
'Knowing the Road That Leads You Home': Family, Genealogy, and Migration in Post-Socialist Kazakhstan¹

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In 1990, soon after the beginning of "perestroika" (restructuring) in the former USSR and the rise of open public discontent with the Soviet regime and its colonial practices in non-Russian republics, the Kazakh *shezhyre* - a genealogy register of all Kazakh tribes and lineages - was published for the first time since the establishment of the communist regime in Kazakhstan.² Two versions of the *shezhyre*, similar to each other, compiled by Kazakh historians in the first decade of the 20th century, were published in 1990.³ They came out in Almaty in both languages, Kazakh and Russian, and not long after that, multiple *shezhyre* charts - schematic descriptions of genealogical structures drawn from these registers - became publicly available as well, distributed in Almaty and other cities in Kazakhstan through bookstores and newspaper kiosks. I recall experiencing a somewhat surprised and euphoric feeling when I first saw a *shezhyre* displayed in one of the Almaty kiosks. The *shezhyre*, it had seemed to me, was a testimony that was guarded from people by public officials, hidden for decades in closed stacks with limited access in the National Library or other restricted archives among other historical records. Disclosing such documents, it seemed to me, was an act confirming an ideological change, and a movement toward the rediscovery of the historical dignity of the Kazakh people.

Each of the two *shezhyre* versions is a hundred-page genealogical account of the Kazakh historic tribes, which focuses on the lineages that gave birth to Kazakh historical figures, political leaders, warriors, thinkers, and intel-

lectuals, as well as distinguished citizens of the time when the *shezhyre* was written. The *shezhyre* contains pedigree, details on kinship relations between tribes and lineages, myths of origins, and tribal demographics. Densely filled with detail, the *shezhyre* is hard to read, especially for readers unaccustomed to historical chronicles. In the summer of 1999, in the midst of my fieldwork, I was pleased to meet Akimbek-aga, a retired professor from an Almaty Veterinary School in his late sixties.⁴ He has been known among his family members and friends as a person with a keen interest in *shezhyre*, and they kindly referred me to him.

Akimbek-aga showed me his neat collection of books, brochures, and manuscripts, containing biographies and genealogy records that he kept in his Almaty apartment. He reached for the shelf and pulled out a book in a solid black cover, which he seemed to have prepared for our meeting. It was a *shezhyre* of the Argyn, including biographic data on a great succession of men, as well as some women, associated with this large Kazakh tribe in the Orta zhuz. Akimbek-aga explained that this *shezhyre* was of particular importance to him because it was his grandfather who compiled it before he died in the early 1950s. His cousin, a retired historian from The Kazakh Academy of Sciences in Almaty, finalized the manuscript and published it in 1996. Akimbek-aga turned the first pages of the book and immediately located the most distant ancestors of his lineage:

My *shezhyre* starts with Meiram. He comes from

Bekarys - one of the three sons of Alash, the ancestor of all Kazakhs. Meiram had four sons: Kuandyk, Suyundyk, Bugendyk, and Shugendyk. [...] My family comes from Suyundyk. He had four sons as well.

Akimbek-aga turned to the next page, and, using his finger to guide him through the text, continued: "The names of his sons are Toshkarak, Orazgeldy, Sygenshy and Karzhas. Manshyk and Mamyk (they all are Orazgeldy's sons); my direct ancestors go from Mamuk..." As he reached more recent ancestry, Akimbek-aga frequently elaborated on the contents of the book, which would set him off on tangents, telling stories and legends concerning his lineage, and then returning again to the book itself. After he was through his genealogy, Akimbek-aga posed a question, relating it to my initial inquiry, that is, what I, as a Kazakh woman, should look for in *shezhyre*. "If somebody asked you, *Kandi Kazakhsyng*" ["which kind of Kazakh are you?"], what would you say?" After a short pause that he made to make sure that I was listening, he said:

The answer is in your ancestry. You should recount as many as seven generations - *zhety ata* - of your ancestors.⁵ You start with your father's name then you note your grandfather's name, and then the names of all other ancestors that you know. This is how you let people know about yourself,

your *ru* [lineage]; you pay respect to your ances try this way and show appreciation of your Kazakh origin shared by all [Kazakhs].

