses, they waste their earned money there all the time. They work hard as well, but also spend money for nothing.

Askar explained why he was against his in-law coming to Yakutsk. ‘If possible, I believe we should avoid relations with kin, that’s what I learned over time’, he started, and added, ‘with kin it is best to stay in respectful relations’, which meant ‘distant’, as in the less you engage, the less problems it creates between people. Aidai’s jezde [older brother-in-law] wanted to work in Yakutsk, but Askar did not want to deal regularly with an elder in-law. As a younger man, Askar did not want to become inferior in the house that he controlled. Moreover, because he had already experienced conflict with two cousins on his father’s side who lived with them, he was bitter about dealing with kin. ‘Instead of helping out kin, I realised it is best to help your close friends or classmates’, he explained, because his problems with particular kin affected his entire family.
On *Uiat* [Shame] and *Ümtööt* [Expectations]: The Sense of Obligation

Transnational migration boosted migrants’ sense of obligation towards their kin in the country of origin. The following case developed after I finished my fieldwork in 2012. I continued to stay in touch with the families and migrants with whom I lived. When Bilim, Mira’s second daughter-in-law, returned to Alcha after two years in Yakutsk, she felt uneasy about not bringing any presents for her parents. Bilim did not work in Russia due to two consecutive pregnancies, so she did not consider herself as a migrant. Nonetheless, she took responsibility for daily cleaning and cooking for the rest of the family in addition to caring for her children, which was not considered by others in the household to be work.

Everything about Bilim’s return home was similar to other migrants’ experiences, except that Bilim could not display the migrant habitus through clothes or belongings. Out of the shame [*uiat*] she felt, Bilim borrowed money from her mother-in-law, Mira, to make money through *kommertsia* [petty trade]. She had learned skills from her family business. This practice involved purchasing various household items in Bishkek’s largest market, Dordoi, and reselling them locally for a higher price in Alcha’s market. Bilim’s plan was to generate profit during the New Year’s season celebrations. Her entrepreneurship addressed the sense of obligation that Bilim felt to her extended family. Thieme (2008a, p. 342) showed how women in Kyrgyzstan were subject to ‘deskilling’, resorting to petty trading from professions because of the lack of access to ‘economically relevant social networks’. Her husband, Rahat, planned to rest in Alcha during the holidays, but petty trade was a quick way for Bilim to earn money that she could not in Yakutsk. Thus, Bilim had to convince Mira, who in turn would obtain money from Askar and agree to look after her children. First, visiting home was about displaying migration status, most explicitly demonstrated through material things – clothes, jewellery, and belongings (cf. Levitt, 2001, Reeves, 2012b). Bilim, compared to Aidai, had little to display in the eyes of the local community. Bilim was well aware of the rewards of caring for her children in Yakutsk. Those sentiments, however, did not stop her from resenting that her husband’s family ‘did not buy her new clothes’ – not ordinary clothes, but something significantly visible, such as a fur coat or gold jewellery. It mattered to her, because this was how the village assessed returning migrants’ achievements. Second, Bilim did not want to visit her natal family without gifts. She felt ‘uncomfortable’ because she considered it rude to visit ‘with bare hands’ [*spustymi rukami*]. As a result, Bilim earned several thousand Soms, which she spent on a fur coat, some clothes for the children, and presents for her parents. Finch and Mason (1993) suggested that responsibilities between kin should be seen ‘as
negotiated commitments rather than given sets of obligations or duties’ (p. 33). Although Bilim did not think of bringing a present as a duty, she felt obliged to display her status of ‘migrant’. Throughout two years of caring, cleaning, and cooking for a house of 10 migrants including friends, Bilim fulfilled her role as the youngest daughter-in-law, who stayed at home and did not contribute to the family budget. Bilim returned Mira the borrowed sum in full, but Bilim’s initiative raised eyebrows in the family. In Mira’s words, Rahat did not press his wife’s case with his brother, Askar; instead Bilim negotiated it with Mira. Askar’s scepticism that Bilim would be able to make a profit was rejected by Mira, and it was her support that swayed Askar. Bilim’s case is demonstrative of women’s stronger sense of obligation to their natal families in terms of display of support. Although nominally not expected to give presents, Bilim worked upon her return to Alcha to demonstrate to her husband’s family that she was capable of working and earning money. Yet, she also demonstrated that transnational life only reinforced her sense of shame and inability to show care for her family of origin, which was ultimately but belatedly displayed. According to Finch and Mason’s (1993, p.124) insightful explanation for how to understand cases like that of Bilim, raising children at home, and not working, in Yakutsk can be seen as a case where she can be ‘legitimately excused’ from helping her immediate kin. However, the authors suggested that women ‘are seen as being in a position which makes them able to juggle various commitments simultaneously’ without putting one family over another (ibid: 124). Upon her return to Alcha, Bilim continued caring for her children and, as a daughter-in-law, was expected to look after the household. Her circumstances, however, made her ‘conducive to taking on other commitments’, because as Finch and Mason argued, ‘women’s biographies tend to put them in a position where they are particularly likely to develop commitments to relatives, and as a consequence to be regarded as an ‘obvious’ carer without need for discussion’ (1993, p. 125). Bilim’s case offered additional evidence for how women creatively strategized to break out of the dependent structures of their husbands’ families by ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275).

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the somewhat overlooked notion of transnational kinship and the transnational family activities of ‘kinkeeping’ (Rosenthal, 1985; cf. Björnberg and Ekbrand, 2008) by providing ethnographic findings from female migrant experiences in Yakutsk. ‘Kin work’ has been crucial in maintaining geographically dispersed transnational families (Zontini, 2004, p. 1117; cf. Banfi and Boccagni, 2011;
Joseph and Lundstrom, 2013). As in Marihsa Alicea’s (1997) study of Puerto Rican transnational families in the United States, which pointed out the key role that women played in families by carrying out ‘caring work, mother work, kin work’ (p. 621), Kyrgyz transnational women also reproduced the sense of family and community through their kinkeeping activities. My empirically grounded observations demonstrated that family and kinship were the spaces where ‘women’s subordination to male authority [was] fully articulated’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1994, p. 1114). Focusing on migrant families’ strategies to accumulate money and decisions about monetary transfer activities, I have brought the processes of family commitments and obligations to the fore, showing that remittance practices were gendered. Money, and the ability to earn it, was a powerful resource that was constitutive of relationships.

In the above vignettes, migrant family members undertook family strategies of earning together towards projects, which constituted them within temporal and spatial frameworks. As opposed to a single migrant’s transnational ties with home, migrant family configurations’ and their financial strategies allowed for better accumulation but were a source of conflict and strain in relations within families and with wider kin. While migrant men continued to consider themselves as ‘breadwinners’, in choosing jobs, men were more conscious of status deprivation (Al-Ali, 2002). Women, on the other hand, were more resourceful and adaptable, and thus more reliable remitters (Thieme, 2008a). Many subjects noted that migrants’ capacity to remit was tied to the important ability to *chogultush kerek* [the skills to save money].

Finally, I have sought to demonstrate that migration has a transformative effect on monetary obligations. Kyrgyz migrants’ sense of obligation was overstretched, a state of being when the demands to provide help to ‘families we live by’ and ‘families we live with’ (Gillis, 1996) exceeds the capacity of the migrant. When financial resources were stretched thin within migrant families, tensions arose around resource allocation and distribution. Gender and migration must thus be looked at through the prism of economic, labour, and power disparities between women and men and kinship obligations within the household (Zontini, 2004). From a time horizon, in Finch and Mason’s words, men and women and their kin’s positioning ‘is not determined by gender and genealogy’ but what matters is ‘this positioning in relation to individual commitments in one’s own family (not gender or genealogy per se), on one’s opportunity to deploy and claim meanings in negotiations’ (ibid., p. 125, original emphasis). Women played a crucial economic role in Kyrgyz transnational families, despite living in subordination to their husband’s families. Migration impacted women’s ability to support their natal families. Unsatisfied with patriarchal structures, they struggled and resisted against their inability to assist openly
their families by creating second wallets, accumulating money without their husbands’ knowledge. In contrast to the myriad of victimized images of Kyrgyz women published in the Russian and the Kyrgyz press, my study has thus provided powerful evidence of the presence of women’s agency.
5 Moralities and Materialities of Transnational Investments: The Case of Livestock and Building Barns

In chapter four, I explored the concept of *chogultush kerek* [the need to accumulate money] and examined what is at stake in the complex processes of migrants’ attempts to accrue financial resources towards the completion of meaningful projects. I suggested that the existing literature on transnational families paid insufficient attention to the ways in which transnational kin relationships are strained because of tensions between different sets of kin obligations. I explored the adaptive strategies migrant married women employed in maintaining ties with their families of origin. Traditionally, patrilocality has subsumed women’s production within their husband’s families (Ismailbekova, 2014). Migration has provided opportunities for women to challenge the status quo by using alternative means, such as maintaining ‘second wallets’ and ‘black cash boxes’ to support their natal kin and to purchase things that they otherwise could not.

This chapter continues to explore the role of remittances, with a focus on the material culture of migration and families’ attempts to invest remittances into what they consider meaningful: livestock and building projects, including construction, renovation, or enlargement of barns. There has been increased interest in the small-scale negotiations, which comprised the mundane, but ‘very real’ and ‘energy consuming experiences’ of everyday life (Ho and Hatfield, 2011, p. 710). Remittances can reveal potentially conflictual relations within families, where transnational money constitutes relationships between senders and receivers that are continuously negotiated and contested across borders (Wong, 2006). In particular, this chapter frames the debate around what constitute ‘productive remittances’ (Davis et al., 2010, p. 2) during family negotiations over remittance utilization. Therefore, I consider the conflicting nature of intra-family and inter-family practices around remittances as Kyrgyz migrants decide between different
forms of investments. Following Jessaca Leinaweaver (2009), I focus on the interaction of dwelling and kinship that ‘situates the house as a location that is indeed deeply meaningful in terms of both consumption and symbolism but is also more than that: it is a ground on which social relations are enacted and sustained’ (p. 778). Alcha’s transnational families offer an insight into how barn building often precede house building and can contribute to the development of family farms through livestock investment. Dwelling and livestock remittances not only allow stayers to sustain households, they also reveal important family obligations and expectations.

**Remittances and Development**

Migrant money transfers have increased dramatically over the past decade due to international migration (Davis et al., 2010), which explains the growing scholarly interest in remittances globally (Abashin, 2003; De Haas, 2006; Wong, 2006; Osella and Osella, 2000; Akesoon, 2011; Ruiner et al., 2011; Thai, 2012). International development organizations have expressed the hope that direct remittances to families in rural households would reduce poverty and facilitate investment and development (UNDP, 2009; Ratha et al., 2010; Bray and Slavi, 2011; IOM, 2013). Kyrgyzstani migrants’ financial flows served as essential sources of income for non-migrant family members (Bichsel et al., 2005; Sadovskaya, 2006; Thieme, 2008a; Marat, 2009; ICG, 2010; Schoch et al., 2010; Atamanov and van den Berg, 2012; Isabaeva, 2011; Kroeger and Anderson, 2012; Reeves, 2012b; Rubinov, 2010, 2012, 2014). To wit, in 2011, Kyrgyzstan was amongst the World Bank’s (2013) list of 10 largest recipients of remittances relative to GDP globally.

In 2009, a collaborative report on the *Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Labour Migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia* (Lukashova and Makenbaeva, 2009, p. 82), based on a survey of 1,200 households in three southern (and south-western) provinces of Kyrgyzstan, revealed that 27% of transmitted remittances were targeted for investment in livestock. These findings were supported by more detailed analyses of remittances by Nadia Schoch et al. (2010) and of the importance of livestock for rural families (Farrington, 2005; Stammbach, 2009; Steimann, 2011; De la Martiniere, 2012; Kasymov, 2014). The abovementioned report revealed that 50% of these households’ largest expenditure was directed towards housebuilding, renovating, or real estate. According to other studies, migrant family members also bought cars, paid for children’s education (Kroeger and Andersen, 2012; UCA, 2012), financed different rites of passage (Rahmonova-Shwartz, 2012; Reeves, 2012b, 2014; Isabaeva, 2011, Rubinov, 2012, 2014),
and invested in crop farming (Sabates-Wheeler, 2007; Atamanov and van den Berg, 2012). Literature on Kyrgyzstan has indicated migration’s positive effects on rural households (ADB, 2008; Lukashova and Makenbaeva, 2009; Atamanov and van den Berg 2010, 2012), but largely painted a negative picture of villagers’ dependence on remittances and lack of development. Due to the 2014 Russian ruble crash, recent media prognoses have been gloomy regarding its economic impact on Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian states (Lelik, 2015; Lemon, 2015; Trilling, 2015a, 2015b).

Thomas Faist et al. (2013) identified three phases in which the relationship between development and remittances evolved. Initially, in the 1950s and 1960s, the idea of temporary migration to work in the post-war developing industries of the U.S. and Europe was welcomed and was seen as a strategy to improve livelihoods in migrants’ countries of origin. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, ‘structural dependency’ between developed and developing countries was argued to negatively impact the societies and economies of sending countries because out-migration attracted the well-educated. Also, the outmigration of rural young and able-bodied persons was not seen as contributing to regional development largely due to ‘conspicuous consumption in the form of prestigious houses and luxurious festivities’, which revealed households’ growing dependency on remittances (Faist et al., 2013, pp. 69-70; see Cohen, 2001). Finally, as of the mid-1990s, migrants were portrayed as ‘agents of development’ in many policy initiatives of development aid programmes. This phase was also characterised by new rhetoric on ‘cross-border exchanges’ and ‘transnational communities’ suggesting an optimistic view on the effect of migration on the local development of the community (ibid., p. 70). Most importantly, these authors’ historical perspective revealed that ‘development’ as a discourse and as a notion, a post-war establishment, has been associated with many meanings ranging from ‘great transformation, modernisation and economic growth’ to ‘livelihoods of people measured by human development indicators’ to ‘democratic government and good governance’ (ibid., p. 70). Thus, macro-economic analyses – reducing remittance data to numbers – failed to account for the social dynamics of remittances in contemporary transnational families. Such studies also neglected the social and cultural meaning of sustaining family relations seen as meaningful and ‘worth living for’ in the communities of origin by making normative assumptions about what constitutes a ‘productive’ investment (i.e. business over a tushoo-toi).

In this respect, to better understand rationalities and decision-making, or lack thereof, regarding money transfers earmarked for investments among family members, I focus on a set of questions that became apparent during my fieldwork. What are the remittances, or what is being remitted? How are money transfers utilized by family
members? How are decisions made within family hierarchies characterized by age, gender, and position within families? How do families decide in what to invest? My discussion extends these numerical representations of money transfers into social, financial, and symbolic representations of ‘good’ investments articulated and negotiated by migrant family members both ‘here’ and ‘there’. What numbers and percentages overlook is the complicated nature of reflections and negotiations around what Kyrgyz believe they ‘ought’ to spend on. My intention is to shed light on how migrant and non-migrant family members’ negotiations are conducted as these sites embody complicated forms of interaction and are embedded ‘within local structures of value’ (Reeves, 2012b, p. 112).

In this context, I argue that remittances should be seen as constituting family relationships between migrants and non-migrants that are continuously contested, negotiated, and renegotiated across time and space. Using ethnographic interviews with family members and extended kin and participant observations of everyday family life, conducted both in Kyrgyzstan and Russia, this chapter contributes to the literature on remittances by drawing on family practices and the negotiation of responsibilities. I treat remittances as exemplifying intricate and potentially conflict-ridden relations between family and kin members. Specifically, I focus on the nature of the intra-household relations and behaviours around remittances. Remittances are not just coping strategies reflecting family subsistence and material needs, but they are also essential in practicing culturally bound family roles, obligations, and commitments through culturally meaningful practices of expectations. Transnational lives producing fluid family arrangements offer a fascinating insight into how Kyrgyz migrants negotiate their emerging individual and family interests in Russia and manage the demands and expectations of family members in Kyrgyzstan. In doing so, there is a need to look at the dialectic processes of remittance experiences in the family and household context, and not just between those who send and those who receive (Wong, 2006).

**Remittance Arrangements and Decision-Making Processes**

In 2011, Mira connected me with Jamal and her husband Bakyt, Ermek’s nephew, who returned ‘home’ from Russia for the winter. ‘Their case is interesting,’ she said, ‘Bakyt has been actively pushing his youngest brother to marry in order [for the married couple] to look after their aging and widowed father’. Later that year, I accompanied Mira to their house in a nearby village to witness Bakyt’s youngest brother’s marriage. A few plates of food later, I joined Bakyt in the courtyard where he stood over a huge kazan [steel pot], continuously ladling *shorpo* [broth] over meat chunks emerging on surface,
and tasting the hot broth as snowflakes fell from the sky. Covered in a thick sheepskin coat, he responded to my curiosities about his family life with much excitement, ‘You see, we had to push him [to marry]. Belek is the family’s youngest son. Because he is in his 30s already, if he goes back to Yakutsk, he will change his mind’. To my question whether Belek would find a job in the village, Bakyt explained that he would raise livestock, *mal menen el bayip jatat* [people are getting rich just with raising livestock] adding ‘the more livestock you own today, the richer you are’ [*kancha mallyng bolsö, oshoncholuk baisyng bügün*]. To my comments about the 30s being a young age, Bakyt corrected me, ‘They [brother and daughter-in-law] have to look after the household. We even had to buy spoons and forks for the wedding! All of us [siblings] have moved away, the house has been unattended. Now we have to refurbish the house completely’.