The tradition of shezhyre originated among Kazakh pastoralists to specify kinship links and ancestral paths in a single systematic manner. The shezhyre served the purpose of social structuring and lineage segmentation; thus, it was the major principle regulating community affairs and legal disputes. Moreover, as a powerful discursive representation, it embodied the lore that surrounded every social event. More recently, the shezhyre has become a topic often discussed within communities of rural elders who hold it as a cultural medium through which they express their values, construct and communicate their perceptions of social organization, and maintain local politics. Younger generations of Kazakh villagers, however, do not seem to be concerned with community activities requiring expertise in the shezhyre. Most of my informants, especially those with living parents, when I asked them whether they knew who were their lineage ancestors, excused themselves by referring me to their parents' records:

I do not know much about my genealogy, but my mother should have our pedigree chart...

or

I am Argyn... Well, my father told me the names in our *ru*... I just cannot remember... I was about forty when my father wanted to talk to me, his oldest daughter [child], about our *ru* for the first time....⁶

A young Kazakh woman, a university student in Almaty and one of those with more consistent shezhyre knowledge, commented:

We are all Naymans in our village. Nayman is a very large tribe that has many *ru*. I can't remember the *ru* that occurs in our village... I'm Kozhambet as of the seventh generation, and my *baska ru* [minimal lineage] is Dortoul. We are the only Dortoul family in the village....

We don't have relatives in the village.⁷

Young and middle-aged villagers who have moved to Almaty are quite similar in this regard to their urban counterparts; in the city, the shezhyre survives with the new senior enthusiasts like Akimbek-aga and his cousin who try to preserve it as body of knowledge that relates histories of dispersed Kazakh lineages to the national past.

Despite the relative lack of interest in the structure of Kazakh tribes and lineages that we find in Kazakh society, in general the shezhyre is commonly acknowledged as an unusually respectful cultural tradition and a powerful testimony to Kazakh identity. I was not surprised then to hear from a young Kazakh man, who had his *zhety ata* (names of seven generations of his ancestors) displayed as if it were a family photograph in his office at an international organization in Almaty, that "any Kazakh person, who has at least some degree of self-respect, should preserve the knowledge of his lineage ancestors." Such commitment to seeing the shezhyre as an ultimate source of moral rigor and identity prompted me to think of it as a "dominant symbol" among Kazakhs, which, similarly to the *mudyi* (milk) tree analyzed by Turner "refers to values that are regarded as ends in themselves" [1967, pp. 19-47]. This major characteristic of such a symbol, according to Turner, lays the basis for its multivocality - the complexity of meaning that indigenous actors, specialists and ordinary participants of the given cultural practice invest in it, and upon which anthropologists, who are as well involved in production of meaning in the culture they study, build up their interpretations and analyses [ibid.]. Following the perspective advanced in symbolic anthropology, the meaning(s) of a "dominant" symbol is "associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means" [ibid., p. 20], "satisfying both existential and political ends"



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Yurt on an alpine meadow in the eastern Tianshan

[Cohen 1979, p. 102], and, therefore, tailored to specific situations. From this standpoint, relative lack of interest in shezhyre among younger Kazakhs does not preclude their responding to its appeal once they reach an older age when the shezhyre can serve them as a source of their authority in community affairs and help to handle the life crisis situation that occurs when someone becomes part of the shezhyre at a lineage cemetery. Furthermore, the meanings of the shezhyre and its relevance to society's needs and tastes shift across broader social and temporal realms. The intensity with which it draws boundaries between genealogically defined communities and reinforces community solidarity, provides a meaningful frame for linking families, generations, and communities; creates points of attachment to ancestral land, bridges rural and urban segments of the society; and supports other cultural practices, such as lineage segmentation, exogamy code, and patriarchy, which depend on the historical context in which the shezhyre is conveyed.

This contingency of cultural forms and their role in creating "the unity in experience" [Douglas 1966, p. 2] has been overlooked in research seeking causal-functional explanations of Kazakh identity. It has been argued that the tradition of shezhyre emerged within the Kazakh pastoral system as "a way of thinking, a way of interpreting ongoing processes through the prism of the genealogy of the individual or group" [Masanov 2002, p. 1], and, after sedentarization of Kazakh nomads in the 1930s, formed a "natural" constituency in their ethos as a nation [Masanov 2000; Karin and Chebotarev 2000]. Statements in which authors assert that genealogical thinking was transplanted unchanged from the past into the Kazakh present-day culture and social reality have followed this fairly consistent argument. For example, Khazanov believes that for a Kazakh "his parochial, regional, and/or kin-based tribal and clanal affiliations still have significant meaning and play an important role in his loyalties" [1995, pp. 124-125]. In his research, the shezhyre has figured as a "burden" of the pre-colonial past that has a particularly strong impact on rural society:

Kazakhs who migrated from their lands to other parts of the country, particularly those who settled in the multiethnic districts of Northern Kazakhstan, at present understand the clan structure less well than those who continue to live in their traditional territories. However, in the purely Kazakh districts even the children are well aware of their clanal affiliations. [ibid., p.125]