Following Bakyt’s emphasis on the importance of livestock, on caring for his aging parent, on helping with his sibling’s important rite of passage, and on preserving his natal household in rural Kyrgyzstan, my discussion of how remittances are utilized back home is situated within family debates around what constitutes a ‘proper’ expenditure. In this vignette, Jamal’s vision of what is ‘proper’ differs from Bakyt’s, as in her eyes, buying land, building a house, or buying a container in Bishkek’s Dordoi market are more tangible, ‘sure things’, than investing in cattle because these relations involve kin-keeping. Quantitative analyses neglect these important family practices of contestations and decision-making about what constitutes a ‘right’ expenditure. Moreover, families make important decisions about who should care after their live assets. Thus, livestock, although material and tangible, carry moral implications due to the implicit need to contract with kin to raise them. Here I follow Madeleine Reeves (2012b), who urged the analysis of Central Asian labour migration within ‘the realm of social obligations and ethical debate: that is, within broader concerns about the proper accumulation and distribution of wealth; about the production and maintenance of respectful relations, and about the meanings and consequences of family absence’ (p. 114). While decisions to send a family member, or members, abroad are overwhelmingly driven by economic needs of families, decisions around utilization of remittances in the country of origin illustrate a complex picture of contradictions in expectations and management of resources. Non-migrant family members, although dependent on remittances, exercise their agency, suggesting migration reshapes the ‘identities of those who spend them’ (Rubinov, 2010, no page). In doing so, there is a need to analyse power hierarchies as culturally embedded according to gender, age, and social position within larger families, where decisions and remittance management behaviours are shaped by, and constitutive of, complex negotiations of family members. Often these decisions are not unified family decisions (Wong, 2006).
Kyrgyz migration offers an insight into family members’ positions within households and cultural expectations that define and constitute social norms, which in turn affect remittances. Although migration can have an emancipatory effect on halting power tensions within households (Mahler and Pessar, 2006), migrants’ remittance strategies depend to a great deal on those who stay behind (Isabaeva, 2011), and are driven by migrants’ continued display of presence in the place of origin. Remittances should also be seen as migrants’ materialized presence, their proxy, a reminder that although far away, their presence lives through their investments and projects back home. Thus, scholars have highlighted remittances’ emancipatory capacity, but here I draw attention to how remittances can potentially also contribute to reproducing domestic hierarchies.

Conversations in Alcha and Yakutsk were strewn with concerns about money transfers. What do they do with money we send home? Is the money I earned through hard work being used thoughtfully? Will I be able to keep my job and remain healthy enough to continue making money? Did they actually buy two sheep and a cow? Will my migration result in shame [uiat] and gossip [ushak] in the village? Why do they only call us to ask for more money? Will I be able to earn towards my child’s wedding/education/tushoo toi [celebration of child’s first steps]? Should we buy a car, build a house, or buy more sheep? When will we stop sending money, and when will we start saving? Will my children working abroad be able to secure their jobs and avoid being caught by the police?

The daily lives of transnational families were haunted by these and other questions, revealing constant economic and moral uncertainties. In unpacking the notion of ‘successful migration’, we need to consider what this means for families in the context of household structure and economy when family members live transnationally. While material remittances were considered more visible and tangible for migrants, these experiences shed light on conceptualizing ‘transnational moralities’ as migrants and non-migrants are ‘differently positioned within the moralities of transnationalism’ (Carling, 2008, p. 1457). The ‘materiality’, as Ho and Hatfield (2011) illuminated, emphasized the ‘tangible attributes of the ‘material’ (p. 709). Based on my ethnography, ‘materiality’ was seen and declared through ‘objects’ and ‘matter’ (ibid., p. 709), such as clothes, jewellery, cars, and ownership of things, such as electronic devices. These objects were seen as ‘material remittance’ for their visibility, distinguishing the social status of the owners from those who did not possess, but also because these items could be foreign, fashionable, or expensive. Some ‘material remittances’ were enacted through actions, such as the construction of houses or barns, the purchase of household items, the renovations of fences, providing food during celebrations, and so on. Therefore, the materiality of remittances reflected not only the visibility and durability of material possessions, but also
how materiality is grounded in everyday life. Such materiality ‘intertwines in everyday life with sociality’ (ibid., p. 710), relations with families, kin, and community members.

The materiality of remittances has become a symbol of migrants’ successes, but also, these same materialities should be seen as pivoting migrants back to their homes of origin. Whether they purchase an apartment, build a house or a barn, replace household furnishings, or procure livestock, these projects keep them invested in their homes materially, socially, and emotionally. When different stages of these projects are celebrated back home, it is through the tois that family members display kin relations. This sense of obligation competes with yet other goals of acquiring material goods. At the same time, managing their investments (both in livestock and building projects) necessitates informal business relations with family members that can be conflict-ridden, highlighting the emotional and moral complexities of transnational kin relations. In this context, remittances are not just about the visibilities of these projects and demonstrations of accumulated wealth, but also about the invisibilities of maintaining trust, pride, and shame while family members are dispersed geographically. While dwelling projects can be seen as physical sites rooting migrants to their homes, building barns and investing in livestock offer particular ways of emplacement that engage migrants in continuous and potentially contentious kin-keeping.

‘Malchylardyn közün ele karap kaldyk’: We Became Dependent on Herders

The abovementioned vignette introduced Bakyt and Jamal who celebrated Belek’s marriage. While Belek was not ‘ready’ for marriage, his family members pushed their youngest brother to take care of their widowed father, who had lived alone for several years. Bakyt’s natal house was located in a village neighbouring Alcha. Its climate was characterized by warm summers, but long, cold winters, and therefore short periods for farming (Steimann, 2011). Bordering China to the south-east, the province was historically traversed by the Silk Road. Today this trade route connected China with the Central Asian market hubs, Bishkek and Almaty (Kazakhstan), and through them, with Russia. However, in modern days, this route did not develop large markets in Naryn, perhaps, due to the province’s remoteness from the rest of the country, poor transport infrastructure, and lack of economic development. Therefore, the region’s economy developed mainly around agriculture, overwhelmingly livestock, where 95% of land was classified as pasture, while only 3% was registered as arable land (Steimann, 2011, p. 77).
In April 2012, I visited Jamal and Bakyt in Yakutsk. Jamal, a 33-year-old professional cook, and Bakyt, her husband, a 35-year-old construction worker, migrated together immediately after their marriage in 2008 despite the financial crisis. I met with Jamal one weekday in Yakutsk city’s centre and travelled by public transport to their residence in the outskirts. On the bus, to my surprise, Jamal confidently spoke aloud in Kyrgyz. Many of my interlocutors in Yakutsk avoided speaking in Kyrgyz and deliberately conversed in Russian to avoid inhospitable looks. The Kyrgyz language could easily be confused with the Yakut language – both Turkic in origin. Jamal felt obliged to act as a guide, ‘Their buses are old; it almost feels like being back in the U.S.S.R’. We arrived in the greenest part of the city, which was a rare oasis in the outskirts, given that the city itself could not grow trees anywhere, ‘This is where the richest of Yakutsk live’, Jamal elucidated as we walked through an alley flanked by private multi-storey houses hidden behind wooden three-metre fences, some of which were built by Central Asian migrants.

Jamal’s cell phone began ringing and suddenly stopped. ‘Maiak’ [literally, ‘light-house flash’], she said. The abrupt single ring signified that Jamal had to return an international call to Kyrgyzstan. ‘So, did you find the medicine?’ Jamal started without greeting her avysyn Samara, her husband’s younger brother Ardak’s wife and the herders of Jamal and Bakyt’s livestock. Samara was calling from their sarai [barn]. One of their cows ‘back home’ had fallen ill with murrain [sharp], an infectious and potentially lethal disease that affected sheep and cattle. ‘The cow was fine only a few weeks ago when we were home, I do not know what could have happened to it’, Jamal expressed her disbelief, but also visible frustration with her limited options. ‘I am not there, what can I do from here?’ she continued, ‘I will tell Bakyt to call you’, she concluded. As we continued walking, she explained that according to customary practice, herders were required to notify immediately owners of their ill-fated cattle. Traditionally, cattle owners either sent the herders money to buy medicine to treat the animals or they arrived personally to deal with the situation. For herders, establishing social networks locally was important as herders often used local veterinarians’ services. Animal owners also consulted private drug store [apteka] personnel who were aware of local treatments, but not well-versed in the diseases themselves. During the Soviet Union, kolkhozes [collective farms] were provided with state veterinarian services, whose responsibility was to regularly immunize livestock and treat diseases. With the privatization of livestock, these responsibilities fell

48 Like most other migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Jamal’s description of Yakutsk, when she first arrived, was filled with negative tones, ‘I could not believe I was going to live here. It was dirty, grey, no greenery. Then I learned food was expensive, nothing natural, but the salary was good, so I am still here’.
to the owners, who used local drug stores to purchase medicine and immunize their cattle annually in the spring before the jailoo season. In the case of severe illness, owners would travel to inspect their sick livestock, and if it was edible, it would be slaughtered. If the owners could not be present, herders sent the slaughtered tusha [carcass] and gave its head to the owners. Otherwise, herders would be asked to bury untreatable (or dead) livestock. Interestingly, Jamal’s telling of the story implied that she did not entirely believe that the cow was actually sick. Rather, she insinuated that her in-laws (Bakyt’s brother’s family) might be lying, especially because they had recently seen their cattle. Jamal implied that the physical distance precluded the herder from sending any evidence, and thus, planted suspicion. Yet, Jamal would not articulate her misgivings directly to her in-laws. However, her frustrations and anger were evident as she talked about their lack of control in maintaining their investments from afar.

**The importance of herding and animal husbandry**

Bakyt was the middle of five brothers and had two married sisters. His younger brother Ardak was the only son to follow in the footsteps of their parents who were professional yak herders on the largest summer alpine pastures in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Livestock was essential for the nomadic Kyrgyz in the pre-colonial era (cf. Kisliakov, 1969; Abmazon, 1971). When the Kyrgyz became a Soviet republic, they were forcefully settled and collectivised in the late 1920s (Fitzherbert, 2000). After World War II, the Kyrgyz SSR’s pastoral skills and seasonal pastures were used to graze sheep and cattle to produce fine merino wool (Fitzherbert, 2000) in addition to meat production. In the context of Naryn province’s lack of arable land (Steimann, 2011), its high-altitude pastoral lands have been historically used for animal husbandry and were famous for meat production. The animal population quickly increased, which also led to pasture degradation (Farrington, 2005). In my fieldwork conversations, few villagers seemed to acknowledge the issue assuring me, ‘we have plenty of land’. Herding was a prestigious profession, even though the Soviet livestock sector was considered to be an ‘unsustainable system’ (Shamsiev, 2007) due to the risk of overgrazing pastures. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent break-up of the collective farms, herders’ households received arable land and animals as private property, which were slaughtered en masse to survive the economic crisis in the early 1990s (Schoch et al., 2010; Stammbach, 2013). Eventually, the numbers resumed (Farrington, 2005; Steimann, 2011). Although animal

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49 For example, the number of sheep fell from 10.3 million in 1989 to 3.7 million in 1996, but the numbers slowly recovered over time. See Shamsiev, 2007; Schoch et al., 2010.
husbandry remained a key component of the rural economy (Steimann, 2011; Kasymov, 2014), herders were nostalgic about their previous support and wages as state employees (Schoch et al., 2010). In present-day Kyrgyzstan, skilful herders offered private services managing villagers’ flocks, which provided them with seasonal or year-round employment. Generally, the villagers with whom I spoke saw increasing their flocks as critical to improving their livelihoods. As Mira asserted, ‘There are many interested villagers offering their services as herders. In fact, those raising livestock are getting rich’!

In rural Naryn, animal husbandry has become an important family subsistence strategy. Nadia Schoch et al. (2010, p. 214) offered three reasons why rural households’ wealth is measured by the number of livestock they own. First, livestock helped households to maintain self-sufficiency. With a dairy cow, households drank tea with milk and enriched their diets with dairy products; and poultry diversified diets through both eggs and meat. Second, animal reproduction served as an ‘investment fund’, through which livestock could easily be sold when cash was needed. Third, livestock provided food for guests during feasts and celebrations with kin. This list, however, omitted the importance of livestock as part of the gift-giving culture among the Kyrgyz, which also played the role of strengthening particular kin ties. Bernd Steimann’s (2011) case studies of two villages in the Atbashy district [raion] of Naryn province showed that few households made a living without livestock, although there were huge disparities in the number of livestock villagers owned. Similarly, Steimann elaborated on livestock having more than just an economic value, but ‘an important social function’ (ibid., pp. 168-169):

Social status and wealth are first and foremost measured by the quantity of livestock a person or a household possesses. Households with little or no livestock are usually considered poor, while local definitions of middle-class and wealthy households vary considerably. […] In qualitative terms, hens and goats are often associated with poverty, while wealthier households can afford to invest in more expensive animals such as merino sheep, horses and yaks. This wider social significance of livestock results from the fact that households do not only eat and sell animals, but also used them to establish and maintain social relations with others. Parents usually endow their children with livestock once they marry and start their own household, and animals are an important part of the dowry. If a young man migrates to an urban area and cannot take along his share of animals, his parents or brother often pool all their children’s livestock and manage it jointly.

During the Soviet times, state herders also owned their own livestock: a flock of sheep or goats, cows, horses, and poultry. Livestock was not just a source of subsistence, a potential cash flow, and food for guests. It also served an important function of keeping and maintaining social ties with kin, friends, and neighbours – especially between villagers and their urban kin. Livestock could be seen as constitutive of and enacting important sets
of kin relations. For example, livestock often served as or were promised as gifts and products from livestock were shared with urban kin as ‘goodies in a bag’ [bashtyk] sent during holidays. In order to celebrate various rites of passage, some livestock were especially fattened [bailangan]. Moreover, the herder’s family in the village ‘looking after’ [karap beret] their urban kin’s flock enhanced their social position and improved their chances within the wider kin network for receiving favours. In return, their urban kin would open their doors for their rural kin children when studying in the city or visiting during summer holidays. By combining kin’s flocks together with the state livestock, a herder’s household secured its social mobility through the relations of ‘mutual indebtedness’ (Werner, 1998) by engaging in reciprocal exchange of labour, social services, and favours.

Seminomadic livestock herding has always been challenging, but after the Soviet Union’s collapse, Kyrgyz herders became ‘completely self-reliant’ (Farrington, 2005, p. 193). Individual herders had to face the following drastically shifting conditions (ibid, p. 193). Many of the public infrastructural developments of the Soviet times (e.g. roads, water systems, power lines, medical clinics) have gradually deteriorated and are lacking necessary repairs. Leftover agriculture machinery has been sold to Chinese scrap-metal dealers. Deforestation due to coal mining has decreased the area of lowland pastures. Finally, wolf kills, which did not affect the collectively owned herds, now represented potential large personal losses for individual herders, as wolves can kill several sheep in an attack. Despite these barriers, livestock is still considered essential to sustaining rural livelihoods.

**Pockets of deceit**

A short period after their arrival, Bakyt and Jamal started sending money home. They both arrived assuming that ‘if it works out, we will stay longer’, which proved true. Although both graduated from Kyrgyz schools, they had also both lived in Bishkek, allowing them to develop their Russian language skills and thereby facilitating their quick adaptation. Bakyt and Jamal prodigiously invested into, and only into, livestock, rationalising it as the most tangible investment that could be converted into cash when necessary:

JAMAL: We arrived in October 2008, and by December we sent money for 10 cows; they used to only cost 12,000 Som[each; 200GBP]. We both started working a week after we arrived. Bakyt also made shabashka [unofficial cash], working in cemeteries. Over time, we increased [cattle] to 12 cows. <pause> Then [the following year] we were told that somehow only seven [of our] cows were left. I
understand that one cow died because it could not give birth, but that is also 
because they did not look after it well. Then we were told one cow died somehow 
stuck in mud. <pause> Seven out of 12 were female cows. During the year we 
were told that we had seven calves, <pause> but by the time we got home, we 
learned that they lied to us about the number of cows they actually purchased.

Managing material remittances transnationally was a difficult task and filled with 
emotional and logistical traps. This couple’s case was characterized with alleged 
fraudulence and cheating:

JAMAL: I was so upset, so angry since we returned from ‘home’ [Kyrgyzstan]. 
<pause> I am angry every time he [her husband] says ‘livestock’ (‘mal’ degende 
jinim kelet)! I go mad! I cannot listen to this anymore <pause> I respond, ‘Let’s 
buy land!

These narratives excerpted from our discussions reveal the core of Bakyt and Jamal’s daily 
arguments. Like many seasonal migrants, the couple visited ‘home’ in December and 
returned to Russia around early March. Some years, both stayed year-round. Bakyt worked 
renovating the flats and houses of middle- and upper-class households, a thriving business 
in Yakutsk, using skills that he learned renovating apartments in Bishkek.50 Having 
established the reputation as a hard worker and having made local connections, Bakyt 
found employment less than a week after his return to Russia. Jamal was not working yet 
because they were debating whether to move to a Yakutsk suburb to start their own 
business with hopes of increasing their earnings and investing into their ‘businesses’ in 
Russia and Kyrgyzstan. After two years of cooking in local cafes, Jamal was confident she 
could run her own cafè. She and Bakyt were living in an upper-class Yakut family’s dacha 
[summer house] that he had refurbished, and in which they house-sat during the non- 
summer season at a reduced rent.

Jamal did not stop talking for the next two days that I stayed with them. In the 
absence of her husband, she clarified that I was the only other person with whom she 
shared her emotions besides him, because she did not dare to discuss any negative aspects 
of her family life with either her natal family or with her husband’s kin. When I inquired 
in general about how migration was affecting their family and others, and why livestock 
was a choice of their investment, she cried out, ‘Why speak of others, when there is so 
much going on in our own families’? Jamal explained that over two years of sending 
remittances, she and her husband kept records of how much money they sent, how many 
cows, sheep, and horses they wanted to purchase, wrote down how many they were told

50 Bakyt hoped to find enough clients in Yakutsk wanting to refurbish flats, which he 
learned to do in Bishkek, but it was only a recent development in Yakutsk, according to 
him.
by Samara and Ardak were purchased, and had a certain vision of the materiality of their remittances. The couple also imagined that their cattle would reproduce, increasing in number. When they returned, however, their actual number of cattle fell far short of their expectations. When Jamal attempted to find out the reasons for discrepancies, Samara contested some of the details and claimed to have lost their records. Jamal resented that during the preceding two years, Samara and Ardak had only notified them of some of the casualties. Unfortunately, I could not verify Ardak and Jamal’s account because when I returned from Russia, they had migrated to the pastures. While Ardak and Samara were paid per cattle per month, and received cash for hay over the winter season, the herders were responsible for all other accrued costs.

The transnational perspective posits that ‘responsibilities and obligations do not cease’ when migrants move and other family members stay behind (Faist et al., 2013, p. 31). Transnational practices also impact both migrants and non-migrants, indicating that flows do not just go one way (Isabaeva, 2011; Faist et al., 2013). In this transnational family, Bakyt organised his family entrepreneurship of increasing livestock, his ‘investment fund’, by trusting his younger brother Ardak, because he was his family member: ‘Bir tuuganynda!’ [He is my kin!]. For three years, Bakyt sent money to Ardak and his wife Samara, who sustained their family of five through herding. Each spring, they moved to the summer pastures together with their three young children. Ardak, who did not own a vehicle, usually led flocks of his clients’ animals to his sarai [stable] via an hour-long horseback ride from Alcha. Ardak’s family lived in a small two-room mud-hay house without electricity and access to clean water.51 Their socio-economic status could be described as poor by anyone visiting their house. However, the stable where he kept over eight dozen sheep and a few dozen cattle and horses, mostly clients’ livestock, told another story. Bakyt was proud of his brother for following his father’s path, having retained skills that remained highly valued in the village, and he genuinely expected his sibling to be responsible for his entrusted livestock. Bakyt and Jamal could have entrusted Jamal’s kin who were herders in southern Kyrgyzstan, but Bakyt wanted to help his brother’s family ‘to get on their feet’ [butuna tursun dep] in difficult village conditions. Jamal suspected her brother-in-law’s family of mismanaging their entrusted livestock. They started receiving phone calls shortly after their return to Yakutsk. Jamal was

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51 When I visited Ardak’s sarai in 2012, I learned that co-villagers have been communally arranging with the local governance office in Alcha to bring electricity to the remote villages. However, Ardak’s household was not ready to contribute to electricity lines stretching to his house and sarai. I was told that each household could pay around 50,000 som [714 GBP] if they wanted access to electricity.
annoyed because ‘they did not call to ask how we are, whether we made it alright, but they only call to ask for money’:

JAMAL: I had a few units (edinitsy) left on the phone, so I asked, ‘What’s the matter?’ He goes, ‘at alyp beresingerbi? (Will you buy [me] a [riding] horse?’ Janym kashaidy. [Literally: ‘my soul was blinded’, meaning, I could not believe my soul he said that!] If we arrived just yesterday, what horse?! A herder without a horse?! <pause> A few days later, my avysyn called again, ‘Are you going to help with the roof? Bakyt promised to help. Tiles cost 40,000 som [571 GBP]’, she said. I was speechless! All of this could have been discussed when we were in the village, but no, they call us now.

MEDINA: What did you do?

JAMAL: We said we had no money, we just got here! <pause> Then a few days later they called again asking for money for fodder (malga chöp). They said nothing [about fodder] before we left the country. We just returned from ‘home’ having spent tons of money for the wedding, ash [memorial celebration], seeing kin. They know it! <pause> I’m just surprised why this happens between relatives. Why do they lie? They buy a cow for 42,000 [600 GBP], but say they bought for 45,000 [643 GBP]. If they were not our relatives, they would have to pay back to us. But because they are, they did not.

These narratives raise a number of themes that require further unpacking. First, they vividly demonstrate stayers’ ability to manipulate, demand, and put pressure on migrants in their absence. These demands could also be interpreted as naïve expectations of remittances on the part of stayers. The lack of direct, eye-to-eye contact during phone conversations made it difficult, in Jamal’s words, for them to have a meaningful conversation. However, the fact that Samara and Ardak did not openly address these issues back in Kyrgyzstan, raised Jamal and Bakyt’s suspicions. In Jamal’s words, Samara and Ardak should have understood that they had spent a lot of money during their visit. On the other hand, an open conversation would have been painful due to Jamal and Bakyt’s suspicions about their mismanaged remittances. Awareness of the dynamics within Ardak and Samara’s household allowed Jamal to understand that they needed cash, ‘So, I guess when they realised that we are not going to help them with their roof right away, they decided to ask for fodder for our livestock’, which they could not refuse.

Kyrgyz families’ default delegation of their livestock to patrilineal kin continued despite such mismanagement. Traditionally, men such as Bakyt reproduced patriarchy by insisting on exclusively helping their ‘own’ kin. Having received his brother’s promise that ‘he will take care of [their] livestock,’ Bakyt was confident ‘everything will be fine’. When I inquired why they continued trusting Ardak, Jamal believed her husband was too proud [namystanyp koidu] to ask her kin. Jamal’s descriptions of her siblings, living in the mountainous villages of Osh province, suggested they were socio-economically better off
than Ardak’s family. She rationalised that her kin had ‘tighter’ relations than her husband’s kin, based on the size of cash flows between siblings when ritually marking good [jakshylyk] and bad [jamandyk] life events. Yet, from Bakyt’s perspective, Samara, his sister-in-law, was to blame for everything:

BAKYT: It is she [Samara] behind all this! She does it all behind Ardak’s back! It does not sound like my brother at all. We do not know from here what happens there. We only find out the details when we go there.

After all, Bakyt had to choose between punishing his brother’s family by entrusting their livestock to someone else, thereby decreasing their income, or continuing to maintain brotherly ties and overlooking their suspected pocketing of money. He opted to give his brother’s family another chance. Jamal continued, ‘I am just surprised how this can happen between relatives. Why do they lie?! If they were in a tough situation and told us, we would have helped them out. I think they just used part of our money to build their house’. Jamal compared her natal family with her husband’s, ‘Both of my parents are alive. They live together. My mother cares for the household. That is why my family is better off’. Bakyt’s family was characterised by seven siblings and their widowed father separated and living on their own, with the youngest single brother working in Russia. In rural Kyrgyzstan, elderly people’s lives were strongly dependent on their children’s support (cf. Ablezova et al., 2008; Hegland, 2010), which is why the marriage of the youngest son was considered paramount for the family.

Remittances create opportunities to create pockets of deceit among kin. In a similar case, 28-year-old Aziz, Askar’s neighbourhood friend, sent 200,000 som [2,857 GBP] home during his nine months of seasonal work in Yakutsk. He dreamed about moving out of his brother’s house, buying his own house, and driving a car. Aziz sent his earnings to his older brother to buy cattle while he was working in Russia. His wife and daughter stayed behind, living with his brother’s family. Aziz knew that some of his remittances helped provide daily food and clothes for his daughter and his unemployed brother’s children. Aziz heard repeatedly about various cattle that his brother had purchased and imagined his prospects back home. However, when he returned to Alcha with plans of building his own house, he learned that his brother ‘had to sell [Aziz’s] cattle’ to pay towards unexpected medical expenses following complications after his nephew’s birth and his niece’s deteriorating health condition. Aziz’s brother apologized, but assured him that he would migrate to Russia to pay him back, but Aziz consoled himself:

AZIZ: They survived with the power of money. <pause> Drugs, hospital fees, payments to doctors, transportation to Bishkek <pause> I am grateful that my nephew and niece are alive, aman bolsun [let them be safe]. Unchugalbait
ekensing bir tuugan bolgondon kiyin [I could not utter a word because they are my kin].

Aziz’s inability to word his feelings, that is, to demand that his brother return his earnings, about how his remittances were utilised without his consent, stemmed from his brother’s recognition and expectation that Aziz would have felt obligated as a bir tuugan [relative] during such critical times. For his brother, asking Aziz’s permission was unnecessary, as he expected that Aziz would have told him to use his cattle. Aziz’s toleration of such deceit is a powerful demonstration of how being a relative [bir tuugan] is more meaningful than money that was earned through hard work. It also demonstrates how in rural Kyrgyzstan, livestock truly represents a bond that can be converted into cash when necessary. It is striking that his younger brother deceived Aziz instead of openly discussing the heart-breaking situation, which his brother would likely have understood and tried to help. Some conversations were not deemed necessary because the assumption that a brother would offer assistance was a given. The siblings were a family, and his remittances were used for the family’s needs. In Aziz’s understanding, his brother’s thinking was that when life was tough, it seemed unnecessary to ask for his permission, as he was far away. Moreover, due to his family’s poverty and lack of connectedness with kin, they could not have hoped for external support. Neighbours also discussed why Aziz’s wife left him during his migration. Aziz was told that his wife knew that all of his remittances were spent and that she could not live with the realisation that their economic situation would not improve after Aziz’s return. His migration to Yakutsk left him divorced, with a child to raise alone, and back to where he started. No matter how hard Aziz worked abroad imagining and constructing his vision of future, paradoxically, his remittances were insecure in the hands of his immediate family members. Eventually, he was able to recover 20,000 som [285 GBP] that he lent his uncle for his son’s wedding and which Aziz used to buy an old house in Alcha to start a new household with his daughter. Migrants remitting towards material investments could visualise their tangible, calculable remittances from afar, but could not control their management back home if these relations were built with immediate kin. How then are we to interpret the ambivalence towards kin in relation to trusting them with remittances?

In his study of the Cape Verdean migration to the Netherlands, Jørgen Carling (2008) suggested we think with the notion of ‘asymmetries’ when trying to understand relationship dynamics behind practices such as sending remittances. Carling explained that asymmetries occur when both migrants and non-migrants experience ‘vulnerability and ascendancy at different times and in different contexts’ (ibid., p.1453). In addressing the moral dimensions of transnationalisms, Carling contended that physical distance creates
communication gaps. Even though long-distance communication has become more accessible, the process of communication can still require great effort, as evidenced by Jamal and Samara’s debate. Carling further deliberated that even when migrants and non-migrants keep in touch regularly, migrants cannot know with certainty how the remittances are spent and how non-migrants’ lives are affected by it. He offered an example from another study by Azam and Gubert (2002) who argued that gaps in communication between senders and receiving farmers in Mali were used strategically by the receivers, who announce fictitious disasters as a way of ‘eliciting and managing remittances’ (in Carling, 2008, p. 1463). Carling’s research mirrored my own findings, demonstrating similar examples of non-migrant relatives’ pocketing money intended for investment. In one case, his interviewee sent 100,000 euros to Cape Verde to build his house, which he was told was being built, but when he returned home, there was nothing there. Carling argued that such ‘anecdotes’ of ‘being cheated’ have become so widespread that migrant’s vulnerability and non-migrant embezzlement are perceived ‘as a common risk in relations’ between senders and receivers (ibid., p. 1464).

In a similar light, non-migrants’ views about migrants’ lives abroad is based on the limited information they receive. Ruben Gowricharn’s (2004) study of migration to the Netherlands showed how non-migrants in Surinam hold commonly accepted, morally founded entitlements for support from their migrant relatives. Jamal and Bakyt felt they had to cope with Bakyt’s siblings’ expectations to remit. Bakyt helped his youngest brother, Belek, and Bakyt’s brother-in-law to purchase tickets and find seasonal opportunities to improve their financial situations. Such arrangements, however, were filled with ‘emotional trappings’ (Wong, 2006):

JAMAL: Bakyt’s in-law arrived here in spring, when it was warm. We found a job for him. He worked and took home good money. He had no idea what the winter was like here. He stayed with us, did not chip in for rent. His food was for free; I made bread and cooked every day after coming back from work cooking all day.

Jamal’s disappointment with her non-migrant in-laws related to what she perceived as their lack of appreciation for her efforts to make their lives easier and their lack of understanding of their sacrifices. ‘We do not even buy clothes here, and that is the reason why we are able to collect money, but they do not see it, and they do not understand that we work hard’. All of these examples underscore that the ‘remittances-as-development’ rhetoric popular in social media and policy research has ignored the fact that the materiality of remittances is accompanied by sociality in the everyday lives of transnational families. Such reports failed to observe that families continue remitting towards investments they considered meaningful; however, these decisions were contested
within their families and challenged by various external and internal conditions. These monetary flows should not be seen as only resulting in materialities, but also as causing moral, emotional dilemmas and intra-family tensions, which is what makes a family – ‘family’.

‘Land Does Not Eat Grass’! Insecurities and Uncertainties of Investments

Monetary relations entrusted to kin and managed transnationally can be forged. Livestock remittances offer key insight into the insecurities of investments and how they affect relations of trust among kin. In general, remittances were considered ‘successful’ if they were invested into material goods, into something visible and tangible. Given the general perception that livestock was a ‘symbol of wealth’ (Schoch et al., 2010, p. 215), I wanted to understand why Jamal insisted on buying land and building a house and opposed investing in livestock. She spoke of her vision of what happens to their remittances:

JAMAL: So when we were there [in Kyrgyzstan], they showed [to us]… this is your horse, that is your cow, so of course, I believed them. But then we left and went back [a year later] and there was nothing. So you wonder whether they lied [to us] all along <pause> you see, this is why I tell my husband if we instead bought a piece of land for 4,000 dollars, it would have been 6,000 [USD] by now. It [land] does not eat grass! <pause> When I say that to my husband, he is furious, he cannot see his life without livestock!

MEDINA: Did you discuss with your kin before you left? Did you count your cattle together?

JAMAL: I said to my husband that we are not going to deal with livestock anymore. You see, if you buy 10 cows, you expect that one year later, you would at least have 15 with calves, the same with horses and sheep. But instead of 15, they are not even giving our initial 10 back.

MEDINA: So what is it then? Why do you think this is happening?

JAMAL: I am sure they just spent the money we sent on something else! <pause> They are building their own house. <pause> They did not even buy grass for the money we sent, which we learned later. <pause> We all make plans with money we have. Every time we were on the phone, I asked Ardak, ‘Are you writing down how much you spent, when you bought?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ I remembered how once a cow was 25,000 som [357 GBP], another time it was 30,000 som [429 GBP], so I was like ‘ok’. I do not know if they were just telling me some numbers, but that is how I kept my notes, and when we wanted to talk to Ardak when we were back home, he pretended that he could not find his notebook until we left. So he never explained how we ended up with only seven cows.
Migrants’ absence at home was filled with emotional spaces of uncertainties. Bakyt and Jamal were emotionally charged after their return because only then could they analyse what happened back home. They left the village disappointed, keeping their anger and frustration to themselves:

JAMAL: I have nothing against Belek, the youngest brother. He just got married. He did not have a family yet. Still he tried to sell his cattle, renovate the house, and prepare for his wedding. Bakyt sent money to Belek to help with house materials. But that’s unseen money [körünborgон akcha]. I told my husband we will not send money for food anymore, because it is unseen money. I would rather give the same amount towards something specific, for example, bash at [horse]. The small byky-chykyl [nitty-gritty] is unseen. Nobody showed respect to us for what we did at home. We took care of all the costs of the wedding celebration. Nobody really had us over as guests after the celebration was over. Knowing that we were moving far away, nobody saw us off. Instead, Bakyt bought a big sheep for 7,000 som [100 GBP] and left for ata [his father] so that they could drink shorpo [soup]. And I feel most unhappy about the fact that his [Bakyt’s] name is not deservedly praised. Instead of saying that Bakyt brought his family together over this celebration, he is discussed and criticised. Some of his siblings said, ‘he did not have to spend so much money’. If outsiders [chuzhoilor] said it, fine, but why would his own siblings say it?! Aitkandyn oozu jaman, yilagandyn közü jaman [Those who speak have a bad mouth; those who cry have bad eyes]. Bakyt always burned [küiört] for his family. He has been the one gluing it together. He worked so hard and took his mother to hospitals. He worked and never accumulated his money, but spent it on his family and siblings. He left for Moscow after his mother died. He worked and sent 1,000 USD and asked his brothers to buy cattle for him. When he returned, they gave him a few goats. When he told them to replace his cattle, he was looked down on [jaman körüstö] by his eldest brothers. ‘Berebiz-da, emne!’ [We will return, what’s the problem!] was their response, but nothing was replaced.

Jamal’s narratives are illustrative of a number of issues that are at stake in family relations. They point to a range of challenges as transnational family relationships are constituted across time and space. Within his natal family structure, Bakyt was neither the oldest nor the youngest brother, social positions which prescribe a set of normative expectations in Kyrgyz culture. The youngest son is expected to care for his parents and their natal home; the oldest brother often serves as a secondary parent. However, Bakyt felt responsible to help his siblings regardless. Yet, Jamal felt indignant towards Bakyt’s kin for not showing the level of respect that Bakyt deserved. Showing respect ‘appropriately’, in Jamal’s perception, could have taken the form of an invitation for a meal by his siblings thanking him for the support that he had provided over years and wishing them ‘good luck’ in Russia.

Those who speak have a bad mouth; those who cry have bad eyes. Jamal used this Kyrgyz proverb, which implied two points. For one, she recognized herself as someone

52 Bash at, literally a horse head, refers to a wedding gift to the father of the bride.
who discussed domestic affairs when she should not take domestic problems out of the private sphere. Second, she acknowledged that by ‘crying’ or being upset about family issues, she is not resolving, but giving up on them. Jamal felt the need to express what had been bothering her and could not discuss her problems with anyone in Yakutsk. All of these emotions have been influencing her predisposition to diversify their future investments. Otherwise, if they lost their invested remittances again, they would suffer *uiat* [embarrassment]. Her suggestion that land, a house, or a stall (container) in Dordoi market would not require additional costs, because land (or any of these investments) does not eat grass, and yet would represent some property value is a powerful way to argue that some tangible and visible remittances can be more material. Her deliberations were based on her diminishing trust towards livestock remittances, that although are visible, were not materialising as they had expected. However, for Bakyt, life back home could not be possible without livestock, despite its many risks. For Bakyt, livestock defined him as herders’ son, as a Narynian [Naryndyk], as someone who grew up in the mountains, eating copious amounts of good meat and drinking *kymys* [mare’s milk] when he wanted. While Bakyt did not plan to live like a herder, he did not want to relinquish his idyllic vision.

Migrants’ testimonials bring us back to how successful remittances were measured by their visibility, in their ‘materialness’. These testimonials again show that remittances are not just material in form, but they have moral dimensions and can be a source of pride, respect, prestige, and satisfaction, but also of shame, embarrassment, indignation, and condemnation. That is, not all material goods can be considered equally material. Once Jamal realized that Bakyt’s family did not appreciate their efforts in preparing the festive wedding table conspicuously consuming, in her estimates, 30,000 som (429 GBP), she resented not having contributed otherwise for the wedding, by buying a horse for that sum. Unlike food, a horse, given its symbolic importance in Kyrgyz culture and its massive physical presence, would have been at the centre of his kin’s conversations and more valuable than the ‘unseen’ food.