The problem with this approach is that, by following conventional wisdom of functional analysis, it fails to recognize that the shezhyre may only seem to represent some sort of "a long established pattern of values," which in turn "implies a rigid mental outlook or rigid social institutions," as Mary Douglas [1966, pp. 4-5] insisted in her critique of a materialist treatment of religion. In fact, the shezhyre is a symbolic form that communicates a more general view of the social order.⁸ For this reason, we cannot simply assume that social/ethnic processes in Kazakh so-

ciety form a "mirror image" of the ordering principles suggested in the shezhyre. Had they done so or had Kazakh society generated what Khazanov [1995, p. 125] calls "pure forms of tribalism" based on genealogical divisions, then (speaking in terms of my own research) we should expect to see native place associations formed by migrants (a common phenomenon in other developing countries) on the basis of their regions of origin. Yet, through extensive interviews carried out with recent Kazakh migrants who came to Almaty from different regions of Kazakhstan during my fieldwork in 1999, I found none.

In this essay, I explore the shezhyre in respect to its meaning in the context of rural to urban migration to post-socialist Almaty. Special attention is paid to how the idea of ancestral and family ties, a Kazakh cultural repertoire that places much emphasis on moral rigor, community spirit and solidarity, and family/kin group obligations, is involved in Kazakh migrants' lives. I intend to expand on this theme by drawing on an ethnographic case study. This study recounts a series of episodes from a history of a couple of recent Kazakh migrants, Madina and Zhanbolat (her husband), who arrived in Almaty a few years ago from a rural area bordering with Uzbekistan in southern Kazakhstan. Following Mary Douglas' analysis of religious symbolism, I argue that, in the given context, the shezhyre is a creative movement aimed at reducing anxiety on the part of older generation of villagers who use genealogical knowledge in an attempt to restore a "unity of experience" within their families and communities that was disrupted, from a rural point of view, by outmigration to the city.

It was a lovely autumn evening in mid-October 1999. The weather was fairly warm, although after sunset the air was infused with chills indicating that summer was gone. Madina was preparing dinner for her family, her husband and their two children, and her mother-in-law, who was visiting them in Almaty. She had already diced meat and vegetables in small cubes and was making pasta, vigorously manipulating the dough which came out of her wooden rolling pin as a large sheet, thin as paper. In the summer Madina used a spa-

cious summer kitchen in the yard that her husband built for her this year. A few days ago, she returned to their small indoor kitchen, separated from a living room by an improvised curtain. Every time when she had to reach for something, trying to avoid corners of compactly arranged cupboards, appliances, and boxes, she complained about the inconvenience of the size of her indoor kitchen.

In the living room, Ultugan-apa,⁹ Madina's mother-in-law, played with her granddaughter while trying to keep an eye on the TV. At one moment, she asked the girl: "*Men saghan kimmin?*" ["Who am I?"]. "*Siz menin ejemsiz*" ["You're my grandmother"], the girl replied, giving Ultugan-apa a big smile. Their relaxed interaction was interrupted when the other child, an older, energetic boy about to turn five, decided to run to the kitchen demanding his mother's attention. Ultugan-apa wanted the boy to come back so he would not distract his mother from cooking. Trying to manage the two children at the same time, she pointed her finger at the boy while asking the girl: "*Myna bala kim bolady saghan?*" ["Who is this boy?"]. "Arsen," she said moving towards her brother. Ignoring his sister, the boy ran to a window in the living room, trying to see if his *ekeji* [father], was coming home from work. "*Arsen mening agham...*" ["Arsen is my older brother"], the girl added. "Have you heard what she just said?" Ultugan-apa asked the boy, now afraid that he would get hurt if the window suddenly opened. He did not respond; instead, he ran across the living room to the television and increased the volume. "Hey, Arsen!" his grandmother could not resist yelling at him. Not quite scared, the boy nevertheless decided to seek sanctuary with his mother, asking her for a treat immediately as he reached for her skirt. She objected to his request, arguing that dinner was coming soon. He firmly held his mother's skirt and kept insisting when the door opened and his father entered the living room.

As he heard him coming, the boy released his mother's skirt and immediately ran towards him. Zhanbolat, his father, lifted his son over his head: "How are you, Arsen?" He let the boy down on the floor, and, at the same

moment, Ultugan-apa gently presented the girl to him since she was going to seclude herself in their bedroom to do Namaz (a Muslim evening prayer). Madina came out of the kitchen to greet her husband too. Briefly hugging him, she announced that the dinner was almost ready. As everyone sat at the table, Ultugan-apa took the little girl from her *kelin's* [daughter-in-law's] lap, placing her on her own. Madina mildly objected but her mother-in-law [*ene*] insisted, as she wanted Madina to enjoy her meal while she would feed the girl. After dinner, noticing that Madina was about to put some leftover food in the garbage, the older woman commented that it was sinful to waste food. Madina seemed to have appreciated the comment, as she agreed that throwing food away was a bad urban habit that she did not intend to acquire. The manner in which the two women interacted displayed nothing but concern, mutual respect, and warm feelings.