**Monetization of Kin Ties**

As my study has revealed, siblings and extended kin in transnational families increasingly engaged in monetary relations. According to many villagers, the establishment of monetary relations among kin were quickly growing phenomena, also changing the dynamic of relations between family members. For example, we observed previously that Bakyt paid his brother Ardak for his herding services. Many villagers assured me that paying family members was not the practice during the ‘good old Soviet
days’, when herders agreed to look after kin’s livestock without formal compensation. In return, they were informally thanked by kin with various gifts and presents, but also through blat, the economy of favours (cf. Ledeneva, 2006). For Ardak, it was a valuable opportunity to tend his brothers’ livestock for a fee [akysyna] and through it he supported his family of six. In 2011, the going rates for herding livestock were at least 25 som [0.36 p] for one head of sheep and 150 som [1.8 GBP] for a horse or a cow respectively per month. According to Jamal, Ardak’s 2011 summer jailoo herd included nearly 600 animals from April through November, including his other clients’ livestock. In addition to the monthly payments, herders’ families freely used the output produced by animals during the herding season. For example, Ardak’s wife returned from the jailoo season with over 50 litres of ‘yellow butter’ [sary mai], 20 kilograms süzmö [tart dairy product], and over 50 litres of kymys [mare’s milk], which could be preserved and consumed over the winter or sold to villagers upon arrival. Jamal learned from some neighbours that Samara sold the produce to relatives and neighbours. Such sales characterised another changing tendency in village life. While some encouraged kin to find ways to sustain their families, other kin criticised such practices, considering them ‘wrong’. Largely, however such practices were normalised in poor families justifying the need to sustain their families.

Monetized family relations were sites of conflict among kin. My observations suggest that in critical moments, relations with immediate kin were more likely to be flawed than those with distant kin. Mira’s family also used Ardak and Samara’s services to care for their livestock. Her son elaborated on why they ‘should not entrust livestock to relatives’ any longer:

ASKAR: Although we pay them just like everybody else per cattle per month. <pause> Yes, they take care of them well over the summer, and yet each year they lose our cattle, of course, they lose others’ cattle too, and you cannot save yourself from trouble, but my mom does not tell them anything when they lose our cattle, so over years relatives got too free-willed. I suspect they just slaughter our cattle or sell them for income, and just tell them they lost it <pause> how could we prove they did not? We cannot. <pause> Dad never complains, he lets it go, he does not like conflicts, dealing with his kin over cattle and money. So, Mom deals with it, but I think she should either ask our cattle back or give it to another herder, but they do not want to look bad [jaman körünüp] and break kin relations.

Two years after completing my fieldwork, I learned from Mira over the phone that her family ceased using Ardak’s herding services. For years, Mira also had fought her husband

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53 By the 2013–2014 season, during a phone interview with Mira, I learned that prices increased to 30 som [0.43 p] per sheep, and 200–300 som [2.8–4.3 GBP] per cattle or horse.
Ermek to move their livestock to Mira’s distant kin. Ermek opposed until Mira and her sons’ continued insisting won:

MIRA: It is apparently better to deal with non-relatives. We pay for their services, just like we paid our relatives. But in this case, they tell you exactly how many birthed, they hand you exactly the amount of livestock you expected to have. <pause> Relatives think, ‘ah, they will not say anything to us’ and they get away with it, because we would not fight with our relatives. Alys tuugandyn arasynda syi, urmat bolot eken. Evidently, far kin relations are more likely to be based on respect and dignity.

Mira and Ermek opted to entrust the care of their livestock to Mira’s maternal in-laws. Still, they were not strangers, but alys tuugan [distant kin]. Considering the nature of sibling relationships, I wondered ‘why continue entrusting one’s investment to (immediate) family members who have not proven trustworthy?’ Globally, similar questions were raised by other researchers. In a study of Filipino migrants in Italy, Filomeno Agiular (2013, p. 351) used Janet Carsten’s (2000) cultures of relatedness to show how Western optics of ‘nuclear family’ fail to explain kinship obligations to ‘extended family’. From this perspective, kin ties were ‘social processes’, therefore, they were more than just a set of formal categories. Bakyt’s sense of obligation to his younger siblings exhibited all three drivers of remittances described by Lucas and Stark (1985): altruism, self-interest, and mutually beneficial arrangements. But kinship was ‘at the forefront of having kin’ (Aguilar, 2013, p. 351). From their early ages, older siblings are expected to care for younger siblings. This pattern of supporting siblings holds even after younger siblings are married and live separately, because they maintain their relatedness. Similarly, in the Filipino village of Paraiso, older brothers sacrificed for younger siblings, while the latter were not expected to display similar altruism. Younger siblings’ appreciation was not expected, although younger siblings could extend help through other practices. However, migration could threaten the close bonds between siblings (Aguilar, 2013), and when tensions arose, the goal was to manage it, ‘as divisions can be deep, painful, and lasting, precisely because these conflicts transgress and reverse the close bonds expected of siblings’ (p. 361). Although Bakyt gave Ardak several chances, in 2014, I learned from Jamal that Bakyt decided to transfer his livestock to his newly married youngest brother Belek. Although Bakyt found a new herder, he continued entrusting his cattle within the family. This act demonstrated two things: first, the nuclear family continued support and importance of patrilineal kin ties, and second, investment in livestock remained significant as an insurance policy, as opposed to the options preferred by Jamal, the dwelling projects or investing in future business. Because Belek lived in their ancestral house and looked after their elderly father, Bakyt and Jamal felt morally
obliged to help his youngest sibling. Entrusting their cattle to Belek would employ him and potentially improve his young family. This case puts forward cultural values in practice as exemplified by remittances invested into what is meaningful to rural families: bir tuugan [kin] and livestock. The subsequent section will demonstrate that monetization of ties was not limited to livestock only.

Barn Building

House building projects reflect transnational migrant dreams worldwide (Pellow, 2003; Leinaweaver, 2009; Dalakoglou, 2010; Boccagni, 2013b). In the case of Kyrgyz migrants, dwelling projects were also popular, but the processes of family negotiations has received scarce attention. Migrant remittances towards dwelling projects involved building new houses, refurbishing [remont] existing houses, buying land in order to build houses, or purchasing flats. Nonetheless, two of the three families with whom I lived invested into barns for perhaps obvious reasons. Mira and Ermek’s migrant children built an entirely new barn having demolished a few small structures, for which they invested 50,000 som (714 GBP). Burul eje’s family (see Figure 6.1) rebuilt the existing barn, upgraded its roof and ability to withstand cold temperatures, and enlarged it to house future cattle investments. Both families could not see their households without some sheep and cattle, but enlargement of barns meant envisioning families sustaining themselves through livestock. This aspect of transnational families is an understudied phenomenon, which contributes to my argument that remittances that were considered successful were materialised into goods that could be visible, seen. These are ways in which remittances visibly add to rural development. However, even small dwelling constructions, such as barns, allow us to examine family negotiations of kin obligations, shedding light onto the changing family relations characterized by monetization of family ties. The discussion is not so much about the building of barns, but how remittances ‘enliven’ cultural practices by redefining and challenging local identities (Rubinov, 2012, p. 142). Moreover, while houses can be built even if migrants will not come back to live there (Thieme, 2008a, b; Dalakoglou, 2010), or might be sold or resold, the construction of barns and accumulation of livestock suggests that transnational incomes offer a new kind of imagination for local development. Barns, as fixed forms of material culture, placed within particular rural domestic economies, are increasingly likely to pivot undecided migrants towards home at some point and invigorate the return of the urban-rural mobilities.

In autumn of 2011, Burul eje, a 68-year-old widowed grandmother, found out that she had to tend her livestock throughout the winter on her own. For three years, Burul had
arranged with her eldest son’s in-laws to tend her cattle throughout the year. Villagers expected the fall harvest would yield less grass and hay due to low precipitation, which they assumed would raise the price of fodder by spring. This situation created several problems for Burul. She had to be ready to care for livestock through winter. She also cared for her two elementary school-age grandchildren, the children of her migrant daughter living in Russia’s Novosibirsk. Burul had six children: two daughters and four sons, two of whom were migrants. Her youngest son, Kadyr, was determined to invest in livestock since he left for Russia’s Sakhalin in June 2011, where he was employed as a long-distance truck driver. Having consulted with his mother and wife, Altyn, Kadyr agreed to send money towards refurbishing their old two-room barn and building a new stable beside the barn (see Figure 5.1). Moreover, Burul had to procure fodder for livestock before the cattle arrived in December from summer pastures.

When I lived with Burul’s family in October 2011, two hired local men and her second son Janybek had been working on the barn [sarai]. Built in the 1960s along with the house they lived in, the barn was small, had never been renovated, and was falling apart. I learned from Burul that she invited her second son, Janybek, from Bishkek to oversee the construction process. Over the dinner table eating plov with homemade bread, she expressed her concerns over the hired men’s diligence and discipline. Although she paid for their labour in advance, the men repetitively suspended construction due to what Burul suspected were their bouts of binge-drinking. When the men did not show up the next morning, Janybek called his older brother in Alcha, who brought his teenage son and continued where the workers left off. In a mountainous Narynian village, time was a huge factor in autumn construction. Winters arrived earlier than the rest of the country; therefore, construction could easily be halted by sudden snowfall. The barn had to be finished not only before the cattle arrived, but before temperatures dropped below zero. Burul regretted the fact that she paid the two villagers in advance. The men were from the village, acquaintances from one household earning towards wedding preparations of one worker’s son. Their failure to show up was immediately tied to alcohol consumption, ‘Ayildyn erkekeri buzuldu [The village spoiled our men]. They all drink today, do very little. If they start anything, they do not finish’. Janybek joined the conversation, ‘Nowadays nobody helps’, with a smile on his face as he recalled some memories:

JANYBEK: There used to be times in our childhood when we were taken away by trucks and put to work in a field by other villagers. <pause> We always helped our neighbours, if any of our neighbours were in the process of building something, my dad would send one of us to give a hand. The same they did if we were busy working. Today nobody helps. Instead, if you pick up a shovel, so do they. See, the
At first, my understanding, based on conversations with Burul and Janybek, was that Janybek had temporarily left his children in Bishkek in order to help with the construction. They were reticent about sharing information about the barn’s expenses, so it was unclear why his brothers living in Alcha would not help their mother. However, a few days later, when Burul’s daughter-in-law, Altyn, and I became more familiar, she softened towards me and explained:

ALTYN: My husband sent money to build the sarai. He sent 30,000 som [430 GBP] towards the construction payment. Three men were to be hired. I gave the money to Janybek, so he paid the workers. <pause> Last year I left my husband. I had disagreements with my mother-in-law [Burul]. I have my own house here in the village. A month later my husband came after me and we decided to live separately [from his mother]. This year I came back [moved in with Burul] here only recently, because of my husband. Every time he calls me he asks if I am in his natal home, or my own home. I do not want to make him sad and worry about his mother.

Decisions and actions around whom the migrants sent money to shifted the power dynamics within the household. A week before Janybek planned to go back to Bishkek and therefore complete the barn, he expected the rest of the construction materials. The family members were furious to have learned that Altyn had returned with six sheep from the Sunday market. When Altyn was at work, her brothers-in-law furiously criticised their youngest brother’s decision to send money to his wife rather than their mother, Burul. At the same time, the sons were careful not to show their displeasure of Altyn in her presence, fearing that their mother would be repeatedly left alone with grandchildren if another conflict arose between them.

These narratives offer a powerful insight into changing family relations and the normalisation of the monetisation of kin ties considered in the previous section. They reveal fundamental tensions between the needs of the nuclear family and obligations to the extended family. The fact that neither Janybek nor Burul admitted that Janybek was being paid by his youngest brother to build their mother’s barn was illustrative of changing norms of kin help [jardam]. Altyn was indignant with her brother-in-law for accepting payment instead of gifting his assistance. At the same time, the unemployed Janybek justified earning money by working on his brother’s house and sustaining his own nuclear family and children temporarily left in Bishkek. Kadyr estimated and sent 30,000 som [429 GBP] to hire three workers, but Janybek paid 1,000 som to two villagers, 7,000 som [100 GBP] to his nephew who helped and kept the rest of 22,000 som [314 GBP]. The vignettes illustrate the contradictions of transnational family lives. The desire to support
siblings and extended family members contrasted with growing normalisation of monetary relations that were inherently fraught with tension.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the investment of remittances into livestock and building barns, the specific kinds of remittances Alcha villagers considered meaningful in their daily lives, and the specific kinds of remittances that have been understudied in the migration literature. Jamal’s exclamation that her husband ‘cannot see his life without livestock’ largely resonated with the importance placed on rural families’ livelihood strategies in Naryn province (Steimann, 2011, p. 83; UCA, 2012; Kasymov, 2014). According to a household survey, one-third of remittances in three of Kyrgyzstan’s provinces were invested into livestock (Lukashova and Makenbaeva, 2009), which is significant considering the diversification of remittances.

Contrary to development and migration literature, my empirical research demonstrates that transnational families strategized over how best to invest their accumulated resources to improve their livelihoods. Largely, these projects included daily sustenance needs, house and barn building, livestock, clothing, household items, and **tois**. I have argued that we consider the materiality of remittances existing side by side with the socialities of families’ daily lives. Previous large-scale quantitative studies of remittances failed to reveal the gender and kin-keeping practices that motivated decision-making processes. These dynamics reveal specific cultural ways in which different family members negotiated remittances bringing to the fore tradition of the patrilineality reinforced by men and continued contestations of women to change the status quo. In doing so, I have argued the need to look at remittances not just as economic (sustainability), but as constituting relationships between migrant and non-migrant family members that were continuously negotiated, causing tension within families and kin. Thus, I stressed that, in general, successful remittances were seen as material, tangible, and visible, but remittances also can be seen as ‘social’ and ‘moral’. Some material remittances were considered more material: while tangible, livestock could be a risky investment, given their propensity to wander of, become ill, or die. In contrast, a piece of land or a flat was viewed as more reliable assets.

In the context of how migration and remittances have affected social relations of transnational family members, there is a growing tendency to financially support close kin at the expense of extended kin. Remittances have affected transnational families in a contradictory way. While such monetary relations supported and improved non-migrant
extended family members’ lives, these relationships were fraught with strains and increasingly considered not to be mixed with money because of lack of responsibility. As my cases revealed, migrants considered it easier to deal with non-kin or distant relatives in managing their assets than to manage with the potential conflict, arguments, resentment, and subsequent strain on ties in dealings with close kin. Although initially, primacy was given to patrilineal kin, there are some emerging shifts in entrusting livestock for care to other than patrilineal kin, suggesting changing attitudes in the long-established patriarchal values.

Less explored in the remittance literature in Central Asia were the remittances dedicated towards barn building and animal husbandry, which in the context of mountainous Narynian villages were considered tangible and meaningful investments. Development and public policy literature in Kyrgyzstan has largely concluded that remittances have not been invested into development and business. However, one of the implications of this research for future investment practices is that migrants could potentially invest in animal husbandry infrastructure and contribute by developing this sector more formally. As a region, Naryn province, characterized by its remoteness from central markets, such as in Bishkek, lacks opportunities available to city and peri-urban low- and middle-income families, but the value of meat remains (de la Matiniere, 2012). Thus, remittances related to animal husbandry are more likely to continue to grow as meat maintains a high price and value socially, symbolically, and economically.

My empirical findings in this chapter have revealed how remittances can empower receivers over senders, or stayers over movers, once again highlighting the need to attend to the agency of the ‘left behind’. In this context, my findings in this chapter contribute to the wider discussions on development and migration literature that has tended to neglect that remittances should be seen as both material and deeply social. In this case, livestock materialised family relationships. Thus, family remittances can illumine the intra-family tensions over what constitutes a productive and valid investment. Remittances also monetised ties between family members. The lack of immediate and continuous physical presence of migrant entrepreneurs back home allowed for the emergence of pockets of deceit between migrant and non-migrant kin. My analysis of livestock remittances affirmed the importance of analysing the transnational logistics of families. Remittances have transformed the nature of kin obligations and expectations, as well as the previous assumption that kin are more reliable sources of livestock care.
In chapter five, I addressed the material and moral dynamics of family relationships vis-à-vis remittances specifically invested in livestock and barn building. In this final thematic chapter, I continue interrogating the impact of migration on transnational families, in particular, with regards to caregiving arrangements.

**Grandmother, Grandchildren, and the Daughter-in-law**

‘Enough! Stop running around, can’t you sit and play in one place’? Burul, a 68-year-old widowed grandmother, raised her voice while her four grandchildren shrieked, running from one room to another, arguing and continuing to giggle in somewhat lower voices after her admonition. This picture summarised the everyday reality for this grandmother who has been ‘looking after’ her grandchildren [kyzymbyn baldaryn karap jatam], her daughter Asyl’s two children, since she migrated to Russia’s Novosibirsk six years ago. ‘Do not judge me’, she said, ‘You have to scold them once in a while; otherwise, they will become mischievous [tentek bolup ketet]’, justifying her disciplining. In 2011, I missed Asyl by a few weeks when she visited her mother and her grown
children, Dania and Damir. When Asyl migrated, her children were three and four years old. Earlier that summer, Burul’s youngest son, Kadyr, migrated to Russia’s easternmost peninsula of Sakhalin, while his wife and two children stayed in Alcha. As the youngest son, he and his wife, Altyn, did not live together with Burul due to lingering tensions between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. However, in Burul’s words, Altyn reluctantly returned to her mother-in-law’s home in Alcha following Kadyr’s outmigration. Altyn confided to me that she did so out of a sense of obligation. Her migrant husband regularly used to visit his mother, but in his absence, Burul shouldered the burden of running the household. Moreover, the four grandchildren were joyfully reunited, forming a house [üi] of two female adults and four children, spanning members (three generations, constituting a family [üi-bülö]. ‘My days are less boring, my grandchildren keep me occupied,’ Burul smiled as we continued drinking copious cups of black tea with jam after dinner. ‘I get up at 6 [a.m.] every morning and prepare Dania for school’, whose classes started at 8 a.m. Mondays through Saturdays. ‘She fights her sleep every morning, I tickle her, I barely get her up, and by the time she is dressed, I prepare the table [for breakfast], braid her long hair while she eats, and send her off to school’, Burul spoke with much pride and pleasure, in contrast to the hopelessness portrayed in much of the literature on migration’s impact on the grandparents and grandchildren ‘left behind’.

![Figure 6.2](image_url): Burul’s family, 2011-12. In bold, family members who lived with Burul during my fieldwork.

Caregiving arrangements can also be complicated by family separation due to divorce and remarriage. Burul’s daughter Asyl had divorced and received custody of her children. In order to support her family, she migrated to central Russia. However, soon after arriving in Russia, she remarried and started a new family there:

BURUL: I was angry. I told her not to get married (especially to someone from the South), but she did not listen. I told her not to have children right away, she got
pregnant again. <pause> I did not like her husband. He took control of her money. My daughter started helping us only five years later. Until then, we did not even feel that she was a migrant with money. <pause> She said she received Russian citizenship a year later, because she knew she would get a better paying job. Apparently, healthcare there is more affordable, as [it was] during the Soviet Union days. I have not seen her third child. He is being cared for by her in-laws in the South.

After sending Dania off, Burul turned to the other three grandchildren, two of whom studied in the afternoon, ‘It’s much harder with the boys. You have to keep telling them to do their homework. Dania does it all by herself’. Sitting on a short stool, leaning over her knees, she hand-washed Dania’s white blouse and tights, using the left-over warm water from tea preparation, so they would air dry by the following day. It was both endearing and disconcerting to watch a grandmother co-manage a household of six. Whenever permitted, I tried to wash the dishes, giving her a break from the endless domestic chores. ‘Jön ele koichu, sen konoksungda’ [‘Please don’t be bothered, you are a guest after all’], she would usually respond, treating me as a guest. Burul preferred to keep busy, saying it helped her stay energetic and feel better about herself. Altyn, her 35-year-old daughter-in-law, worked full-time as a nurse in a village hospital. At home, she took responsibility for preparing dinners, hand-washing clothes, and cleaning the house, all of which involved manually pumping water from the yard. Burul did all of the above by herself and was not necessarily cheerful about getting an extra hand, but she was happier to see her grandchildren growing up together. While Altyn worked, Burul looked after her fourth granddaughter, Altyn’s four-year-old Elza, who did not attend kindergarten. During my stays, Asyl’s children never mentioned their mother to Burul or Altyn, and neither of the adults referred to Asyl in everyday parlance. Asyl rarely called and almost never talked to her children on the phone. Although Dania and Damir’s references to Burul as apa could be interpreted as either ‘mother’ or ‘grandmother’, their respect and emotional attachment to Burul, made clear that she had become the source of authority for them, effectively replacing their biological mother.54

Cases like that of Burul’s family raise many questions about the parenting, caring, and caregiving practices in which migrant and non-migrant family members participate. In the context of Kyrgyzstan’s migration, what enables a parent to leave his or her child(ren) behind temporarily or for an unknown period of time? How are feelings of commitment and obligation to care maintained by family and kin members? How are these cultural norms of caring and caregiving affected due to migration? While there has been much

54 In Kyrgyz, apa means ‘mother’, and chong apa (lit., big mother) means grandmother. Yet, apa is used interchangeably. In families exposed to Russian language schooling, mama and papa are commonly used to refer to parents.
discussion in the media about migrants’ caring and parenting practices, or lack thereof, transnational caregiving is largely understudied in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. I will begin by foregrounding the debates around caregiving globally. Then, I will shift the focus to Kyrgyzstani migrant families’ production, negotiation, and performance of relations of care through an analysis of gender, generation, and kin care work.

Transnational Care

Transnational caregiving practices have received wide interest globally: in South East Asia (Tacoli, 1999; Parreñas, 2005; Gardner, 2008; Jingzhong and Lu, 2011; Huang, Yeoh and Toyota, 2012; Huang, Thang and Toyota, 2012), in Latin America (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Plaza, 2000; Schmalzbauer, 2004; Dreby, 2006; Leinaweaver, 2010; Winters, 2014); in Europe (Yeates, 2004; Zontini, 2004; Zechner, 2005; Baldassar, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Le Bihan and Martin, 2008; Evergeti and Ryan, 2011; Boehm, 2012), and in Africa (Salih, 2001, 2002; De Haas, 2006). Transnational caring can be seen as practical, financial, personal, emotional, and moral, which is characterised by the intensity of communication and interaction (Baldassar, 2007b). Care has ‘an inherent spatiality’, where many aspects of it require a co-presence of those with whom people have affective relations (Raghuram, 2012, p. 157). Loretta Baldassar (2007a) argued that families should not be reified as households and as the reproducers of national governments because that was how families were ‘theorized as inherently connected to the geographical place’ (p. 276) before the transnational perspective. By reifying families as a household, migration literature largely emphasized the dyads, parent-child relations, or Western understanding of the nuclear families (Kofman, 2004). Many scholars like Zentgraff and Chinchilla (2012, p. 348) pointed out that the transnationalism research emphasized creative ways in which parents continued to fulfil their roles and responsibilities when separated and how non-migrant family members adapted to such changes. Moreover, fewer studies have concentrated on the ‘transnationalisms from below’ by engaging with activities within ‘the transnational domestic sphere’ (Gardner and Grillo, 2002, p. 179). Migration policies often overlooked the micro (family) and meso (community) aspects of transnational lives, therefore, they ‘[did] not actively accommodate the ways people support each other within families and communities across time and national borders without migrating’ (Baldassar, 2007a, p. 278). In other words, migrant families can come from cultures where a wide supportive network of extended family members ‘are present and normative’ where ‘parent substitutes can effectively attend to the emotional needs of developing children’ (Zentgraff and Chinchilla, 2012, p. 349).
My emphasis on the transnational caregiving practices has been motivated by vigorous discussions in Kyrgyzstani and Russian media during and after fieldwork. These reports largely highlighted the negative impact of migration on the non-migrant family members and focused on the dangers of the ‘left-behind’ children ‘becoming a skipped generation’ without parental upbringing (Trilling, 2010; cf. Kojobaeva, 2009; ICG, 2010; Kasymbekov, 2010; Costachi, 2013; Fryer et al., 2014; Toktonaliev, 2014; Myrzabaeva, 2015) and without investment into children’s human capital (Kroeger and Anderson, 2012). Such reports also tended to conclude that grandparents forgo their ‘own happiness’ while their children abroad ‘live happily’ (Ablezova et al., 2008, p. 2). While the lives of non-migrant children and grandparents may be vulnerable, I challenge the views painted by the media and policy reports that were based on snapshot pictures of families. This reporting did not engage in or observe families’ everyday transnational caregiving practices enacted through contestation and negotiation over space and time. My findings also point to the vulnerabilities of non-migrant family members in the contexts of continued and prolonged absences of parents from their children’s family lives. However, my ethnography also highlights that Kyrgyz families followed caregiving (fostering) practices [amanat] that were widely exercised during the Soviet times, an underreported phenomenon (Sanghera et al., 2012); thus, while leaving children behind for care was not a novel practice, recent migration further reinforced gender hierarchies in kin and care work.

This chapter focuses on the complexities of transnational care, which has not been duly addressed in the current literature on post-socialist transnational families. While caring non-migrants ‘left behind’ can be seen as vulnerable, their own desires and aspirations to help their families and kin are essential in providing the caregivers’ own views of themselves as helpers rather than as victims. In other words, I challenge the tendency to portray stayers’ as ‘victims’ of transnationalisms. By doing so, this chapter continues interrogating the concept of family as fluid and unbounded, with an emphasis on migrant and non-migrant family members’ meanings of caregiving in the context of family practices ‘here’ and ‘there’.

In agreement with Evergeti and Ryan (2011), I consider transnational family caregiving practices as ‘diverse’ and contingent upon ‘the changing circumstances and living arrangements’ of migrants and their family members (p. 355) here and there. Particularly, migrants can maintain responsibilities towards siblings, parents, and other kin, which adds to the complexity of migrants’ experiences. This suggests that transnational migration is not just about parents managing child caregiving from a distance, but also managing other relatives. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that
migratory decisions around caregiving within ‘the family’ do not just impact the individual migrant, but also his or her family members (Evergeti and Ryan, 2011) and wider kinship and friendship networks. Moreover, we should not neglect the consideration of culturally embedded structures and practices of caregiving in Kyrgyz culture, specifically, the widely practiced, but understudied, phenomenon of baguuga berüü (Sanghera et al., 2012). Baguuga berüü, or amanat, refers to the arrangements made by parents to temporarily give up or transfer care of their children to relatives under specific circumstances. This chapter offers an empirical demonstration of the multiplicity of caregiving strategies taken by transnational families and offers a holistic approach to family care relations as historically and culturally structured and constituted. I argue that the translocal caregiving arrangements are reinforcing gender hierarchies instead of empowering migrant transnational women. Migration arrangements were shaped by the availability of other female family and kin members to assume caregiving roles, while men have largely abandoned caregiving responsibilities, thereby strengthening the classic patriarchy. Migration also reproduced sibling hierarchies where the arrangements were determined by the availability of siblings’ children, hierarchical positions of siblings, and hosts’ needs of children as labour, confirming the flexibility of cultural practices of caregiving arrangements based on foster care.

Discussions about care in the Kyrgyz culture and media followed the customary laws about family relationships. Generally, parents care for their children until they married (or if they were separated as a domestic unit). In turn, children care for their aging parents. Because Kyrgyz follow a patrilocal kinship and family structure, married women are seen as ‘belonging’ to their husband’s families, and thus are expected to provide care in the married-into families. These customs and traditions should not, however, be viewed as fixed. In fact, migration has altered the transnational family practices of caregiving, where women are increasingly able to provide care to their natal families. Concurrently, I argue that migration is reproducing gender hierarchies and strengthening patriarchal notions of caregiving tied to the availability of female non-migrant family members. While migration offers women a way out of their customary subordinate roles within their husband’s family, it also reproduces gender hierarchies in the destination country by replicating women’s subordinate positions as carers, cleaners, and cooks.

Moreover, migration is shifting traditional expectations about sibling roles and responsibilities. As opposed to recent studies (Thieme, 2008a), my research shows that youngest sons migrate along with or without their siblings when given opportunities to improve their quality of life, offering important implications for changing hierarchical sibling relationships. Thus, the widely accepted belief that the youngest son should stay
behind and take care of his parents is evolving as well due to increasing pressures on families to maximize the benefits of migratory experiences internally and externally (cf. Fryer et al., 2014). The agreed upon construct of parents-youngest son care in Kyrgyz culture is not required by law, but exists and is practiced customarily in a wide range of ways (cf. Borubashov, 2009). The reality of family caregiving practices is much more diverse. How does migration render visible practices of custom [sali]? What are the sites that complicate these relations vis-à-vis care work?

Migration strategies used by family members are formed by ‘the interplay of local opportunities, national policies, and international possibilities’; thus, migrants are neither bounded by the local, nor entirely free in the transnational spaces (Ryan, 2011, p. 87; cf. Ryan, 2008). In the following sections, I address considerations surrounding family practices, strategies, and dynamics by focusing on how migrants arrange, perform, and negotiate caregiving transnationally. In this respect, I explore four aspects of transnational families’ caregiving practices as evidenced by my ethnography: as a responsibility within a family configuration, as an obligation in relation to siblings, as dependent on women caregivers, and as dependent on other children in the family configuration.

Caregiving as Responsibility and its Impact on Family Configurations

In their study of caring for dependent elderly parents, Le Bihan and Martin (2008) highlighted that the caring relationship between the adults and the elderly parents ‘show the family as a configuration of complex relationships beyond the nuclear family’ (p. 59). In developed societies where intergenerational cohabitation has become less frequent, the authors suggested that adult children often care for the elderly despite the existence of services to help aging parents manage their own care. Culturally, the Kyrgyz would disapprove of anyone relinquishing caring responsibilities for their aging parents. Yet, caring responsibilities involve continuous negotiations between family members representing different generations, genders, positions and roles.

Immediate family members are often involved in occasional childcare. Yet, caring is still closely associated with women: mothers, daughters, sisters, daughters-in-law, aunts, and grandmothers. In extended families, typified by a large number of siblings and several generations, adult siblings often request or expect grandmothers as carers for their children. In the opening vignette, we witnessed the relationship between a married non-migrant mother, her children, and her mother-in-law. Altn considered her decision to stay put and care for her young children as conscious, because she did it for the sake of their children. Cuddling with her four-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son who competed
for her attention and space on the bed, Altyn expressed her joy of having children and genuine worry for my childlessness in my 30s. Altyn often compared herself to her classmates and regretted that she had children later, ‘My classmates’ children are already cleaning the house and pouring tea’. In the privacy of a separate sleeping room, away from her mother-in-law, Altyn shared how she made her decision to stay based on her prior migratory experience:

MEDINA: Why did you not go together with your husband [to Russia]?

ALTYN: Maga al jaktak emne bar! [What’s there for me!] My children are here and they are young. I have a job. Back in the days, I lived in Samara [Russia] for one year. I know what it is like to live abroad. Even if I earn here less than there, I would rather live in my own country with my children for small money. <pause> Biz namyzdau ekenbiz. [We are apparently proud people.] Russians believe in love and so on [süüü-küüü], and us, even if we are in love with someone else, we go with whoever takes us. Women were not created equally.

Although Altyn was satisfied with her employment, despite a small monthly salary of 2,000 KGS [28 GBP] and the responsibility of taking care of her children by herself, she was also saddened due to the prolonged separation from her husband. Her prior labour migration to Russia did not entice her to return; on the contrary, she refused to live and work in ‘someone else’s land’ [biröönün jerinde] even if she could improve her family’s economic situation. She valued being a good mother, which meant ‘being next to’ her children. More importantly, she did not have a plausible arrangement for looking after her children. While speaking about the possibility of visiting her husband, she was aware that she could not leave her children with her mother-in-law for several consecutive months.

The couple spoke by phone daily, with her husband calling on his way to and from work. Despite the time difference and distance, they managed to preserve close ties, ‘He tells me everything he does. We plan together on the phone’.

Altyn had strong convictions about women’s place in Kyrgyz culture. Approving of Russian women’s freedom of choice in marriage, Altyn voiced her belief that bride kidnapping was her ‘fate’. According to her beliefs, if I were to be kidnapped in the village, I would ‘have no choice but to stay’. My counter-argument that women indeed possessed a ‘choice’ did not convince her strong traditional views. Yet, her conception of Russian women’s sexual liberty concerned her in relation to Kadyr’s prolonged stay in Russia. On the other hand, despite believing in the importance of yyyym [customs], Altyn had defied the societal norms that would require her, as the youngest daughter-in-law, to live with and care for her mother-in-law. Until recently, she and her husband lived separately in the house she bought with the money she earned in Russia. Altyn moved in with her mother-in-law partially for practical reasons: it was better for her children to
grow up together with their cousins in one household, facilitating their homework, playtime, and supervision after school.

This post-migration family arrangement was also a result of wanting to combine financial resources. As Kadyr sent money from Sakhalin, the money could be invested into one place, one tütün [smoke], one ‘family’. Separately, Buruł noted to me that when Kadyr and Altyn moved out, her older sons questioned their misplaced ‘traditional’ responsibilities as the youngest son (cf. Isabaeva, 2011) and raised questions about Kadyr’s potential loss of his rights to the natal house and land if they did not resume their obligations. I was careful not to raise this matter with Altyn, not knowing whether she was aware of such talks in the family, which could have caused a potential crisis. She declined to discuss the exact reasons behind their past disagreements, but she slowly came to terms with her changing circumstances. More specifically, Altyn was uncomfortable being the youngest kelin. In her mid-30s, she wanted to be treated as an adult (‘I’m not in my 20s!’). In her eyes, her social status was measured by her children’s ages. Pragmatically, Altyn wanted her children to do chores around the house to balance power relations in the family. Co-managing the ‘new’ house with her mother-in-law generated many daily interactions, each potentially fraught with tensions. Altyn also balanced her influence by contributing her salary for family consumption, which had previously consisted of Buruł’s significant pension of nearly 6,000 KGS [86 GBP] to feed the family of six. The conflicts that I observed between them mainly arose due to their lack of open communication and failed coordination of ‘family’ resources, making money a source of animosity among this household’s members.

In spring, Altyn concluded she could not visit her husband. She contemplated the physical difficulties of traveling to Sakhalin from Kyrgyzstan (flying for two days and crossing the sea in a boat) and the cost (‘nearly 800 dollars [USD]’). Mainly, though, Altyn explained her reality: ‘I could not know how to leave my children behind’. Moreover, Altyn rationalised ‘what the people will say’ if she left the household ‘just to visit her husband’. ‘Instead, we will buy a few sheep for the ticket money’, she offered as she thought of future opportunities, even though Altyn’s chance to see her husband was prolonged by another year. The ability to track Altyn’s decision-making and how it evolved over time was a powerful example of the value of ethnographic study.

A few months after Altyn moved in, Buruł’s son Janybek and her grandchildren in Bishkek invited Buruł to visit them, ‘Come to Bishkek and relax for a week’, her son offered. Altyn understood that because Buruł’s son needed to be hospitalized, Buruł’s trip to Bishkek could be prolonged depending on his health. Although Buruł felt full responsibility for Dania and Damir, she was moved by her son’s contention that his
children also needed their grandmother’s attention. Her absence temporarily reshaped the household configuration, leaving Altyn to manage the household and care for the children for over a month. Dania and Damir’s mother in Russia did not participate in these negotiations. Rather Burul and Altyn agreed among themselves. In this case, Burul’s availability to help her son’s family was affected by the availability of another woman in the household, her social position, and the norms of caring, which she could not deny. Burul’s personal dimensions of daily life, however, were ‘destabilized’ (Le Bihan and Martin, 2008, p. 63), abridging her opportunities for relaxation and leisure. In her late 60s, Burul maintained a rich, tight social network of friends with whom she engaged in cherniaia kassa outings or sherine dinners (see chapters 4 and 5), taking turns hosting friends for food. Her prolonged absence had a ripple effect on her social network as well, lest we forget Burul the grandparent had a personal life.

**Kinship caregiving or baguuga berûü [foster care]**

Local understandings of care shape the institutional architectures of care. Kyrgyz migrants leave home with the particular understanding that traditionally, grandparents are expected to help care for and support their grandchildren (cf. Isabaeva, 2011). I have noted that transnational family practices cannot consider just the parent-child connection, but have to address alternative determinants of changing family structures where informal kinship caregiving has been a long-existing practice among Kyrgyz families. Kathleen Kuehnast (1997) offered one of the first accounts of the practice, which she defined as ‘giving a child as a gift’ when the first child of a son was given to grandparents for care (p. 307). The historical context of this form of temporary kinship caregiving was recently carefully considered in the study by Sanghera, Ablezova and Botoeva (2012) offering one of the first sociological analyses of informal kinship caregiving practices among Kyrgyz families. During the Soviet years, primary caregivers who lived in poverty or in ‘cramped’ living conditions, or due to their studies, temporarily relinquished care by leaving their children with grandparents or kin. They suggested that after the collapse of the Soviet Union some parents opted to send their children to live with their grandparents and relatives in order to migrate to Bishkek and overseas in search of work. The internal rural-urban migration for economic reasons constrained parents’ ability to raise their children due to the difficulties they faced in sending their children to schools in Bishkek without a formal residence permit or a wider social network (Sanghera et al., 2012, p. 384). The authors demonstrated how such moves impacted the lives of each family member,
separating birth parents from children; often causing distress and negative emotions and impacting family care and support when they were re-joined in the future (ibid., p. 392).