Madina came out of the kitchen carrying a food plate. She was going to see Zoya Il'inishna, an elderly Russian woman in her eighties, with whom they shared the house. Madina did not recall seeing their landlady on that day and wanted to make sure that she was all right. She was well, Madina gladly reported when she returned; she simply decided to stay inside, trying to adjust to the colder weather. As soon as his mother was back, Arsen followed her to the kitchen, asking for chewing gum, but she told him to wait and his grandmother shepherded the boy to the living room.

"Tell me [the names of] your 'seven fathers' [*zhety ata*]," Ultugan-apa asked the boy who was not pleased with his mother, "and you will get the thing." The boy climbed up the chair and, standing still on it, started recounting his genealogy, which was quite a performance: "*Mening zheti atam* [my 'seven fathers' are]..." He paused, trying to focus, and proceeded: "*Mening dey atam* [my 'big fathers' are] *Amangeldy, Zholdybay, ...* hmm... *Orazgeldy, Orynbasar...*" The boy spoke seriously and loudly, exclaiming each word. His grandmother nodded in approval with every name, encouraging the boy to continue. "*Mening atam Sapar, mening eken Zhanbolat, Arsen mening aghan!* [My grandfather

is Sapar, my father is Zhanbolat, and my name is Arsen!]" When the boy finished, his grandmother and his father, who had just come back from the yard where he had a cigarette, applauded him, praising his talents, which made him feel shy. Arsen hid behind his mother's skirt when she entered the room holding a plastic bag with candies. She offered him a candy but he refused, expecting a gum. "What's so good about gum? Candy is better!" she tried to tease her son. "You can swallow the gum... Anybody want a candy? ...*Apa* [mother], would you like a candy? ... Tea is going to be ready in a minute." Madina then turned to her son: "All right, let me get you a gum if you want it so much."

Madina's family comes from the Dzhetyysay village, formerly a *sovkhos* [state farm] center in southern Kazakhstan near Shymkent, the largest town in the region. This village was re-built during the Soviet period on the basis of an old Kazakh settlement. Vineyards have become its major agricultural business, serving as the basis for a newly constructed winemaking factory. Road maintenance, transportation, and garage services were part of the village infrastructure in the 1970s, along with a clinic and a professional school. Madina's father was a car mechanic, and her mother worked at a local clinic as an accountant. Madina was a middle child, having a younger brother and an older sister, Enzhu, who went to study nursing in Shymkent after she finished school. Enzhu married in Shymkent, and she and her husband relocated to Almaty where her husband was hired at a construction firm at the invitation of his ex-classmate who had arrived there earlier. Zhanbolat, Madina's husband, was born in Zhan Tobe, a smaller village populated by less than a hundred families in southern Kazakhstan. It is located near a district center named after a Kazakh poet, Abay, which is the largest settlement in the area. Zhanbolat was the fourth child in the family of his parents born after their two daughters and one son. Both his parents worked in the cotton industry, which was a major branch of their village economy. When Zhanbolat returned from military service in 1990, he replaced his father by taking up his job as a water-truck operator. By that

time, both his sisters were married, living with their husbands in neighboring villages, and so was his brother who stayed with his wife and children in a house that their father built for his family in Zhan Tobe. Zhanbolat and Madina met while she was visiting her distant cousin in his village. They were both twenty-one at that time, and, when Zhanbolat's parents became aware of his interest in her, they encouraged him to marry, driven by the desire to see their youngest son settled down (Zhanbolat was a late child; he was born in 1971 when his mother was forty-one years old). They married in the summer of 1992 and stayed with Zhanbolat at his parents' house where they had their first baby boy.

By the time of their marriage, which coincided with the collapse of the Soviet economy, life in Zhan Tobe had become more difficult. Zhanbolat and his parents maintained a tobacco field like many other families in the village. Zhanbolat marketed their harvest in rural Russia where people liked to roll tobacco leaves into cigarettes. In order to increase their income, his parents involved everyone in the family in working the field, including Madina, who had to leave her baby with her husband's young cousins. One day in August 1993, a fourteen-year-old girl was looking after the baby. Having trouble pacifying the baby, she gave him a small piece of cucumber, assuming that it was an appropriate food for him. The baby swallowed the cucumber, which made him terribly sick, but the girl was afraid to tell anyone about what she had done, hoping that it would pass. Late at night, they rushed to see a village doctor, who refused to see the baby at that hour. They drove to the hospital in the district center, which took another three hours, but it was too late to help their baby.

Madina and Zhanbolat were devastated. Enzhu, Madina's older sister immediately came to the village when she received the terrible news about her little sister's baby, and so did their parents, who came to support their daughter as well. Surrounded by her family, Madina secretly shared her thoughts: she blamed her in-laws who wanted her to work in the field. Had she looked after her baby herself, he would have been alive. Agreeing with

Madina, Enzhu wanted to help her sister to recover from her grief and invited her to Almaty. Zhanbolat was not aware of the discussion; however, he hoped that his wife's visit to Almaty would do her good. The only person who was not happy about this decision was Ultugan-apa, Zhanbolat's mother. She was not sure about her daughter-in-law separating from her husband and his family and told her husband and her son. Zhanbolat could not join his wife at that moment, as he wanted to join a team of his village fellows going to a marketplace in Russia. In this critical situation, Madina's parents intervened, insisting that Madina needed this trip to the city. When Zhanbolat came back from Russia, Madina was still in Almaty. He was sad about the loss of their baby, for which he blamed the local doctor and the entire healthcare system that he felt had let it happen. Later, Zhanbolat admitted that he increasingly "hated everything about life in the village." Not long after he returned from Russia, he went to Almaty in November 1993. His parents believed that he wanted to bring his wife home. However, he intended to join her, planning to spend the winter in the city.

While Zhanbolat searched for work, they stayed with Enzhu and her family. Madina suggested that Zhanbolat talk to her sister's husband, but her husband seemed to be unexcited about a construction business in which his *bazha* was involved. He met his friend from the military, a young Kazakh man from the country who worked at a bazaar and invited Zhanbolat to join their group of sellers. Zhanbolat had suitable skills that he had gained at a Russian marketplace, which helped, but, in contrast to his previous experience in retail as an agricultural retailer, in Almaty, Zhanbolat felt like a *commersant*. They marketed textile and wool products imported from India supplied by an urban relative. His job at the bazaar, Zhanbolat thought, was much better than the one that his *bazha* could help him with at the construction firm. Soon, Zhanbolat and Madina rented an apartment in Almaty and obtained residence permits.

In the meantime, Zhanbolat's parents expected them to return to the village. They were upset about their prolonged

stay in Almaty, blaming Madina, who they thought had convinced their son to stay away from home against his will. When Zhanbolat telephoned home, his mother tried to interfere, arguing that he let his wife have the upper hand. Zhanbolat had a good time in Almaty, meeting new people and making friends, but he preferred not to argue with his mother and tried to ignore what she said. In the early spring of 1994, he thought that they would return to the village, when Madina announced that she was pregnant. This news provoked Zhanbolat to abandon his idea of going back home: they had lost one baby there, and he could not let it happen again. Arsen was born in Almaty in November 1994, which was almost a year after Zhanbolat came to the bazaar. He appreciated his job; however, by that time, he became aware of the risks associated with the bazaar:

Work at the bazaar gave me good money, but it was a dangerous place. As sellers, we had to maneuver between policemen and groups of crooks [*raketchikov*]. Each group, trying to squeeze cash from us, insisted that they would "protect" us from other groups. We simply could not afford their "protection," as there were too many groups.

Zhanbolat was also confused about why there was not much solidarity among Kazakhs in Almaty and believed that it was disgraceful for Kazakhs to oppose each other. He commented:

You know, one thing I could never understand: when I was in the army (I served in Minsk [Byelorussia]), there were quite a few Kazakh guys, and we always stayed together. If one of us was in trouble, we all mobilized. [The situation] in Almaty is different. For example, at the bazaar, Kazakh guys confront each other arguing about money. This does not make Kazakhs look good in front of Russians who, perhaps, think that Kazakhs are like that, [i.e.,] have no unity.

In 1995, their group disintegrated after getting into serious trouble with some bazaar crooks. Zhanbolat hung around the bazaar for another year, doing different jobs here and there that gave him some income and much less moral satisfaction. He was still determined to become a *commersant* again. As he said in 1999: "commerce was the only thing that I wanted to do." In 1997, while Madina was expecting another baby, Zhanbolat had to abandon his plans and decided to find a job elsewhere. Short of money, they wanted to find an apartment with a lower rent.

Madina insisted that Zhanbolat should talk about a job with his *bazha* who had promised her that he would hire her husband. To her disappointment, Zhanbolat refused, trying to find his own way in the city. He believed that his *bazha* did not care about them and his promises were empty. One day, Zhanbolat's friend referred him to a coal distribution company in Almaty, which was hiring truck drivers. He finally had a job. Every morning, Zhanbolat had to load his truck with a portion of coal (two to three tons), deliver it to a customer and promptly come back to the station for another portion. In December 1998, his job took him to a small neighborhood behind the Kazakh Drama Theatre comprised of individual dwellings. As he found his customer's house, Zhanbolat impatiently signaled with the horn. He was about to leave, assuming that nobody was home, when he saw an elderly Russian woman appear on the porch. Zhanbolat was going to dump his load right on the street, as he was supposed to, when the woman asked him kindly to unload it in the yard. Zhanbolat reluctantly agreed.