In the context of transnational families, Sanghera et al. (2012, p. 393) considered the attachment theory as their theoretical approach in examining ‘the costs of migration in developing countries’ in two ways. First, migrants who leave their children behind for economic reasons ‘face a dilemma of conflicting family responsibilities’ that often have ‘adverse consequences’ with regard to their children’s development, grandparents’ well-being, family dynamics and future adult relationships between parents and their children (ibid., p. 393). The authors, however, suggested that these adverse consequences need to be evaluated alongside the benefits of better financial security. Second, the neoliberal strategy of ‘empowering communities’ aiming at reducing poverty by ‘drawing on familial bonds and social networks’, assuming that kinship support is ‘automatic’ (ibid., p. 393). Nonetheless, the survival of temporary foster care practices reassured families considering international migration. It is important to note that during Soviet times, sending a child to his or her grandparents, uncles and aunts, or cousins for an indefinite period of care was also widely practiced by many parents during the summer months. The arbitrariness or time in these temporary caregiving practices is what makes the idea of foster care flexible. Similarly, Zentgraff and Chinchilla (2012) argued that in the Caribbean communities that ‘tend to have stronger familial networks’; women are able to migrate and leave their children with kin, friends, and neighbours, which ‘ensures greater continuity in children’s lives’ (p. 350). Just as Burul’s daughter did not know when (or if) she would bring her children back to Russia with her – she had been living in Russia for seven years by 2012 when my fieldwork ended – Burul did not know when she would return from Bishkek to resume caring for Dania and Damir. In both cases, it was the availability of other women and the flexibility of informal caregiving practices among kin that enabled their mobility.

Caregiving as Obligation and the Impact on Siblings and Kinship

Women are still primary caregivers in both developed countries (Le Bihan and Martin, 2008) and developing countries, such as Kyrgyzstan. The Soviet ideologies of production and female emancipation pushed women to enter the workforce, which had a huge impact on the dynamics of care. Although women earned significantly less (65-75%) than what men earned (Thieme, 2008a, p. 330), numerous employment opportunities were created for women. However, the collapse of the welfare system caused fundamental transformations especially in the lives of the elderly and women: affordable childcare deteriorated, pensions and childcare allowances ceased (Kandiyoti, 2007; Steimann, 2011,
also see Hegland, 2010 on Tajikistan; Keough, 2006 on Moldova; Tolstokorova, 2012 on the Ukraine), increasing the rates of remaining childcare options. In addition, many families navigated non-transparent procedures and informal social networks to secure enrolment in public kindergartens due to the high demand for available spots. Older children increasingly grew up caring for their younger siblings. While unemployed parents made their livings working in gardens and fields, cleaning and cooking by hand, and leaving the household to run errands, children were often left in the hands of their older siblings.

In this section, I argue that transnational family caregiving practices tie genders and generations within families. This is also a realm of family relations where age and gender intersect in everyday transnational family lives. My findings illustrate that migrants’ decisions to leave children behind were largely dependent on existing systems of kinship support practices in Kyrgyzstan, but children were left almost exclusively with other women, further perpetuating the subjugation of women. Suggesting that we reconceptualise transnational care globally, Parvati Raghuram (2012) highlighted that it was the increased migration of women that led to stress on the ‘global’ due to the redistribution of care from women from the global South typically providing care to women of the North. Such patterns have left ‘a care deficit’ in the countries of migrants’ origin (ibid., p. 158), which has been filled with other family and kinship members. Women have also continued to use technology to provide care and support to their children without ‘a significant rebalancing of their caring responsibilities with either their partners or through state support’ (Williams, 2010, p. 385).

Akmaral, a 27-year-old officially unemployed mother of four children aged four-to seven-years, completed her typical demanding daily tasks: hand-washing a mound of clothes, baking bread, and cooking dinner, while her youngest child followed us crying and wanting her mother’s attention. Akmaral simply did ‘not have time’ to tend to her daughter’s emotional needs. Recently, her daily chores had multiplied because her avyysyn, Elzada, husband’s (older) brother’s wife, left her two children with Akmaral ‘in order to make money for her children’ in Moscow, promising to return in nine months by December:

MEDINA: How did you agree to it?

AKMARAL: Initially, [Elzada] planned to leave them with her own sister-in-law, but [her brother’s wife] changed her mind at the last minute thinking she would not manage, because she had two adult children applying to colleges all summer in Bishkek. There was an option of leaving them with her grandmother, but she was too old (mid-70s) to look after small children. Then [Elzada] left them here.
MEDINA: So why did her sister-in-law agree to it at all?

AKMARAL: I know, at first she said ‘yes’, but then she also apparently asked for money to look after them [children]. So Elzada got upset. <pause> They had an argument, so she called me crying, saying, ‘I already bought a ticket for 16,000 [KGS; 229 GBP]’, so I agreed. How could I have said ‘No’?! <pause> That’s how she left. Then she called a month after she left. She said she was working in a shop mopping floors, which paid little money, so she found another job with a higher pay in a sewing shop. She said they sleep and eat where they work. They do not get out of their working place very much and only sleep for three to four hours.

MEDINA: That’s tough. Did she tell you about her living conditions?

AKMARAL: No, we talked very quickly, worrying about her [mobile phone] units. <pause> Then recently I called her myself. I asked for some money for her children’s kindergarten fees. She said she didn’t receive her second salary yet. She gave her first salary to her brother.

MEDINA: Why to her brother? Did she tell you how much she was making?

AKMARAL: I asked her, ‘Is your salary alright?’ She said it depends on how hard they work.

MEDINA: Are you paying for their children then?

AKMARAL: No, their father does.

MEDINA: So, where is their father? And why isn’t he taking care of his children?

AKMARAL: He cannot do it. He drives his truck and makes money doing it. Erkek kishi bagalbaitta kyzdy! [A man cannot raise girls!] He works as opportunities arise, he leaves often ‘here and there’ all summer transporting hay.

Elzada, in her early 30s, had previously never worked due to her husband’s extreme jealousy and traditional beliefs that she should stay home to care for their household and children. Her husband Sultan was also unemployed and the family depended on his seasonal work. Sultan inherited his father’s lorry, which was in high demand during the harvest season, but he often lacked the money to purchase the gas to operate it. Elzada had received many offers to work in Russia; this time, when her girlfriend invited her to Moscow, she did not want to pass up the opportunity despite the conflicts and tension it created between the couple. I met Elzada before she left and despite her difficult situation, she never complained. Leaving her children behind was not her will. She knew that she would be living with several people in one room and that her children would be better off staying at home. When she called Akmaral crying, ‘Please take my children, I know you would take care of them as your own daughters; if you do, I would send money for their kindergarten, for clothes’, Akmaral agreed to discuss it with her husband. The fact that this negotiation occurred between two avysyn, and not between...
the brothers, meant that Elzada deployed her last resource, the strongest kinship tie in her network. The situation is also demonstrative of women’s agency in the household decision-making process and in taking responsibility over the organizational and practical aspects of the caring process, because Akmaral’s husband Kairat referred to his wife as ‘[she was] going run after children’, meaning that she would barely handle caring after six children.

It was not easy for Akmaral and her husband Kairat to assume additional responsibilities as neither of them worked officially or earned a guaranteed income. Kairat and Akmaral thought of themselves as malchylar [farmers] who lived off animal husbandry. They owned sheep, cattle, and horses and also looked after clients’ livestock, but instead of herding in the pastures, they grazed their cattle in their large backyard, which was once their neighbour’s land. While Akmaral was serene that the girls played well with each other and quickly adapted, I questioned why the girls’ father ‘could not take care of his own daughters’ while their mother was gone. The siblings’ families arranged that Sultan would ‘help’ two nights a week, which he did. Both Akmaral and Kairat understood the responsibilities they were accepting, but they felt pity and a sense of tuuganchylyk [kin connectedness] ‘because they [Elzada and Sultan] have been struggling for years’ and wanted to help them ‘to get on their feet’:

MEDINA: So, what is it like to take care of other people’s children on top of your own?

AKMARAL: I look after them more than after [my own children]. Yes, I am worried what if anything would happen to them. I check and fear [more often] that they might get sick. So I am concerned with how to deliver her children in the condition they were left with me.

MEDINA: Could you have said ‘no’?

AKMARAL: No, I would not be able to! How could I have said, ‘No’!

MEDINA: How are your own girls taking it?

AKMARAL: They understand everything. They actually feel bad for them. They tell them, ‘Don’t worry, she will come back soon,’ my oldest daughter often consoles them. She helps me a lot: walks them all to the kindergarten and sometimes brings them back. On the one hand, it looks good when you have children running around the house, when your family has many children, no matter how hard it is. But it’s difficult to watch after them all, to bathe them all, wash their clothes. <pause> My girls seriously worry for their cousins though, they understand what’s going on. <pause> They often ask me to bring them ‘home’ when they are with their father.

MEDINA: Do you have any other relatives helping?
AKMARAL: No, they all have their own lives. Nobody helps today. Sometimes my mother feels pity for me and sends some socks and soap, or stuff for girls. Some of our own relatives said, ‘Why did you take them if you already have four of your own?!’

MEDINA: What did you tell them?

AKMARAL: I tell them that I am not doing it for anybody. I am doing it for our relatives (tauganybyzda).

Caregiving can be seen as an obligation among kin. Akmaral and Kairat felt obliged to help Elzada because Kairat and Sultan are brothers. Their monthly kindergarten payment was nearly 1,600 KGS (23 GBP), 400 KGS per child/month. They did not qualify for a child allowance, as opposed to Elzada and Sultan, because they owned more than 10 sheep. Through petty market trading and buying and reselling cattle, they earned several hundred som per week to buy staples for weekly meals and pay bills. Akmaral justified her decision to extend a caring hand, ‘I was looking after my children already, so what are two more children’! She felt pity for her own eldest daughter, the first-grader, who helped her mother by looking after the rest of them. Some kin disapproved of their decision concluding that their willingness to help Elzada allowed her to migrate, to which they also objected in general. The couple’s intentions sounded altruistic, and they were disappointed to learn that Elzada was not going to send money before school started. Instead of saving for her children, which she had articulated as her primary goal, Elzada explained to Akmaral that she needed to help cover her sibling’s debts. In the first month of Elzada’s absence, Akmaral and Kairat dealt with Sultan’s jealous tantrums over his wife’s living abroad. In particular, his anger mushroomed as he heard and retold village stories about migrant infidelities in Russia. Kairat told me that his family always helped his older brother’s family by giving them meat when they slaughtered sheep, sharing their potatoes after each harvest, and inviting them for dinners. According to Kairat, his older brother’s problem stems from his personality, his lack of tyng [outgoing]. During get-togethers, kin carefully avoided discussing Elzada’s work abroad. Akmaral understood Elzada’s ‘desperate situation’, but she could not help but wonder, ‘I do not know, sometimes you

55 See Steimann (2011, p. 87): a ‘household is entitled to child allowances if its monthly per capita income does not exceed the guaranteed minimum standard of living (GM)’. For example, the GM in 2007 was set at 175 KGS/month, and the per capita was determined based on the following: a) per hectare of arable land: 55.90 KGS/month, b) per bit [0.01 ha] of home garden: 3.5 KGS/month, c) if the household owns more than 10 sheep: 2.5 KGS/month, and d) cash incomes and salary, pension money. The child allowances are paid by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, therefore, local administrations are in charge of keeping books, or ‘social passports’ for each applying household (Steimann, 2011).
hear all these stories and think ‘what if she leaves them here, starts a new life there, and doesn’t come back’?

This example points toward the importance of family obligations. The older brother’s family became dependent on his youngest brother, an unexpected, but growing phenomenon. Kairat blames his older brother’s inability to figure out how to sustain his family in his 40s. At the same time, as his brother, he is willing to help his family for as long as it takes, because they are brothers, and these are ‘family-like’ relations (Finch and Mason, 1993). We have also seen a new migrant’s decision to use her first remittances to cover her brother’s debts instead of her daughters’ school expenses. There is a kind of flexibility in childcare as shown by Elzada’s decision to prioritize helping her sibling in need over her daughters, who had a home and were being cared for by kin.

As Kempeneers and Thibault (2008, p. 41) wrote on the strategies of childcare in Quebec, it is the family configuration and ‘mainly its female members of the network’ that is a fundamental consideration of women who decide to work on Saturdays, during holidays, or after school hours. My findings suggest another important factor not discussed in other studies: childcare arrangements may also depend on the presence of other children, not necessarily as caregivers but rather as playmates, in the family. For instance, Elzada did not seek childcare help from Kairat’s other older brother’s wife, who also lived in Alcha, had no children, and did not officially work. Instead, Elzada chose Akmaral precisely because she had children. Elzada rationalized that her children would be less of a burden on Akmaral and would benefit from having other children with whom to play. As we have seen, Akmaral’s oldest daughter was already socialised as a caregiver. Among the many migrants’ families I met, there was not a single case of young children staying behind with fathers.

These findings were useful to think about in relation to Deniz Kandiyoti’s classic patriarchy (1988) and ‘the Soviet paradox’ thesis (2007) that pointed at the contradictions of the Soviet emphasis in women’s emancipation projects. The Soviet paradox was characterised by, on the one hand pushing for high literacy and labour participation, and on other hand by encouraging childbirth and large families evident in contradictory policies that did not transform domestic divisions of labour (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 607). In another similar account, Mary Elaine Hegland (2010) showed how labour migration from Tajikistan to Russia, also a highly remittance-dependent Central Asian country, ‘strengthened gender and generational hierarchies’ where, compared to its neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, male migration was prevalent. Referring to Harris (2006), Hegland demonstrated how Tajik women ‘greatly respect’ their parents and show ‘cheerful compliance’ to the elderly, showing little agency in asserting themselves especially in
front of their mothers-in-law, who increasingly have been making decisions for their migrant sons in Russia whether to divorce their wives back in Tajikistan (ibid., pp. 21-22). In Kyrgyzstan, the women I met showed similar respect and compliance to the elderly, but they also expressed their concern that if their economic situation did not improve, their children’s situation would not improve either. The decision to migrate based on these reasons demonstrated more agency in resisting domestic hierarchies in pursuit of better opportunities outside the household and the state. The United Nations (2013) reported that 55% of migrants from Kyrgyzstan were represented by women, the practice that was primarily male oriented. In his speech on the occasion of International Women’s Day in 2013, President Atambaev’s address referenced the increasing number of migrant women in migration and the nearly 20,000 children growing up without mothers (Costachi, 2013). The broader significance of migration and caregiving for the government was reflected in their concern with how these phenomena created a negative ‘image of the republic’ (ibid., p. 3), once again highlighting political rhetoric that does not reflect the real needs of its citizens pertaining their rights, security, and empowerment.

Caregiving Arrangements and How Age Determines Family Configurations

In public and academic discourses, migrants are often characterised as adults (Boehm, 2012), which misrepresents transnational family practices. It is true that largely children are ‘left behind’ with other family and kin members; however, there are other practices where children are born abroad and consequently sent home, or brought back home and left behind, and also brought with their parents to the destination country. Children are often the centre of family migration processes. As the previous vignette brought forward arrangements enabled by young children’s socialization, the subsequent vignettes illustrate a mother’s determination to sacrifice for her children despite her husband’s lack of support. These cases involved older children, which brought different aspects of caregiving arrangements into the equation.

Jamilia, a mother of two adult children in her early 40s, migrated to Yakutsk in 2010. She considered herself ‘lucky’ to have received Russian citizenship soon after her arrival, which eased her registration and was a daily source of confidence. I met her at a barbershop run by a naturalised couple from Kyrgyzstan in April 2012. Jamilia arrived at 6 p.m. after having worked the previous eight hours at a nearby market. She gathered used towels and prepared to hand-wash them in the backyard of the tiny building that hosted the barbershop along with an illegal gambling room that we had to walk through to use the
common bathroom. Elegantly dressed, Jamilia regularly received compliments from the women in the barbershop, a majority of whom (5 out of 6) were migrants from Kyrgyzstan. During our conversation, Jamilia told me she migrated to Russia ‘to educate [her] two children’. She followed her sister’s successful experience of living and working in Yakutsk. Despite her own success, Jamilia regularly encountered gossip back in the village for having left behind her unemployed and drinking husband. Because her children were graduating from high school, she timed her migration to help them with their university tuition fees:

JAMILIA: My sister was a big push for me. She sent me a ticket. She was like, ‘You should come here if you want to educate your children <pause> while there is a job for you, and you should come now’. If not for my sister, of course, I wouldn’t be here. Other kin invited me to Moscow, but it did not work out. Now I am working in two places. Yes, it is hard. <pause> Simply I do not want to waste my time. Since I came here with thoughts of working, then I should work hard, otherwise, who wouldn’t mind some rest? My children are grown-ups now <pause> they are 18 and 19. Most importantly, I tell them, ‘Do not worry about anything, I will pay for your food, studies, extra pocket money, just study and graduate, become specialists and work’. I do not want them to walk on the streets doing nothing.

To ensure her children graduated, Jamilia was willing to work in Russia as long as necessary:

JAMILIA: I think I will be here for several years. <pause> I pay 20,000 [KGS; 286 GBP] for one of them, and 30,000 [KGS; 429 GBP] for another. Who is going to help me with that? My two students? <laughs> My husband is at home, he does not work, and does not want to work. If I stay healthy [‘den sooluk bolso’], I will work two more years, hopefully. Until they graduate.

Jamilia migrated from her natal village, where she was born, married, and lived ever since, working in a printing facility. Her husband never officially worked, and her family subsisted on her salary of 7,000 KGS (100 GBP). She stayed in an unhappy relationship for 20 years:

JAMILIA: I used to think I will have a husband and he will take care of me, but over the years I realised it is not going to change. A lot of women I see hope that their husbands would support their families, but I do not believe in men anymore.

She was kidnapped by her husband and stayed with him because of ‘societal pressure’ and sometimes regretted her choice. Jamilia’s mother-in-law ‘worried’ for her son when she learned about her daughter-in-law’s decision to migrate, but Jamilia told her, ‘I cannot sit

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56 Although gambling was only legal in four territories in Russia, not including the Republic of Sakha, underground gambling could be easily located. Over my two-month stay in Russia, police raided the illegal business a few times. Each time, the business reopened a few days later. The barbershop’s owner assured me he had nothing to do with the gambling, explaining that they shared the utilities for the building.
around any further watching and hoping that he would improve. I have to feed my children and educate them. That is my responsibility as a parent’, she argued, and left her husband behind with her children. Since migrating to Yakutsk, Jamilia was able to not only cover two sets of tuition fees and living costs in Bishkek, but she was able to live independently in Yakutsk. Using her earnings, Jamilia paid off her family’s debts related to her daughter’s hospitalization costs and via phone managed the construction workers renovating their house in Bishkek. Finally, Jamilia prioritized staying connected with family and wider kin by participating in every social gathering of their kin, reciprocating gift giving and making sure that her family ‘did not fall out of family and kinship ties’ [‘tuugandan chygyp kalbaily dedimda’]. To accomplish this, Jamilia negotiated her husband and children’s attendance at social events in her absence. Renting a room from an elderly Russian woman living alone, her daily routine in Yakutsk was secondary to her, for as soon as she picked up her phone, she became fully immersed in her family’s life back in Kyrgyzstan. Distance seemed irrelevant as she arranged the purchase of construction materials, negotiated whether her children should register for additional courses, discussed which clothes they wanted to replace, and so on.

The children’s ages allowed for diverse family arrangements, ‘If they were in elementary school, I would not have come here, because children are children, you need to take care of them, be with them. Now they are grown-ups’. When her children expressed a desire to join their mother after high school graduation and start earning money in Yakutsk, Jamilia strongly rejected it:

JAMILIA: Children get used to money and would not study. I see it happen here a lot. That is what I do not want to happen to my children. I want them to study, be educated <pause> I tell them, ‘I came here for the two of you’. If we cannot educate them, one day in the future they are going to remind me, or us, that we should have educated them. They sometimes do not understand that, but I keep reminding them to study. I tell them, ‘You have clothes, food, money, what else do you need? Tell me what your needs are, I will get it, if you need that for your studies’. <pause> I only have hope for them, what else? I tell them that I do not want to hear from others, ‘See, their mother left for Russia and their children have become such and such [andai-myndai bolup kalyptr], because that is going to hit me hard. So I told my daughter recently, ‘Do not get kidnapped’! I trust and believe in my children. I do not spoil them. I have a very strict vospitanie [upbringing]. I think that’s what they need: not too soft, otherwise, they would give up [their studies].

Migration brought mothering from a distance to the fore of kin gossip, reinforcing notions of shame, embarrassment, pride, and failure. Jamilia exercised a great deal of agency in fighting her familial subordinate position because largely she had given up on expecting her husband’s support and was driven by the responsibility to guarantee the education of her children in order to be able to provide for their future. Interestingly,
Jamilia’s college-attending children, in the eyes of their mother, remained children who needed to be disciplined, watched after, and cared for transnationally.

**Hoping through one’s children**

Parents in Kyrgyzstan consider it their responsibility to educate their children through college. Her children lived with their father, looking after him, feeding, and caring for him on a daily basis. Jamilia often suspected that her children cared for her by ‘concealing some daily facts’ from home where she thought her husband drank or got into arguments with kin over her life in Russia. One day at the barbershop we witnessed a heart-breaking phone call when she had to refute her husband’s accusations that she had been cheating on him. Her story is emblematic of the ‘extreme’ (Le Bihan and Martin, 2008, p. 69) type of caring arrangement where the parent considered her role as a ‘mission’. Mothers like Jamilia continued to fight their portrayal at home as ‘irresponsible mothers, immoral wives, and selfish consumers’, as Leyla Keough (2006, p. 432) put it. In her study of Gaugazian women from Moldova working in Turkey, migrant women argued they worked abroad ‘selflessly’ sacrificing for their children, and they were more ‘resourceful’ and ‘better mothers’ than those who stayed behind (ibid., p. 433). Keough suggested that these women constructed ‘a new moral economy – a new way of organizing and understanding the responsibilities, rights, and entitlements of workers, consumers, and citizens’ through their ‘practices and justifications of migrant labour’ (2006, p. 433).

Similarly, in her research on transnational families in Ukraine, Alisa Tolstokorova (2010) warned that transnational mothers’ support of their adult children does not always produce positive consequences. While mothers worked hard accumulating money towards children’s education, they also often were ‘robbed’ by having to pay their earnings towards getting children out of trouble. Migrants’ adult children were deliberately targeted as ‘victims’ by those members of society interested in using migrants’ children by getting them into trouble (Tolstokorova, 2010, p. 32).

While modern telecommunications technologies allow families to keep in touch, they also provide ‘an illusion of real relationships’, as evidenced by the example of the migrant mother who only discovered that her daughter had given birth upon returning home (Tolstokorova, 2010, p. 39). Also, in the post-Soviet Ukraine, fathers’ gender roles changed ‘only temporarily’, as Tolstokorova’s research showed, they did not continue to be involved in fatherhood after mothers returned home. Paradoxically, transnationalism becomes ‘a barrier for developing progressive gender changes in transnational parenthood’
as transnational Ukrainian women’s experiences did not contribute to their emancipation (ibid., p. 53).

In another case, Ainur, a hairdresser, employed a complex caring strategy by splitting her children ‘left behind’ into different households for ‘better care’. She migrated to Yakutsk with her husband and her brother-in-law, who lived in one room of a four-room apartment and managed his own budget. Ainur took a three-month course in Bishkek to learn how to cut men’s hair before migrating to Yakutsk. The couple set many goals for their migration, one of which was accomplished when they paid off their accumulated debts. Ainur was thankful for their relatives’ help in caring for their children, ‘I did not want to bring my children here because of our living conditions [here]. They are used to living in their rooms, watching television, you know, it would be hard for them without those conditions here’. Instead, Ainur split her children among two different households:

AINUR: My oldest son is in Karakol [a north-eastern town] with my brother’s family. My brother is well off. He asked me to leave my son with them explaining that I would not have to spend [money] on him that he would take good care of my son. In addition, he would resume studies in the same school. My brother wanted my son also because of his work schedule. He works 15-day shifts [in mining], and when he is gone, my son could watch after his two children, who go to elementary school, so it’s not like he would change diapers, but that’s how it [arrangement] happened. But my youngest daughter stays with my sister-in-law in Bishkek’s suburbia. She was like, ‘Well, I am not going to change diapers, right!’

Ainur’s explanations of what mattered in their children’s arrangements allow us to see how caregiving can be a pragmatic and calculated decision. Her brother offered to care for Ainur’s teenage son because he expected that his nephew would become his cousins’ eldest brother and temporarily fill his role as an adult man in the house during his absence, helping his wife with household chores. Similarly, Ainur rationalised that her younger daughter and youngest son were better off with her sister-in-law because her sister-in-law’s children were married and the house was empty without them. In this way, Ainur’s children would be filling a void and helping her around the house. At the same time, Ainur expressed concern, ‘Their youngest son got married and they have a young kelin in the family, so I have to take my children from them sooner, köpkö batpaitta [they will not fit there for too long]’. Ainur already planned for her youngest son to study in a Kyrgyz-Turkish lyceum, which was costly (1,000 USD per academic year). If he was accepted, she would not have to worry about his accommodation, as he would live in the lyceum dormitory. Her daughter was preparing to graduate from high school and study in Bishkek, which meant that she would need help paying her tuition. To cover their children’s education costs, Ainur and her husband envisioned themselves working in Yakutsk at least
for another three years, all the while finding ways to accommodate their children with kin from afar.

**Here, there: Where is better?**

Most migrants and non-migrants with whom I discussed childcare insisted that Kyrgyzstan was a ‘better’ place for children. While having their children living beside them would have been desirable, many migrants expressed concerns about the ‘other’ or ‘acquired’ influences that would accompany upbringing in Russia. Unless the goal of migration was a permanent move, my visits showed that the living arrangements for migrants in Russia did not allow many to live with their children. But accommodations aside, migrants were more concerned about Russian culture’s perceived negative impact on Kyrgyzstani children’s discipline, demeanour, and upbringing. According to many, residence in Kyrgyzstan retained the culturally significant sense of respect towards the elderly, discipline, and good manners under their kin’s control. Ainash did not want her daughter Kyial to be exposed to ‘their [Russian] culture’ [alardyn kul’turasyna aralashpai] – literally ‘mixing’ with their culture. The same ideas were expressed by Ainur and Jamilia in reference to their grown-up children. In general, this reference was made regarding children of all ages. Conversations about children often brought migrants’ stereotypes about local (Yakutsk) children being ‘spoiled’ [buzulgan] in various ways: exposure to drinking alcohol, smoking, and dating were the immediate reasons. Ainur also explained that she would have lacked the time ‘to discipline’ her children if they lived with them in Russia, because they would work all day. Somehow their adult kin living back in the village would keep them ‘disciplined’, ‘well-mannered’, and ‘respectful towards the elderly’. In the eyes of migrants and non-migrants, what constituted morally right in the upbringing of children was tied to their place of origin. To them, Yakutsk was environmentally unfriendly, and Russia was culturally alien.

Parents with younger children were convinced that Kyrgyzstan was more ‘natural’ [natural’nyi] and ‘clean’ [chistyi]. Asel believed her toddler was not receiving sufficient fresh air and nutritious food in Yakutsk, because the food was not ‘natural’ and three out of four seasons, she could not take her toddler out of the house. Parents complained that food was expensive and not locally produced. Many talked about the detrimental effects of the harsh environment on their health, but also the health of their children. ‘We are locked between these four walls all winter’, a migrant mother, Asel, complained to me about her fear to go outside with her toddler during the winter season. Asel thought the local ecological conditions were unacceptable: ‘the air is dirty here’, ‘trash is all over’, and
‘nothing grows here, food is not natural’. These beliefs were shared by many Kyrgyzstani migrants with whom I met in Yakutsk. While decisions about childcare arrangements were already made before departing Kyrgyzstan, migrants still used the negative aspects of life in Yakutsk to justify their decisions. These discussions often led to conclusions that migrant mothers who wanted to be ‘good mothers’ were better off having their children raised and cared for back in Kyrgyzstan. Yet, these experiences varied by family, based on the caring arrangements for their children back home and on their living arrangements in Russia. Most often, migrants’ goals of accumulating their earnings conflicted with the costs required to bring their children with them.

The idea of global care chains has been widely discussed in the literature (Levitt, 2001; Parreñas, 2005; Leinaweaver, 2010; Huang et al., 2012; Raghuram, 2012), when migrants from developing countries raised children of families in developed countries to enable the caring of their own families back home. In Yakutsk, I heard about the growing practice of hiring nannies from Kyrgyzstan to care for Kyrgyz families’ children. Similar to the idea of care chains, Kyrgyz migrant families hired Kyrgyz migrants as caregivers, but the difference was that migrant families searched for ethnic Kyrgyz who could take care of their children. Zarina, a 30-year-old hairdresser, offered her sister a job as a nanny for her two-year-old in Yakutsk. They were desperate to find a trustworthy nanny in Yakutsk, and they searched their family networks. Both Zarina and her husband Aidar worked full-time, six days a week. Due to the unknown and potentially long wait for admission to local kindergartens, the couple first invited Zarina’s mother to come to Yakutsk to help care for her grandchild. The family of three adults and one baby lived in a one-room apartment. This arrangement lasted for about six months; the grandmother found the new living and caring arrangement difficult to get used to and ultimately was offered another job. Thus, Zarina sent money to her cousin, whose document preparations took longer than they expected, so she asked her younger sister Saikal to prepare her documents to travel to Russia. Zarina’s sister, an unemployed mother of two living in Bishkek, agreed to work for her sister as a paid nanny. In turn, Zarina’s sister began searching for cousins who were willing to live in her apartment in Bishkek’s city centre and care after her two children, an emerging diaspora care chain. The major difference in such arrangements among Kyrgyzstani migrants is that employment is maintained within the ethnic diaspora and not extended to the local Yakut or Russian population, which Zarina opposed. Stories of migrants hiring migrants also reflected the typical abuses of power, such as denying pay and breaking oral agreements. Yet, the practice is growing among better-off migrants, who are interested in continuing the exposure of their children
to Kyrgyz language and culture in Russia and limiting the impacts of the ‘alien’ Russian culture on their children’s upbringing.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that migration has been reconfiguring transnational families by rearranging caregiving responsibilities. When Kyrgyz family members migrated, their decisions to leave children depended on the availability of other women within kin networks. Most often, migrants’ parents became the primary caregivers, a practice which was often sensationalised by the print media and policy research. Contrary to the pitiable portraits of the ‘left behind’ grandparents and children, I argued that caregiving should be seen as family processes and practices that are continuously contested and negotiated, thus, they need to be examined over space and time. Moreover, based on the importance and practices of Kyrgyz extended family networks in providing help, I argued that in the context of transnationalism, migration reproduced the tradition of reliance on kin when mothers had to leave their children. The grandparent caregivers were portrayed as ‘victims’, while my empirical findings stressed that grandparents consciously chose to be caregivers and found caregiving to contribute to an active healthy lifestyle.

Nonetheless, migration further reinforced ‘the classic patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti, 1988) and reproduced the gender hierarchies of care. Women’s potential outmigration and care arrangements were tied not only to other female caregivers (grandmothers, sisters, daughters, mothers-, sisters-, and daughters-in-law), but in some cases on the availability of their children to contribute to children’s socialization. Fathers and other male kin largely abstained from involvement in caregiving in the absence of their wives. While Kyrgyz female migrants outnumbered male migrants, women were largely portrayed in negative light. Kyrgyz male migrants posted shocking videos on YouTube depicting so-called ‘Kyrgyz patriots’ attacking Kyrgyz migrant women in Russia and shaming them for dating non-Kyrgyz men (Botoeva, 2012). The factors driving this animosity towards Kyrgyz female migrants were outside my concentration, but require further investigation given their impact and deterrent effect on Kyrgyz women migrants. Although Kyrgyzstani migration increased the number of women taking on breadwinner roles, migration also served to reproduce gender roles and stereotypes around caring and caregiving.

Transnational lives contested what constituted ‘good motherhood’ and a good ‘upbringing’. Family relationships were restructured mainly based on the availability of other caregivers, and not particularly on children’s needs. However, leaving children with grandparents were also seen as simultaneously satisfying multiple caring responsibilities
in one arrangement. Some families split children among several households based on their
gender and hosting family’s needs. The traditional practices of child fostering \( \textit{amanat} \) further reinforced families’ willingness to leave children temporarily for care. The
migratory processes allow for a better understanding, and further research of the
understudied phenomenon of \( \textit{baguuga beriü} \), the practice of informal child caregiving. Practiced then, and now under new economic conditions, I suspect it will only increase in the future. Because \( \textit{baguuga beriü} \) was a way of ‘giving up a child’ for the sake of the elderly and their personal needs, migration is only reinforcing the elderly’s needs of having grandchildren as source of caring and their caregiving of grandparents.

Leinaweaver (2010) argued that Mexican transmigrate women ‘\([\text{filled}]\) their care slots at home, finding someone to foster and thus care for their children in their absence’, but also, that migrants filled their own vacated slot with their child(ren) ‘for that aging parent to foster’ (p. 73). These long-standing practices of caregiving were not addressed in the analyses of transnational families in Kyrgyzstan and they allow us to look at migration and those who are said to be ‘left behind’ with a new critical eye.

Finally, migration also brought to the fore sibling relationships where ethnographic findings revealed that sense of obligation and family and kinship solidarity persevering. At the same time, caring agreements involved pragmatic and practical gains of caregivers, including potential child labour and monetary support. Intimate and emotional ties between parents and children were also maintained through commodities, gifts and presents, and transnational telecommunication, overwhelmingly over mobile phones. Gifts were sent through other migrants visiting home, sent as cash, or were of an uncommodifiable nature, such as hugs and kisses.

Generally, scholars who studied the gender and generations of the Soviet Union largely concluded that the 70 years of Soviet rule changed Central Asian society, but women’s roles in that society did not change (Olcott, 1991, in Kuehnast, 1997, p. 325). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the role of the state changed dramatically as the state provision of important infrastructures, such as childcare, schooling, and medical services deteriorated (cf. Howell, 1996, 1998; Farrington, 2005; Thieme, 2008a). Kathleen Kuehnast (1997) argued that responsibility for the Kyrgyz ‘familial system’ fell to women ‘through their roles as care-giver and as daughter-in-law’ (p. 291), in addition to their obligations as Soviet workers (cf. Kandiyoti, 2007). She argued that the Soviets were not able to eradicate some traditional practices, such as \( \textit{amanat} \) [child foster care], bride kidnapping, and \( \textit{kalym} \) [bride price]. She referred to a well-known proverb, which I employed in the Preface of this dissertation: ‘The wolf will eat the one that has separated’. This adage aptly describes the Kyrgyz desire to stay together as an extended family and to
avoid living apart from each other (Kuehnast, 1997, p. 308). Parents’ efforts at ‘safekeeping’ the child helped ‘to perpetuate the ties between generations within the Kyrgyz extended family’ (p. 309). Today, growing numbers of Kyrgyz transnational families are faced with the sometimes contradictory consequences of leading cross-border lives, where a desire to improve one’s life depends on making another’s more strenuous. While there is a great desire to pull resources towards a nuclear family’s needs, Kyrgyz families continue to feel obliged to attend to the needs of their extended families.
7 Conclusion: The Future of Kyrgyzstani Transnational Families

Inevitability of Migration and Unremitting Migrant Dreams

At the start of this dissertation, we saw how Mira and Ermek’s family dreamed of rebuilding their ancestral house. Their three sons and two daughters-in-law migrated at different times to Russia, where they lived together and worked towards accomplishing their families’ goals. This strategy was a conscious decision to enable them, at the end of the migration, to return and to ‘separate’, that is, to live in a house of their own. During my first weeks of residence with Mira’s family, I could not understand the importance that she attached to non-separation in our many conversations. Mira and Ermek, as parents, consciously chose not to allow their married children to separate, as it usually happens in Kyrgyz culture. Mira stressed that they were still ‘one family’ [bir üi-bülö]. However, as conjugal pairs continued living in Russia and working towards their big family plans, Bilim, the second daughter-in-law was becoming alarmed about the protracted nature of their migration and beginning to wonder when, if ever, they would begin their own (nuclear) lives. Is migration pushing families to abandon extended-type family relations?