Zhanbolat thought about this woman on the way back to the station, wondering about her family and children and why she had no one to help her. He remembered other elderly women, mostly Russian he thought, whom he saw sitting at sidewalks selling newspapers and tobacco or begging for cash. Zhanbolat decided that this happens because it is normal for Russians to abandon their elderly parents, as opposed to Kazakhs who have more concern about their parents. Zhanbolat had an image of his own mother whom he had left in the village. This was not

right, he thought, and suddenly felt guilty. He also felt angry with his wife, realizing she was responsible for their decision to settle down in the city. He blamed himself for not listening to his mother, who now seemed right in asking him to return home. Angry and confused, Zhanbolat decided to go for a drink with his friends. He also decided not to inform his wife that the elderly Russian woman, to whom he brought the coal, was looking for tenants in exchange for a little cash and household help. They did not need a new apartment, he thought, as he intended to go back to the village with his family.

That night, because it was not the first time that Zhanbolat returned home in a drunken state, Madina was more upset with her husband than usual. She refused to serve him dinner and raised her voice when he protested against such treatment. Zhanbolat barked that Madina had transformed into one of those Russian women who have no respect for their husbands. She disagreed, yelling that it was him, instead, who had become Russian--"Look at your drunk face! What kind of a Kazakh are you when you drink vodka every night!" Angry and frustrated, refusing to accept his situation with alcohol, Zhanbolat hit Madina across the face. Outraged with her husband's violent behavior, Madina left their home and headed to her sister's house. Overwhelmed with what had happened, she did not notice the freezing cold weather on that winter night. The next day her daughter had a severe fever. The poor girl was diagnosed with pneumonia and the doctors suggested she should stay in the hospital with her mother. After a few days, Madina's *zhizde*, as she called her older sister's husband, went to see his *bazha*. Zhanbolat was drunk. The news about his daughter's illness helped Zhanbolat to sober up. He remembered how their first baby died and was afraid that the same thing could happen to his daughter. Zhanbolat took it as a wake-up call and reconsidered his approach to his family:

They need me. And for me, my life has no meaning without my family. I just did not realize what my family means to me. I was unhappy because I could not find the right job for myself. I wanted to work in

commerce but I was thinking only about myself. I did not think of my family, all I wanted was to be successful and have cash. It was selfish, as I did not think about my family and my children. They needed me to be more caring and supportive.

They went to see Zoya Il'inishna, the elderly woman who was looking for tenants, and soon after they moved into her house. Zhanbolat fixed the roof and the gate. This was an old house with a yard and a garden. It was built before centralized heating and a sewer system were established in Almaty and it had no access to any of these infrastructural advantages. Madina looked after their landlord when she was sick and tried to make sure that it was warm in her rooms and that she had food. Appreciating her tenants' concern and their kind contribution to the household, the woman stopped charging them rent.

Eventually, Madina found a job at a restaurant specializing in Kazakh traditional cuisine. She joined a team of women making traditional Kazakh pasta. Zhanbolat used to come by the restaurant when she finished work at midnight. One night he was waiting for her when he saw an older Uzbek man who had come to see someone as well and asked Zhanbolat for a cigarette. The Uzbek man recognized a southern accent in Zhanbolat's speech, and they engaged in a conversation. This man was a self-employed chef, specializing in *palau*¹⁰ that he cooked outdoors in a large iron cauldron [*kazan*]. People invited him for funeral luncheons, picnics and parties at their out-of-town cottages. He had a sizable clientele among Almaty residents, including Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Russian families. He planned to buy a car and was looking for a partner. A few days later, they finalized the deal. Zhanbolat and Madina finally acquired some degree of stability and, by the time I met them in 1999, they had managed to rebuild their lives in the city.

Madina served tea, pouring just a tiny bit in rounded Kazakh cups [*kese*], which was the manner in southern Kazakhstan. One could empty the cup in one sip, after which it was returned

to the hostess for a refill. In other parts of Kazakhstan, and especially in urban areas, it is different; so I asked Madina if she could pour more tea in my cup, in this way exposing my non-southern origin to Ultugan-apa, whom I saw for the first time that day. She asked me whether I was from Almaty or elsewhere, and about my parents, their names and origins. The conversation gradually moved to their own family affairs. Ultugan-apa had arrived in Almaty about three weeks ago. In the village, she had not been feeling well and Zhanbolat wanted her to visit a cardiologist in Almaty, which, according to Madina, was the major purpose of her visit. Ultugan-apa, however, said that she had come to observe an ancient Kazakh tradition, which is to welcome the spirits of their ancestors [*eruaktar*]¹¹ to their new home, mentioning a doctor's appointment only in passing. The cardiologist gave her a prescription, suggesting that she should make another appointment after she finished the treatment. But Ultugan-apa said that she could not stay away from home for that long. Her older son and his wife looked after the garden and the livestock that they shared, but she believed that they needed her back soon. A major reason why she intended to leave for the village, however, was her oldest daughter's son's circumcision ritual to be followed by a party [*sundet toi*] to which she was invited.