Migration has dramatically transformed and reconstituted family life in Kyrgyzstan. When the family’s eldest daughter-in-law, who was working in Russia, announced she was expecting a baby, Mira agreed to raise their grandchild despite her husband’s concerns. From the start, this family’s members saw migration as temporary; after between five and nine years of time working in Russia, they still conceived of it as temporary. After paying off their debts, they planned to earn enough money to build their parents’ house, but the siblings also realised that they could pool their money and work towards building a house for each of them. The second son’s family, who initially raised their children in Yakutsk, felt pressured to bring them back to Alcha. One son and both daughters-in-law became Russian citizens to avoid police checks, improve employment prospects, and become eligible for state child support (cf. Ruget and Usmanalieva, 2008; Rivkin-Fish, 2010), which was also saved. However, they all saw their future lives back in Kyrgyzstan, a finding consistent with other academic research (Thieme, 2008c, 2012; Rahmonova-Schwartz, 2012). They also worked additional hours to earn shabashka [off-book earnings] in the evenings and on Sundays. Every earning was collected into one family pot, which allowed them to raise significant funds to finance their large projects. In this small example, we see how the siblings’ ‘separation’ was itself contingent upon complex and bureaucratically mediated strategies of collective strategizing and action.
Building houses or buying flats were not the only projects through which migrants actively materialised their proxy presence in Alcha (Dalakoglou, 2010). They paid for the daily food, utilities, livestock and hay stacks, for barn renovations, for the procurement of coal, for canning for the winter season, as well as school and kindergarten clothes, tuition fees, house renovations, renewing household items, children’s toys, doctors’ examinations and medicine, and not least raja [kin payments] for life-cycle events, tois and funerals. In this way, migration reconfigured family structures and family members’ roles and responsibilities. While the migrant children sent money home, the non-migrant family members oversaw their projects. House construction, for example, entailed the gathering of kin and community support [ashar] to build the house foundation, just as the remainder was contracted and later completed in 2014. This is when the youngest son returned for good to refurbish the house, with plans to marry and bring a daughter-in-law into the family who would care for his parents, fulfilling the family’s cultural expectations of him. The family composition also altered when Mira’s niece moved in while her parents also migrated to Yakutsk. It is this ‘shape-changing’ quality of Kyrgyz families, I have argued, that migration has come to intensify. In chapter 1, I argued that transnational families have become a norm for Kyrgyzstan; divided, they nonetheless maintain strong ties across borders; while stretched (and sometimes ‘overstretched’ as we have seen), the ideational value of family as a site of compelling commitments and gender- and generationally-marked hierarchies remains strong.

The case of Burul’s family illuminates a further set of processes that are critical to our understanding of the Kyrgyz transnational family. Burul’s youngest migrant son, Kadyr, returned from Sakhalin in 2014, three years after leaving his wife, Altyn, with his mother, a nephew and a niece, and his two children. While both Burul and Altyn received monthly incomes, Kadyr’s remittances were invested into livestock, considered an essential village asset (cf. Schoch et al., 2010; Kasymov, 2014), and into refurbishing and enlarging their barn. When Kadyr returned, Burul insisted that he stay in Alcha. Given his status as youngest son, he had little choice, and the family began constructing a new house in their backyard with his savings from Russia. Altyn was expecting an addition to the family, and Burul’s grandchildren, Dania and Damir, remained Burul’s daily responsibility and her source of energy and well-being. Burul admitted to me over the phone that she was feeling older and that she increasingly felt the difficulties of doing things outside the house, which is why she exercised her power to keep Kadyr at home in strong confidence that they ‘can do without migration’. Without a well-paid job in Alcha or elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan, however, Kadyr would most likely have to return to Russia in order to complete their new house in construction.
Throughout my study I have demonstrated that transnational families coped with the contradictory consequences of migration that altered the family meanings, practices, constitution, and the architecture of Kyrgyz family lives. The dissertation has offered numerous examples to suggest that Kyrgyzstani families, characterized by extended family relations, are nonetheless increasingly engaged in nuclear family type of relations in the transnational social fields. In this concluding section, I reiterate three central findings from my research on Kyrgyzstan’s transnational families.

Family as an Expansive Idea

Firstly, there is something about the idea of the family that is enduring despite the distance created by migration that pushed families to live divided and fragmented lives. In fact, I have argued that migration has reproduced and strengthened the idea of ‘family’ worth maintaining. At the same time, my findings also indicated some tendencies of extended family lives leaning towards nuclear-type relations. The journey to this realisation was not simple.

When I started researching transnational families globally, I realised that few studies spoke to extended transnational family lives. Bryceson and Vuorela’s (2002a) illuminating approach of transnational families as ‘familyhood’ set the stage for exploring transnational family lives in a new light. However, the ‘hood’ in their ‘family’ seemed to require deeper exploration. I looked for an approach that would not just look at dyadic relationships between stayers and movers, parents and children, but the kind of approach that would theorize the complexity and contingent configuration of family as constituted through migration.

The ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996, 2013) approach seemed to offer such an answer. The innovation of this approach was to offer a view of family that was not limited to a ‘physical place’. Critically, it argued that no such thing as ‘The Family’ existed, but that families should be seen through ‘family practices’. While linguistically, the definite article in front of ‘family’ does not translate to the Kyrgyz üi-bülö, it was the stress on verbing and adjectivising ‘family’ that I found especially generative for exploring Kyrgyz families. Soviet ethnographers (Kisliakov, 1969; Abramzon, 1971) offered insight about the early Kyrgyz, who used the ‘smoke’ that came out of yurt chimneys to define family units. The usage of the term ‘tütün’ in the village remained omnipresent during my fieldwork, suggesting that the family was still defined through the practice of its members eating from one pot (hence the ‘smoke’ rising from the house). Villagers engaged in
‘family-like’ activities (Finch, 2007) when they dropped by at any time, knowing they would be offered food and a cup of tea.

There is no reason why we should presuppose what family is. Families are what they do (Morgan, 1996). Sanghera and his colleagues’ (2011; cf. Kuehnast, 1997) insightful analysis of the caregiving practices of *amanat* [child foster care] illustrated how temporary foster care was widely practiced as a way of family and kin support. In fact, Kyrgyz parents expected their first sons to give up their own first son to help their grandparents, which over time reinforced the practice of leaving children with parents during internal migration. However, this practice continues in the case of transnational families. When contemporary critics foreground the phenomena of children being ‘left behind’ with their grandparents as problematic, they disregard the fact that this has long been a Kyrgyz family practice.

Transnational lives also transformed intra-family relations, as we have seen in chapters 2-6. Migration placed family members, such as siblings and parents and children, in monetary relations, which created tensions. By 2014, Mira’s children completed the first son’s house in Bishkek and continued building the second son’s house; however, they also started building a new house in Yakutsk. The plan was to start investing into a future business on the premises of the house. Perplexed about the number of construction projects they simultaneously ran in two countries, I once again was reassured that they all intended to return to Kyrgyzstan ‘maybe in about two years’. As long as the migrant children worked together harmoniously, Mira was willing to continue raising her grandchildren. Nonetheless, family members increasingly felt the pressures of temporal constraints in reaching their goals. Migrants employed saving strategies when they limited contact with kin and friends in Russia to more quickly reach their set goals. This sense of temporality was characterized by uncertainty over when to move back to Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, Askar and Aidai were invested in projects back home, but they were also willing to try to see if their business ideas would materialise in Russia. In this way, their experiences have suggested them as belonging neither here nor there.

**Stayed or Left Behind?**

The second way in which migration from Kyrgyzstan raises important questions for family and migration scholarship concerns the relationship between the non-migrants, or stayers, and the migrants. Through examples of herders and caregiving grandmothers, I have argued that stayers are powerful agents in family life. By examining the role of ritual economy in lives of villagers who stay behind, I argued that we need to look at stayers as
‘empowered’ (Archambault, 2010) and not simply as passive victims of another’s absence. In the case of grandmothers, who were largely portrayed as victims of their migrant children, my ethnographic observations over a period of months allowed me to witness days when caregiving was tiring, but mostly I witnessed how grandmothers took responsibility, pride, and joy in bringing up their grandchildren. Nonetheless, migration continued to reinforce gender hierarchies within the classic Kyrgyz patriarchy (cf. Kandiyoti, 1988). While migrant women contributed to the work force, they were also expected to perform the household chores. Women were also vilified, more than their husbands, for leaving their children behind. Moreover, migration arrangements of child caregiving in the absence of mothers were largely correlated with the presence of female kin members.

On the one hand, migrations are increasingly becoming gendered. Migration from Kyrgyzstan can no longer be seen as male-dominated, with global migratory data showing that women constituted more than half of migrants from Kyrgyzstan. Media reports and the policy-oriented literature have painted this emergent gender dimension of migration in negative tones, criticizing migrant mothers for ‘leaving behind’ their children.

**Monetization of Kin Ties**

The family practices illustrated contradictory relationship between migration and development, because migrants and non-migrants became increasingly dependent on remittances and migration became an essential part of the everyday lives (Levitt, 2001). House projects were not the only obvious ways migrants improved their lives. Like these two families, Jamal and Bakyt, I discussed in chapter 5, continued investing only in livestock, which was seen as tangible, meaningful, and valuable (Kasymov, 2014). Nonetheless, migration created contentious relationships between family members around decisions behind what constituted ‘right’ and ‘productive’ remittances. The ethnography of everyday transnational family practices between Kyrgyzstan and Russia showed that while the ‘big family’ goals were on the fore, individual, nuclear family goals were also in sight, and often a contested field of negotiations. Tensions developed from financial relationships over how to spend scarce resources; how to divide resources amongst the various nuclear families that compose the big family.

Migration increased monetary ties within families, and there was a paradox in these relations. Migrants felt obliged to help their non-migrant kin by compensating them for projects, paying them for services, lending them money, or by sending them cash to alleviate hardship. As we have seen, monetary ties strained family relations. To avoid
these conflicts, migrants are increasingly considering cutting ties with kin while working in Russia. This belief was widely and openly addressed in Yakutsk by migrants. These decisions were continuously negotiated and renegotiated over time (Finch and Mason, 1993). Migrants used their status as ‘migrants’ to strategically attend to their nuclear family needs while they were temporarily in Russia. In this way, they found acceptable ways to excuse themselves from social relationships with wider kin and concentrate on specific goals. Increasingly, migrants moved away from their immediate social ties in a calculated manner that their physical absence allowed. On the other hand, migrants also considered it important to stay in touch with kin and engage in life back home as if they never left. Many realized they would benefit from ‘mutual indebtedness’ (Werner, 1998) only by continuously staying engaged in social and kin networks. In terms of remittances, migrants’ dwelling, building, and renovation projects will depend on ‘shifting boundaries of migrants’ belonging, and on the transnational reach of their attachments and obligations’ (Boccagni, 2013a, p. 12). This depended on migrants’ work circumstances abroad. The multiple dwelling projects and attempts to invest or remit towards productive remittances ‘can be a source of distinctive opportunities but also, importantly, of heavy risks, tensions and debts’ (Boccagni, 2013a, p. 13).

Women’s Renewed Strategies

Migration is providing new ways for women to strategize in assisting their natal families. Women continued to bargain with the patriarchal constraints proving how ‘timeless and immutable’ these entities are (Kandiyoti, 1988, 2004). Transnational lives affected married migrant women in contradictory ways. On the one hand, married women largely followed their husband’s familial arrangements for financial accumulation, planning, and expenditure. On the other hand, my empirical data showed that women ‘juggled’ their multiple roles (Thieme, 2008a) by using alternative ways to assist their natal families and kin, themselves, and their children. During a recent chat with Bilim, I learned that she openly resisted contributing her income in Yakutsk towards the family budget, because she felt that her personal needs and those of her two children back home were not being addressed from the common budget. This active resistance was seen as a challenge from the rest of the family, although her avyyn, Aidai, also personally controlled her income. This development is exemplary of the shift towards nuclear family type relations as well as the empowerment of women who are earning, which, in Bilim’s words, will allow her to better ensure that her income is used towards meeting her nuclear family’s needs. When family issues were discussed openly (Finch and Mason, 1993), often
they generated strain and tension, thus, women often deliberately engaged in activities obscured from their husbands, a practice that I have referred to as ‘second wallets’. Women also employed various strategies of money accumulation (e.g. ‘the black cash-box’) within networks of colleagues in order to help their families of origin. Having said so, the ethnographies of men’s lives and migration are insufficiently researched, with a few exceptions (Reeves, 2010a).

Throughout this dissertation, I also demonstrated a strong link between women and caregiving. Scholars writing about post-Soviet Central Asian women generally argued that the 70 years under Soviet Union rule changed Central Asian society, but not Central Asian women’s roles (Olcott, 1991; Kuehnast, 1997, 1998; Kandiyoti, 2004). Increased labour migrations further perpetuated women’s positions within families by moralising their decisions to leave children at home, while women argued that they did it in order to sustain their children’s daily food, educational expenses, and clothes. Nationalist projects attempted, and failed, to limit young women’s ability to travel and exercise their constitutional rights.

The Rubble of the Russian Ruble, the New Patent Migration Regime

Migration is not just economic, there are many other reasons why migrants move (e.g. to experience the world, tourism, visiting relatives). Migration has become inevitable due to Kyrgyzstan’s continued inability to create jobs. One important development that has occurred since I completed my fieldwork and that requires attention has been the 2014 devaluation of the Russian ruble. In reading reports of the ruble’s precipitous decline, I cannot help but wonder about the short and long-term effects on Kyrgyzstani migrants to Russia and on the effects of existing migrants who are endeavouring to sustain their families in Kyrgyzstan. A Russian sociologist with expertise on Central Asian migration, Sergei Abashin suggested that the number of migrants entering Russia decreased by 10-15% in April 2015 in comparison to the same period the previous year (‘Internet-konferentsia’, 2015). Russia’s Federal Migration Service (FMS) decided recently to simplify their labour migration process by moving towards a ‘patent’, permission to work, system. While in theory, the legislation would ease the regulatory burden of migration on migrants, Russia has thus far failed to execute its new policy or overcome the bureaucratic obstacles of accommodating the large numbers of applicants, long-recurring issues the FMS had previously failed to address. In the meantime, many migrants could end up ‘illegal’ due to FMS’s disorganization. Moreover, the new regulation’s requirement for migrants to undertake a language and history test, establishes additional potential barriers.
for labour migrants who wish to work legally. In addition, Kyrgyzstan’s entrance to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is highly anticipated by Kyrgyzstani citizens who are considering migration. These macro-level policies have the potential for huge implications for the future of transnational families. All of these processes do not alleviate the daily burdens facing Kyrgyzstani transnational families as they create and negotiate their documented selves (cf. Reeves, 2013).

In 2014, the Russian Federation’s annexation of Crimea resulted in the imposition of economic sanctions, which together with crashing international oil prices, clobbered the Russian economy (cf. Laruelle, 2013; Siegert, 2013). In 2014, the Russian ruble lost approximately 50% of its value against the US dollar, drastically reducing the value of rubles transferred by Kyrgyzstani migrants (Lemon, 2015). Remittance-dependent Central Asian countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, have been watching spring migratory dynamics closely to determine whether it will affect migratory patterns. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that Tajikistan’s migration would fall by 30% (Lemon, 2015). In March 2015, another report claimed that according to Russia’s Central Bank, individual transfers to Central Asia declined by 15% compared to spring 2014 (Trilling, 2015a, 2015b). While we can only speculate when oil prices will reverse course, transnational families will be increasingly vulnerable due to this economic shock and their halved earnings. In this context, the near future for transnational families working in Russia is bleak.

What are the likely effects on migrant lives? I have learned that Ainash and Bakai returned in spring of 2015 in order to wait out the economic recess in Kyrgyzstan, which reversed their migration pattern. Instead of leaving for Russia in spring, some migrants started to return home. The economic crisis will only push migrants out of work, but it will foster families to stay together and employ strategies of common survival. For example, Ainash and Bakai decided to return during the recent economic crisis and try to find jobs locally until the ruble appreciates. Aidai elaborated on the phone to me that before the crisis, her family had taken a loan (in Kyrgyzstani som) from a bank in Kyrgyzstan to buy their apartment. Aidai was concerned about their ability to repay the loan given loss in value of all three of their salaries. In fact, they changed their decision to send their son to a private kindergarten in Bishkek and will instead send Nurik to a state kindergarten in Alcha. In times of crises, families with children are hit the most.
The Future of Research: Multi-Sited Ethnography

There has been insufficient interest in the research on family studies on Central Asia. In the context of transnationalisms, it is especially important to focus on family lives fragmented across borders in the country that is one of the top remittance-dependent countries in the world. I see my work as an attempt to contribute to existing literatures on the sociology of transnational families and labour migration by having examined family lives maintained transnationally. Following Kuehnast (1997), who wrote one of the first ethnographic dissertations on the post-Soviet families, I renewed the call for increased ethnographic perspectives on transnational families. Ethnographic research extends Clifford Geertz’s appeal for ‘thick description’ in the social sciences that the post-Soviet studies of everyday lives would benefit from.

Future research designs could incorporate both internal and international migration routes (Fryer et al., 2014; Thieme, 2008b). Susan Thieme (2008b, p. 56) claimed many migrated internally before moving internationally, thus these ‘strongly interlinked’ processes need to be looked at together. In this context, there is a need to diversify the analysis of families in a comparative light by addressing transnational families from Kyrgyzstan elsewhere (e.g. Kazakhstan, Turkey, South Korea, the United States of America, and the European states). A special interest that arose from my research were migrants’ documented lives in the countries of destination. While migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia has become a ‘fashion’ (Reeves, 2012b, p. 17), each trip fulfilling different ‘needs’, I could have gained from diversifying my methods of data gathering to account for a larger sample of families. I would, however, continue calling for the exploration of qualitative approaches that would allow multiple researchers to examine transnational families simultaneously (Mazzucato, 2008; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Boccagni, 2013a, b; Faist et al., 2013).