Her oldest daughter and family, including her husband and their three children, lived in a village fifty kilometers from Zhan Tobe. Her husband's father was a sovkhos director under socialism. These days he was retired but still actively engaged in local politics and had organized a peasant co-op specialized in raising tobacco in which his sons were involved as well. Their family was well-to-do: they had sponsored the construction of a house for a young couple when they married, purchased some furniture, and, recently, their son had purchased an imported car that he was going to drive to bring his mother-in-law to the party. The mother-in-law was somewhat jealous of their family. Because their father was well and able to provide his sons with jobs, they all stayed close to their parents' household. One of her sons went to Almaty to try his fortune; the other was at home, but he was not ready to assume

the responsibility over the household the way her husband had done. Ultugan-apa did not object to the fact that Zhanbolat and his wife decided to stay in Almaty:

Schooling and hospitals are better here, they say, and they have jobs. Nowadays nobody wants to work in the [agricultural] field. Only my little daughter still works in the cotton field for such little money, eh poor her... But she has no choice because her husband is an alcoholic and they have two children whom she has to feed.

She no longer tried to convince her son that he and his family should return to the village. Instead, she chose a different strategy that she thought would help her grandchildren who would grow up in the city to assert their link to their native village and the rest of the family despite their being physically distanced:

My husband did not pay attention to whether his sons knew their [ancestral] roots or not. He has his *zhety ata* [seven fathers' names] on a paper that his father wrote before he died. I kept it in a safe place, as I knew that it would be needed some day. I want my grandchildren to learn it by heart, especially Zhanbolat's children, because they moved out of our village where everyone knows each other.

I want them to know their roots, in which case people here would know that they are not [*kandyrgan duana* - i.e., a person with no roots like the dry tumbleweed] but have ancestry as all good Kazakhs. Here in Almaty, there are all kinds of people and things to do, and therefore it is easy to forget where you come from. I have been afraid that once my son and his wife moved here, they and their children would forget their way home. This is why I want my grandchildren to know their roots. To know who your ancestors are is the same as knowing the road that leads you home.

By using such a poetic thought rendering genealogy as a metaphorical connection with home, Ultugan-apa has expressed her concern about the unity and identity of her family in a way that eloquently explains her motivation to teach her grandson about his "seven fathers." To sum up on a broader note, this case study supports my earlier argument that by emphasizing one's relation to his or her ancestry, the shezhyre provided a meaningful frame for linking individuals, families, and generations. As in the case of my other informants whose stories I discussed elsewhere [Yessenova 2003], this elderly woman tried to shape her grandson's awareness of his ancestry. In all situations, the flow of knowledge, the names of lineage ancestors and the stories and legends describing their lives and virtues, indicates cultural transmission across generations. Thus, by playing an important role in raising grandchildren, Kazakh grandparents provide their offspring with a sense of generational continuity and shape their sense of the past.¹² This situation clearly resonates with accounts originating in different cultural settings [Epstein 1981; Paerregaard 1997; Ferguson 1999] in which grandparents become important attachment figures, acting in one way or another as major mediators across "an unbridgeable divide springing up between rural and urban kin" [Epstein 1981, p. 292].

My informants who arrived in Almaty from rural areas in the wake of post-socialism commonly acknowledged the shezhyre as an important aspect of Kazakh culture. At the same time, their testimonies also revealed the shallowness of their genealogical knowledge, the fact of which did not seem to bother any of them. The present case study, unfolding a dialogue between younger migrants and older members of their families across the rural/urban divide, suggests that my other informants' responses have not reflected all the processes associated with their migration, especially those emerging at the rural end. It is there, more specifically, within the space created through the flow of discourse between migrants' old and new homes, where thoughts and anticipations of attachment are generated. These projects that may or may not have an immediate impact on those who left for the city are initiated by

rural family members in response to their anxiety caused by outmigration.

In her classic study of religious rituals and rules of avoidance, Mary Douglas [1966, p. 3] demonstrates that some pollution ideas express "a general view of the social order" through their relation to social life. "In chasing dirt..., decorating," she argues, "we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it to conform to an idea" [ibid., p. 29]. This idea (or ideas) is grounded in concrete cultural norms, the observance of which supports expectations of integrity among members of given community. Therefore, as Douglas insists, "our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea," emerging in a community as a result of external pressures and is "likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" [ibid., p.36]. Quite similarly, in my view, Kazakh rural families employ the idea of common ancestry in dealing with their anxiety caused by the outmigration of their members. Genealogical knowledge in this case is a "metaphor of holiness" [ibid, p.54] that by reinforcing group boundaries expected to sustain continuity across the rural/urban divide plays out in the same way as the dietary rules and rules of avoidance in other societies.

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Notes

1. I am thankful for suggestions from Robbyn Seller (McGill University) and for useful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, the ethnographic material for which was collected as part of my doctoral research. The twelve-months of fieldwork (1999) for this research was supported by grants from the Research Support Scheme of the Open Society Support Foundation (grant No.: 98/1998), Social Sciences & Humanities Research Grants Subcommittee, and Pastoral and Agrarian Systems Equipe (FCAR). An Arthur Tagge McGill University Major Fellowship (1999-2000) and the Supplementary Global Grant Program of the Open Society University (2000-2002) funded a subsequent period of writing. I am grateful to these institutions for their support. I would like to express my warmest gratitude to my informants whose kind cooperation made my research project possible.

2. The term "shezhyre" was adopted in the Kazakh language after the Persian and Arabic word meaning "tree." Among the Kazakhs, it denoted specifically the oral tradition of genealogy reckoning that served the purpose of formation of political alliances, social structuring, and lineage segmentation, and was ultimately linked to the division of pasturelands and annual migration routes. The unified shezhyre, a written genealogical account(s) of all Kazakh tribes and lineages to which I refer here was compiled in the first two decades of the 20th century as a form of Kazakh political resistance. For an extended discussion of the shezhyre as an important historical narrative that effectively shaped the boundaries of Kazakh ethnicity, see Esenova (2002).

3. These are by Shakarim Kudayberdy-Uly (1990; [1991; 1911]) and Tynyshpaev Muhametzhan (1990 [1925]).

4. "Aga" is a Kazakh term and a respectful address to an older man that can be glossed in English as 'uncle' and may or may not be suggestive of a kinship relation.

5. In the past, each Kazakh lineage was composed of seven generations of the kindred stemming from the same

founder ancestor. When the lineage was expanding beyond seven generations, each set of the seventh generation's siblings was expected to form separate lineages. *Zhety ata*, glossed in English as "seven fathers," was the principle regulating exogamy expectations among Kazakhs.

6. The term "ru" in Kazakh language, in a literal sense, denotes "lineage." However, it is popularly used with reference to both lineage (minimal and expanded) and "tribe" (however, the proper term for the latter is "taypa"). Such inclusive use of the term ru has also been adopted in the contemporary literature on Kazakh social organization (see also Werner 1998, p. 610).

7. The term *Baska ru* stands for a minimal lineage, including seven generations of kindred stemming from the same ancestor, *zhety ata* [seven fathers].

8. In her classic work on pollution rituals Douglas demonstrated that the "contrary may be true." As she argues, "... some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing general view of the social order. For example, there are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids. ... Such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy. It is implausible [however] to interpret them as suggesting something about the actual relation of the sexes" [ibid., p. 3-4].

9. Ultugan is her first name. The suffix *-apa* indicates her advanced age as a grandmother.

10. *Palau* is an Uzbek traditional meal based on fried meat with carrot and rice.

11. "In their role as visitors in the home and agents of blessing, the Kazakh ancestors are called *aruaq*... or, more comprehensively, *ata-babalarding aruaq*, the spirits of the ancestors. [Arabic origin, Turkic plural form: *aruaqtar*]" [Privatsky 1998, p. 205]. "Kazakhs have ways of talking about their ancestors in genealogical terms... But when the ancestor-spirits are 'touched' with the blessing of shared food and holy words around the family table, Kazakhs do not use the Turkic terminology for the progenitors of the horde (*juz*) and clan (*ru*), nor the more recent lineage of the "seven grandfathers" (*zhety ata*). Instead it is the *aruaq*, the ancestor-spirits, characterized with an Arabic collective noun, who are united conceptually with the spirits of saints (*aulyyening aruaq*) and prophets (*paygambarding aruaq*)" [ibid., p. 257]. ... "The *aruaq* are the primary actors in the Kazakh spirit-world..." [ibid., p. 205]. Accompanying serving and eating fried pastries with words, such as "*Aruaqqa tiye bersin*" (may it touch the spirit) in the dedication of the meal... to the memory of the ancestors... the practice that the family is trying to strengthen a relational bond with the ancestors, who are ritually passive" [ibid., p. 230].

12. Kazakh grandparents were always involved in the raising of their grandchildren. During the Soviet period, this tradition was, perhaps, reinforced because of the Soviet labor policy, according to which young mothers had to return to work after a short maternity leave. See Cynthia Ann Werner [1998, p. 600] for more information on this issue.



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Pik Pobedy (Mt. Tomur) in the Tianshan on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang