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Forming the Kyrgyz Community of Chicago: Identity, Organizations, and Institutions

Jonah Victor Sorby Roth
Bard College

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by

Jonah Roth

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For my parents.

I'd like to thank my parents for their never-ending support. I also thank my advisers Naoko Kumada and Olga Voronina for their never-ending guidance. I also thank all the anthropology and RAES professors who spent the last four years helping me get to this moment. I also thank all the other professors who made me a better thinker. I also thank all my non-parental family members and friends for always being there when I need it. And finally, I thank all the people who helped me complete my fieldwork for this project, whether you participated in my research or helped me find someone to participate. I could not have done it without all of you!

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2022, I spent a semester abroad at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek, the capital and largest city of the small Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan. When I told people there that I was American, they would often ask me where in the United States I was from. A large portion of them had never heard of my hometown or state—Milwaukee, Wisconsin—so I gradually learned to frame it within the context of something that they would recognize. Since Milwaukee is only about ninety miles north of Chicago, I got into the habit of telling people I lived "near Chicago." This worked out well, as no one in Kyrgyzstan had trouble knowing Chicago. In fact, people often responded with delight by saying that there was a large community of Kyrgyz there. Nor was it uncommon for people to say that they had a friend or relative living there. Before coming to Kyrgyzstan, I had no idea that this Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community existed. When I told my American acquaintances about it, this was always new to them as well. But a quick Google search confirmed that there was a prominent Kyrgyz community in Chicago, complete with a Kyrgyz Community Center and even a few Kyrgyz restaurants. After considerably more research, I found that there was no existing ethnography of this community published by an anthropologist. So, as I was preparing to go back to the States and spend the summer in Milwaukee, the idea materialized for doing a senior project about the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community.

When Kyrgyz people come to the United States, they face many challenges of acculturation, or the overall process by which different cultures are affected by contact with each other. As I set out to do research, I hypothesized that a prevalent method of overcoming these

challenges concerned forming a "community" away from home. This came from noticing the references to the "Kyrgyz community" in Chicago made by people I talked to in Kyrgyzstan. It was clear to me from the beginning that a community meant more than just a population of people with a common ethnicity living in a place. But what was not clear from the beginning was exactly what "community" meant in the case of Kyrgyz in Chicago, what role it played in their acculturation, and how much of their success in the U.S. they accredit to ethnic networks within their local spaces. Therefore, the first goal of my project is understanding *what* the Kyrgyz "community" really means. I decided to center my approach to this around Ann Grodzin Gold's (2008) description of community as generally "a group of people who have something in common and who are actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion" (2). With this succinct summary of the term in mind, I have formed two objectives in my aim to uncover what community means for the Kyrgyz in Chicago: one is understanding what the Kyrgyz "have in common," and the other is finding how they engage with each other in a "benign fashion."

That being said, the task of mapping out the commonalities of the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community members entails understanding who they are as a people. While an "ethnic group" may seem like a universal method of dividing humanity, the Kyrgyz people are rooted in a much different form of relatedness primarily involving tribes (*uruus*) and clans (*uruks*) (Gullette 2010, 4). It is only through colonization that the Kyrgyz have become an "ethnic group" in the usual sense of the word. The result of this is that the Kyrgyz identity today—which is centered around the Kyrgyz nation-state—is not only externally imposed, but is as likely to be appropriated for political reasons as to be used for the purposes of community. It is through organizations like the Kyrgyz Community Center that the Kyrgyz identity in Chicago is solidified and united, which

functions as a kind of microcosm of the state-building initiatives in Kyrgyzstan which, as anthropologist David Gullette (2010) argues, attempt to unite the Kyrgyz people in times of division (156-76). Because of the deep historical roots of this issue, my analysis involves a mix of history and ethnography.

The second aspect of understanding what the "Kyrgyz community" means in Chicago is understanding how the Kyrgyz people "engage with each other in a benign fashion." This is done through my ethnographic exploration of organizations and institutions in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, and the roles that these social entities play in forming networks of mutual help and assistance among the Kyrgyz in Chicago. It is through these analyses that I explore not just *what* the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community is, but *how* it is formed. In doing so, I explore transnational processes of acculturation, especially people's deliberate moves towards preserving their culture through organizations like the Kyrgyz Community Center and the restaurant Jibek Jolu (in Chapter 2), as well as their adaptation to a social environment that is more focused on informal institutions as opposed to formal institutions (in Chapter 3).

My research methods consist, first of all, of ethnographic fieldwork. This includes interviews with Kyrgyz-American interlocutors, most of whom currently live in Chicago, and site visits to Kyrgyz organizations in Chicago. My research also involves deep investigation into Kyrgyz history and how it is interpreted by different scholars such as the political scientist David Lewis, the historian Svat Soucek, and the anthropologist David Gullette. This historical analysis is primarily done in Chapter 1, which serves as important context and background for the ethnographic data that is analyzed in Chapters 2 and 3. My research also involves an investigation of different theories of community, organizations and institutions conceived by

different anthropological and sociological thinkers. The most important theorist for my project is Ferdinand Tönnies, whose influential theory of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) is very useful for understanding how ethnic communities fit into modern urban settings.

Throughout this project, various anthropological concepts are utilized to frame the ethnographic analysis. The most important of these concepts is "community." In addition to using Tönnies's conception of community (Gemeinschaft) as juxtaposed with "society," I explore the relationship between community and distinctively Kyrgyz forms of identity formation. For this particular aspect, my central resource is David Gullette's book *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State and "Tribalism"* (2010). This book provides a deep examination of how traditional genealogy interacts with colonially imposed methods of identity formation to create a complex ethnic identity in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. Gullette argues that accusations of "tribalism" in modern Kyrgyzstan are based on misguided assumptions about Kyrgyz genealogy, and that much more important in times of economic crisis are the informal networks of social obligation that people create with their immediate family members and friends. This I connect with the environment of social obligation that I observe among Kyrgyz people in Chicago as they overcome the challenges of acculturation, which serves as the basis of community formation. This I also connect with the idea of a "sense of duty" as it is conceived by Tönnies in his description of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Kürwille* (natural will). The reason why Tönnies is a helpful resource, in addition to Gullette, is that he creates a comprehensive description of two distinct social phenomena—"community" and "society"—that work together to create what I refer to as the "social environment" of Chicago as a modern, urban, cosmopolitan setting. This is the setting that Kyrgyz migrants navigate and contribute to through

the creation of organizations and informal institutions. The concept of "institutions" is formally introduced in Chapter 3, and I use Douglass North's distinction between "formal" and "informal" institutions to explain the acculturation process of Kyrgyz migrants as it relates to institutions in general. Specifically, I argue that one challenge of Kyrgyz migrants in Chicago is adapting to an environment that is more focused on formal, as opposed to informal, institutions. I use this in order to build on Tönnies's idea of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft by explaining how a focus on informal institutions is inherently complementary to Gemeinschaft, and also in order to situate the organizations described in Chapter 2 within a larger structure of "social reality" as it is described by sociologist Jonathan H. Turner. With all of these core concepts put together, I provide a picture of the Kyrgyz community in Chicago that is informed by a comprehensive understanding of Kyrgyz identity, Kyrgyz organizations in Chicago, and the transnational relationship between people and institutions in the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan environment.

It should also be noted that this project is informed heavily by my experience studying abroad in Bishkek. As someone who has lived in both the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan, I have a unique perspective as a scholar exploring an understudied manifestation of American and Kyrgyz cultures intersecting. The fact that the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community is understudied, as well as the fact that Americans tend to be unaware of it, is unsurprising when the community's overall degree of presence is considered spatially, temporally, and numerically. Kyrgyzstan itself is a small country of only about 6.7 million people that is unknown to most Americans I talk to. And if an American has heard of Kyrgyzstan, they tend to know very little about it. Kyrgyz people also did not start coming to the United States until after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and the borders opened. Even then, population growth in Chicago was

extremely minimal and gradual until the 2010s. According to one of the owners of Jibek Jolu, the first (and supposedly last remaining) Kyrgyz restaurant in Chicago, there were only about a hundred Kyrgyz in Chicago when he first came in the 2000s, and his restaurant opened in 2010 (*Limon.kg*, 2022). Today there are, by some accounts, as many as 10,000 Kyrgyz people living in the greater Chicago area. Though this is a small amount compared to other ethnic groups in Chicago, it is significant enough to warrant an ethnographic study.

Chicago also has a long history of being a site for ethnographic studies of immigrant groups, and for good reason. During the first half of the 19th century, the city was small and insignificant, with a population of only 4,470 as of the 1840 census (Bulmer 1984, 13). Fifty years later, its population surpassed a million, due to an explosion of immigration and industrial development. Half of its population by 1900 was born outside of the United States. Vibrant communities evolved of Germans, Scandinavians, Irish, Poles, Jews, and more. The "Chicago School" of sociology developed in the early part of the century and was influential in the development of in-depth ethnographic methods (Bulmer 1984, 13, 45-63). Since the 1960s, the field of anthropology has also seen an increased focus on migration and cities, as opposed to fixed and isolated groups (Brettell 2000, 129). My ethnography is therefore an important contribution to similar existing literature that has been accumulating for over a century. The Kyrgyz are a recent addition to the urban "melting pot" that are beginning to make their presence felt, and there is indication that they will continue to reinforce their presence and legacy within the city for years to come, as more generations of people migrate. This ethnography is a first-time venture into a subject that is hardly touched upon by academics, but that is in the midst of increasing its relevance.

The first chapter will focus primarily on a historical investigation into the origin of Kyrgyz identity and its effect on the formation of identity—and, in turn, community—in Chicago. I examine three different ways that Kyrgyz identity has generally developed: 1.) through traditional Central Asian categorizations of tribes and clans (*uruus and uruks*), 2). through the colonially imported ideas of ethnicity, nationality, and the state, and 3). through the Kyrgyz language. I look at the role of both Russia and the West in modern Kyrgyz identity formation and the relationship of this role to more traditional forms of identity formation. I prove that this complex process of identity formation is the most fundamental basis of community among the Kyrgyz in Chicago because it establishes what exactly these people have in common with each other that leads them to form a community.

In Chapter 2, I look deeply into the role of two different organizations in the formation of community in Chicago: 1). the Kyrgyz Community Center (KCC), and 2). Jibek Jolu, a Kyrgyz restaurant. Despite the fact that both of these organizations play important roles in the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community, they are fundamentally different in that the KCC is a non-profit while Jibek Jolu is a for-profit. This means, both in theory and in practice, that the KCC is the focal point of a more pure form of community from a classical sociological standpoint. To substantiate this idea, I apply Ferdinand Tönnies's theory of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft to the social processes that I notice in my fieldwork visiting these two places and interviewing community members in them.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I look into the role of larger institutions—specifically the government and the law—in the ways that Kyrgyz people in Chicago form a community, through these institutions' interactions with organizations ("meso-level forces") and face-to-face

interactions (“micro-level forces”). I argue that this primarily manifests itself through migrants’ acculturation from a country with more “informal” institutions to one with more “formal” institutions. I argue, further, that the tension associated with this aspect of the acculturation process is caused partly by the prevalence of undocumented immigrants within the community and therefore a fear of authority, which limits the migrants’ ability to overcome challenges of acculturation.

The combined ethnographic, theoretical, and historical evidence from all three chapters provides very useful new insight into the processes by which Kyrgyz people in Chicago form community. Using this insight, I argue that informal organizations, such as kinship networks, along with informal institutions such as social codes of conduct, are forces that serve more to create community—while formal organizations, such as restaurants and nonprofits, are forces that serve more to sustain the community. By creating a web of different organizations and institutions within the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan population, I partially uncover the deep workings of a very complex community that has hardly been studied and will need to to be studied more in the future.

`CHAPTER 1: THE KYRGYZ PEOPLE AS CONTEXT

This chapter explores the roots of Kyrgyz identity and its application to the modern, global study of people on the move. It thereby provides the basis for an analysis of community formation among the Kyrgyz in Chicago, which will be treated ethnographically throughout the following two chapters. I show that the Kyrgyz in history are primarily defined by ancestral affiliations and language, but that interactions with Russia, the Soviets, and the West have all contributed to the establishment of a modern ethno-national identity. Using evidence primarily from various existing historical and anthropological studies, with additional insight from my own experience abroad and doing fieldwork in the U.S., I frame my argument about Kyrgyz identity within the post-Cold War political and economic environment of the world and its implications for the formation of a Kyrgyz-American community in Chicago.

My project fundamentally asks how a specific ethnic group, consisting mostly of immigrants, develops a community within a specific urban area. This is consequential for the emerging field of urban anthropology, which is often concerned with this very question. Because anthropology is traditionally focused on more isolated and self-perpetuating sociocultural environments than those of major North American and Western European cities, the emergence of urban anthropology presents novel challenges to ethnographic analyzers on how to explain or interpret sociocultural formations. Specifically, it requires more context around a given urban ethnographic site, or around the larger global trends and conditions affecting the movement of certain people to and around those sites. This entails the use of historical, economic, and social narratives on a large scale. It is for this reason that, while there have been many theoretical

approaches to urban anthropology since the field's emergence in the late 1960s which have coincided with dramatic economic and demographic changes in major cities, I want to draw attention to argument laid out in an article by anthropologist Caroline Brettell (2008): that the "city as context" model of urban studies creates important connections between urban history and urban anthropology, which aids the understanding of the role of immigrant groups in contemporary urban socioeconomic environments (129). She argues that the unique demographic, economic, and cultural histories of each city yields equally unique conditions for a setting that a given immigrant group must adapt to. Thus, understanding Chicago "as context" is an important step to understanding the Kyrgyz in Chicago. I would argue that it is equally important to analyze the Kyrgyz through a framework of what I call a "people as context." The unique context of an immigrant group must combine with the unique context of the space to which they immigrate in order to generate their doubly unique role in that space, and this generates many connections between anthropology and history.

The "people as context" is fundamentally different from the "city as context" in that people are mobile rather than stationary. The difference is especially relevant in the case of a group like the Kyrgyz which, traditionally, was largely nomadic. Discussion of the Kyrgyz as a "diaspora" involves analyzing the Kyrgyz people's unique relationship to movement, as well as, in turn, the concepts of "nationality," "state," and "homeland" in a postcolonial setting. As we will see, the movement of Kyrgyz people across different historical, social, and spatial realms entails different types of placemaking than people in the West tend to think about when they think of "diasporas." Overall, a discussion of the Kyrgyz in a globalizing world should be

preceded by a deconstruction of various concepts which are often taken for granted in history and anthropology alike.

To further understand the importance of contextualizing the Kyrgyz people in this project, I first return to a breakdown of the term "community" and its importance for this project. What do I mean when I say that there is a Kyrgyz-Chicagoan "community"? As Ann Grodzins Gold (2008) discusses in her review of this term as it is used in anthropology, scholars often have a hard time defining it and criticize the inconsistency with which it is conceived and theorized. Though Gold does not propose an all-encompassing "definition" of the term, she summarizes it as "evok[ing] a group of people who have something in common and who are actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion" (2). I find this to be a useful way of conceiving of "community" as it applies to the Kyrgyz population in Chicago, as supported by the ethnographic and historical content of this project. Based on Gold's description, a group of people would be considered a "community" based on two criteria: 1). having "something in common," and 2). being "actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion." The way that the first criterion applies to the Kyrgyz in Chicago seems quite self-explanatory at first glance: what people have in common is that they are Kyrgyz and they live in Chicago. But what makes someone "Kyrgyz"? Most official definitions would describe the Kyrgyz as a "people," "ethnic group" or "ethnicity" that speaks a distinctive Turkic language and lives primarily in Kyrgyzstan, and this is how it is mostly referred to in everyday speech—though it is occasionally used to mean a nationality belonging to the state of Kyrgyzstan that is not necessarily "ethnic" Kyrgyz. But neither the division of humanity into ethnicities nor into nation-states is an innate quality that was developed organically across all societies of the globe, and the Kyrgyz are an example of an

ethnicity that is rooted in very different group identification methods than these globalized, standard classifications used today. Understanding the complexities of the Kyrgyz "ethnogenesis" is a step towards understanding how individual communities of the Kyrgyz diaspora function across the world, including in Chicago. Therefore, this chapter is concerned with a deeper understanding of the first criterion for what makes a group of people a "community"—i.e., what everyone in the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community has in common—while chapters 2 and 3 are more concerned with the second criterion. It is for this reason that this chapter is more focused on history than ethnography.

Kyrgyz Identity Before Russian Colonization

For the purposes of a study on Kyrgyz-Americans, the simple question of "who are the Kyrgyz?" is both less straightforward and more consequential than one might expect. Scholars have long tried to construct a solid definition and origin story of the Kyrgyz people, and discussion of such a topic is clearly worthy of a whole book, so it is not my intention to coalesce all major findings and theories into a chronological account. Rather, I will discuss specific aspects of it that are relevant to the formation of the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan identity. Doing so involves deconstructing the idea of a "national identity" and of a chronological ethnic historical narrative. The basic facts are that the Kyrgyz are a Turkic, majority Muslim people who today live primarily in Kyrgyzstan, but have significant minority populations in the nearby countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, China, and Russia (Ismaelbekova 2017, 22-23). They traditionally speak the Kyrgyz language, which is a Turkic language closely related to Kazakh, but colonial history has led to Russian also now being a national language of Kyrgyzstan

(Eurasianet 2011). The actual ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz as a people is murky, partly because of a relative lack of written records, and partly because the Kyrgyz methods of identity formation are traditionally different from those which Western scholars are used to (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016, 137). The Kyrgyz are fundamentally, in a traditional sense, a combination of tribes (*uruus*) and tribal confederations, which are divided further into bloodlines and clans (*uruks*). Cemented by mythical narratives about shared ancestry, it is these sub-ethnic groups that have traditionally defined individual Kyrgyz people's identities more than the Kyrgyz ethnic group as a whole, let alone any kind of "nationality" (Ismaelbekova 2017, 22-23; Gullette 4). The Kyrgyz *uruk* is often defined by a common ancestor five to seven generations back. Especially important is *jeti ata* ("seven fathers"), which refers to a person's patrilineal ancestors seven generations back (Gullette 2010, 52). There is even a Kyrgyz phrase: "Those who do not know their ancestors up to the seventh generation are slaves!" (Gullette 2010, 53). This phrase speaks to the major importance that Kyrgyz people traditionally place on their distinct form of genealogy. This type of genealogy and historiography was viewed as "backward" and in need of reform by the Soviets, and current scholarly debates on the "actual" history of the Kyrgyz reflect this controversy (Ismaelbekova 2017, 22-23).

"Kyrgyz" is believed by scholars to be the oldest Turkic-speaking ethnonym, and is believed to have originated from the Turkic word *kyrk* ("forty") (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016, 137; Ismaelbekova 2017, 23). This refers to the existence of forty main Kyrgyz tribes. The importance of this is famously dramatized in the Kyrgyz poem *The Epic of Manas* (or simply *Manas*), which is one of the longest epic poems ever recorded—though it was, until recently, only transmitted orally (Singh 2009, 99; Reichl 2016). This 1,000+-year-old epic tells of a

mythical man named Manas uniting the forty scattered tribes of the Kyrgyz and fighting various foes of Inner Asia (Singh 2009, 100). It is considered an origin story of the Kyrgyz and a primary mode of telling who exactly they are as a people. The controversy of Kyrgyz historiography is best encapsulated in the scholarship on *Manas*, as the actual history around it is not entirely clear. As a traditionally oral piece designed for ceremonial performances, its age is unknowable, and the extent to which it is based on real events is a point of contention (Singh 2009, 99; Reichl 2016). But it undeniably reflects a real history of the Kyrgyz people, especially events from the 8th to 13th centuries. It was during this era that the Kyrgyz Khaganate was a major force in the geopolitical conflicts of Inner Asia, culminating in its defeat of the Uighur Khaganate in 840 A.D. and subsequent brief control over a vast area of land that included parts of present-day Central Asia, Siberia, and Mongolia (Kradin 2016). Evidence both from *Manas* and archaeological sources indicate that the Kyrgyz at this time lived in the Upper Yenisei and Altai areas of Siberia, not present-day Kyrgyzstan, and started migrating after the Mongol invasion of the 13th Century (Drompp 1999; Reichl 2016, 339; Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016, 137). Today, the general consensus is that today's ethnically Kyrgyz population of Kyrgyzstan is a mix of people who migrated from these areas and the native populations of the current territory, where all of the Kyrgyz were settled by the 16th century, continuing to largely practicing the nomadic ways of life (Osmonov and Turdalieva 2016, 138). It is for this reason that I generally prefer to categorize the Kyrgyz as a "people" rather than a "diaspora" when appropriate. As various researchers have pointed out, "diaspora" is a complex term which originated in the context of the ancient Greek population's dispersal as well as the Jews' dispersal after the Babylonian exile (Sheffer, n.d.). In contrast to these examples, the Kyrgyz have a less solidly agreed upon

ethnogenesis that places less emphasis on a single "homeland" than the ethnic group's Western counterparts. Conversely, the term "people" has no connotation that "homelands" are of central importance, and is better applied to the history of, and history leading up to, the Kyrgyz population in Chicago. This lexical reorientation is a rethinking of how movement of people, in the context of the Kyrgyz, is applied to a global setting.

Overall, precise chronology, physical setting, and historical accuracy of *Manas* is of little importance to the Kyrgyz people, but the poem's overall importance to Kyrgyz identity cannot be overstated (Singh 2009, 99-100; Reichl 2016, 138). The forty tribes of Kyrgyzstan were not united quite so naturally, as there are many differences among them, just as there are striking similarities and kinship-oriented interactions between Kyrgyz and non-Kyrgyz tribes. This begs the question: what classifies a tribe as Kyrgyz? Historian Svat Soucek (2000) argues that the answer is primarily linguistic. He says that the common usage of the distinctive Kyrgyz form of Turkic (i.e., the Kyrgyz language) is "so strong that it managed to absorb alien tribal elements that for a variety of reasons came to live among the Kyrgyz" (41-42), that it is primarily this language which distinguished the Kyrgyz from "even such close kinsmen as the Kazakhs" (41). It is for this reason that other traits which often are used to "define" nationalities or ethnic groups such as (to use a relatively uncontroversial example) food, cannot be applied in such a way to the Kyrgyz today. In the case of food, most "Kyrgyz" dishes are found just as often in other "Central Asian" countries (generally categorized to include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), with the only exception being the Kyrgyz version of *beshbarmak* found almost exclusively in Kyrgyzstan—and only in the north of the country. With language as a primary unifying force among the Kyrgyz, as opposed to other sociocultural

factors, it is no surprise that *Manas* plays such a defining role in Kyrgyz identity, as the poem is quite literally a piece of language. It is also therefore logical that tribal and kinship structures have played such a dominant, divisive, and uniting role in Kyrgyz history, as is explored in *Manas* (Singh 100). This is still seen to some extent today, as it is claimed that each Kyrgyz person is usually expected to know exactly which *uruu* to trace their lineage to, and there are even instances in contemporary Kyrgyzstan of people using ancestral differences to make political attacks on each other (Gullette 2010, 49; Soucek 2000, 45).

Tribal differences are also reflected in contemporary regional sociocultural differences in Kyrgyzstan (Bugazov 2013, 35). During Askar Akayev's controversial term as president (1990-2005), there have been accusations from both within and outside of the country that the corruption and nepotism of his administration was based on both "tribal" and "regional" favoritism (Gullette 2010, 18-47). From talking to many Kyrgyz and Kyrgyz-American people, the regional differences in the country are expressed much more often than the tribal differences. This is often a strictly north/south conception, both economically and culturally. There is a deep history of the south of Kyrgyzstan being resentful of the north for having greater economic development and investment, especially during Akayev's term (before he was, notably, replaced by the southerner Kurmanbek Bakiev) (Gullette 2010, 30). But the fine cultural differences between each of the seven administrative regions of the country—Batken, Jalalabat, Issyk-Kul, Naryn, Osh, Talas and Chui—are often expressed as well, especially when it comes to the varying manifestations and degrees of cultural influence that each country gets from bordering countries. For example, Osh is known to be highly influenced by Uzbekistan due to its proximity and high population of Uzbek minorities, while the northern regions are viewed the same way in

regards to Russian and Kazakh influence. Naryn, which takes up the highly mountainous areas in the center of the country, is universally seen as the most purely Kyrgyz of the region by everyone I have talked to, with the least minorities. However, one Kyrgyz person whom I talked to, a proud native of the southern region of Batken who is now studying in the U.S. on an exchange program, told me that Naryn is undeniably a part of the "north" in terms of culture (even though it reaches the southern edge of the country and not the northern edge). Additionally, there are different regional dialects of the Kyrgyz language. The regional differences and conflicts add an important layer to Kyrgyz people's conception of group identity, and—as we will see with greater detail in chapter 2—this is manifested in Chicago much more than differences in *uruu* and *uruk*. For example, people often form friend groups based on which dialect of Kyrgyz they speak.

One non-linguistic cultural trait that cannot be omitted from a discussion of Kyrgyz culture is religion. Even though it does not have the same defining role in Central Asian ethnic identity formation that language does, religion has played a central and a messy role in Kyrgyz history. The introduction of Islam was a crucial moment in the history of the Kyrgyz and most people in Central Asia, but it did not happen all at once. The Kyrgyz were first exposed to Islam in the 9th century after the Arab conquest of Central Asia, and it became more and more prominent among the Kyrgyz up until the mid-15th century (Ashymov 2003, 135-136). Before this, they practiced traditional shamanism, although there is some hesitancy among scholars to classify shamanism as a "religion" in the same way (Soucek 2000, 40). Today the Kyrgyz mostly identify as Muslim in the relatively liberal Hanafi Sunni school, but still practice islamicized versions of pre-Islamic spiritual traditions (Ashymov 2003, 135; Ismaelbekova 2017, 22; Warren

2013). The mix of pre-Islamic, Islamic, Soviet-atheist, and even Russian orthodox influence have jointly affected the religious identities of the Kyrgyz to this day, and this is reflected in the identity-building of the Kyrgyz in multiethnic urban environments like Chicago. As we will see in Chapter 3, Islam in particular serves as an important non-governmental formal institution in the lives of Kyrgyz-Chicagoans that increases the transnational tension between institutions in the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan.

Interactions With the Russian Empire and Beyond

The Russian Empire took control of present-day Kyrgyzstan in 1876, when it was under the control of the Kokand Khanate with its center in the Ferghana Valley (Soucek 2000, 187, 201). This did not have an immediate effect on the lives of most Kyrgyz, but things took a turn in 1916 when the Russians ordered many Central Asian Muslims to dig trenches in World War I and fight against their fellow Turkic Muslims in Turkey, leading to a bloody revolt in the Issyk Kul region and tens of thousands of Kyrgyz fleeing as refugees (Soucek 2000, 209). The Bolshevik Revolution broke out soon afterwards, eventually leading to the large-scale forceful sedentarization and collectivization under Joseph Stalin from 1928 to 1932, as well as other radical cultural policies which contemporary historians criticize as reflecting an ignorance towards Central Asian nomadic life (Alff 2020). It was this that separated the Kyrgyz's relationship to the Soviets from their relationships to other empires, such as the Turkic, Uighur, and Kokand Khanates, because being under the control of other empires did not uproot their everyday lives in such a profound way. Today, traditional pastoral nomadism is virtually non-existent in Kyrgyzstan, but the Kyrgyz' nomadic and kinship-centered past is inseparable

from their present, so this legacy should be considered in an analysis of Kyrgyz-Americans' relationship to migration and movement (Soucek 2000, 44-45).

Since first being in contact with the Russians, the Kyrgyz have slowly moved towards a sense of identity that is based less on traditional genealogy, historiography, and mythology, and more on today's dominant classification of nation-state and ethnicity. The very use of the term "ethnogenesis" is a result of this. Even though the Kyrgyz have a history of a roughly cohesive ethnic identity based on language, myth, and the uniting of the tribes, the boundaries with other ethnic groups did not coincide exactly with present-day national borders. This, essentially, is the root of Kyrgyzstan's violent conflicts with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan since the fall of the Soviet Union, especially in the Ferghana Valley (the area where the three countries all meet in a mess of distorted, confusing borders and enclaves). A year after the Bolshevik Revolution, present-day Kyrgyzstan was declared part of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic along with the rest of Central Asia. It was in 1924 that the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous *Oblast'* was founded based on national border delimitation drawn up by Soviet ethnographers. In 1936, this territory became a full Soviet Socialist Republic, and remained so until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Gullette, 163-64). Therefore, it was the Soviet ethnographers who first determined the boundaries of modern-day Kyrgyzstan, giving its people a colonially constructed demarcation on the map for generations to come. As David Gullette argues in his chapter "Ethnogenesis and the Construction of Ethnic Identities" (2010), Soviet ethnographers have played a surprisingly large role in shaping the Kyrgyz people's sense of self. Throughout the Soviet era, they have tried with difficulty to place them precisely within the Marxist view of societies' linear evolution from feudalism to capitalism to socialism, and the Soviet authorities have used this data to awkwardly

implement policies aimed at moving them up this trajectory (Gullette 2010, 55). Also influential at the time was Lev Gumilev's theory of ethnogenesis, or the origin of ethnic groups based on common feeling and willingness for sacrifice within a small group of people. Gullette argues that this idea forms the basis of much modern nationalism among the Kyrgyz and was appropriated by President Akayev during his state-building campaigns of the early 2000s that called for greater unity in the face of social unrest and corresponding threats to his presidency (125, 134). This demonstrates how the Western emphasis on the nation-state and of ethnogenetic theory was not only artificially imposed but is artificially used by Kyrgyz elites today.

Gullette argues that a similar thing can be said about traditional Kyrgyz forms of genealogy. Despite the historical importance of Kyrgyz *uruus* and *uruks* (tribes and clans), many ordinary Kyrgyz put very little investment into their ancestral background and do not make it a part of their everyday lives at all. This partly comes from the colonial process of supplanting these methods for Western ideas of ethnicity and nationality, and partly from extreme economic troubles causing people to rely more on immediate family and friends for support rather than genealogical networks that appear more abstract (101). Even though *uruus* and *uruks* are taken seriously and are acted upon by a great number of people in ways that build community, they have also been appropriated by people for political reasons, particularly those who oppose Akayev and falsely accuse him of a kind of corrupt "tribalism" caused by traditional systems of relatedness, as well as those who attempt to challenge the president based on the *uruu* from which he descends (Gullette 2010, 18, 49). As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, similar situations play out in Chicago where people engage in forms of "informal" community development that may

appear “tribal” but are really more complex manifestations of acculturation which cannot be reduced to such labels that are considered outdated by many modern anthropologists.

Another long-term effect of Russian and Soviet rule is that it has broadly affected the way Kyrgyz people are categorized by the rest of the world, as this in turn affects identity-building in Westernized urban environments. In an environment like Chicago, the Kyrgyz are a relatively invisible group of people. With a population numbering under 10,000, and appearances sometimes resembling—and often mistaken for—other ethnic groups, it is natural that the Kyrgyz would be grouped together with other ethnic groups in both everyday interactions and portrayal in popular and scholarly media. In the media, the Kyrgyz are, of course, mostly grouped in the category of “Central Asia(ns)”, which refers to the five Muslim non-Caucasus former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (often referred to historically as a portion of “Turkistan”) (Lewis 2008, 1; Menges 1967, 60). The term “Central Asia” might seem natural in many instances, as each of the five Central Asian countries followed similar trajectories from the second half of the 19th century until today, in terms of imperial influence from Russia, the Soviets, and the West, and also because the cross-ethnic relationships within Central Asia render the individual identities of each country non-absolute. However, “Central Asia” is a controversial and loosely defined term which is said to have been coined 1826 by German scholar Julius Klaproth in his book *Tableaux historiques de l'Asie* (“Historical painting of Asia”), to refer to the area between the Black Sea and the Okhotsk Sea (Goreshina 2012, 405-408). This includes the entire width of China and parts of Siberia—far more than the territory of “Central Asia” that we now think of. Today, intrinsic differences between people across Central Asia are overshadowed by “the different academic, journalistic, or

political backgrounds of the observers," according to Soucek (2000, x). Overall, categories like "Central Asia" have been constructed by external forces and should be deconstructed in an analysis of Kyrgyz-Americans—as my interlocutors can attest to, the Kyrgyz of America do not have particularly strong affiliations or parallel patterns of mobility with people of other Central Asian ethnic origins, and Kyrgyz-Americans are sometimes divided socially by which region they come from. And indeed, not all Central Asian ethnicities are traditionally nomadic or even Turkic—the Tajik, for instance, are Persian-speaking and traditionally more sedentary than the Kyrgyz (Soucek 2000, 31; Tromble 2017, 357). While many observers, such as anthropologist Madeline Reeves, have explored the postcolonial superficialities of the Central Asian "state" and its effect on border conflicts and migration patterns within and from the Ferghana Valley (Reeves 2013; Morgan 2015), the postcolonial superficialities of such vague groupings as "Central Asia" should also be discussed in the context of the Kyrgyz "diaspora." This is an important context to keep in mind during the discussion of interethnic interaction among the Kyrgyz in Chicago in Chapter 2, and its relationship to organizations which are tied to a specific ethnic group.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and Kyrgyzstan soon gained independence along with the other post-Soviet republics. Kyrgyzstan was a true nation-state for the first time ever, and everything changed after this. Kyrgyz migration to the U.S. began in very small numbers. This is perhaps understandable if one considers that: 1). the people of Kyrgyzstan had access to the world outside Inner Asia and the Soviet Union, and vice versa, for the first time ever, and 2). Kyrgyzstan was plunged into an economic crisis that was to be expected given their then 70-year reliance on Soviet Moscow (Lewis 2008, 1). Very few people in Kyrgyzstan or the rest of Central Asia supported the dissolution of the Soviet Union—across Central Asia, people voted, on

average, 97% against it in 1991 (Soucek 2000, 262). And indeed, even though the Soviets originally uprooted many people's pastoral nomadic ways of life, most people alive during this time had lived their whole lives accustomed to the relative security that the Soviet Union brought to the majority of the population, and now suffered immensely, not having envisioned such an abrupt transition (Lewis 2008, 213). Therefore, Kyrgyz presence in the U.S. is a very recent phenomenon, and one that is still rooted in post-Cold War transition. Anthropologist David Ambramson argued in 2001 that ethnographies of Central Asians, especially in interethnic environments, are fundamentally ethnographies of transition (8). Given that Central Asia is still dealing with postcolonial geopolitical fallout amidst many still-vivid memories of the Soviet era, and is engaging in novel international interactions on many levels, this logic still holds true.

In the early '90s, Central Asia was thrust overnight into the field of independently competing foreign influences from almost all directions—China from the east, Russia from the north, and the U.S. and Europe from the west. On the one hand, Russia retreated from Central Asia's sphere of influence with such a speed that the newly independent countries struggled with such sudden demands for self-sufficiency (Lewis 2008, 234). But Russia has been a critical economic and cultural force since then. Not only is trade with Russia an enormous part of Kyrgyzstan's economy, but remittances account for a full third of Kyrgyzstan's GDP in 2021, primarily from migrant workers in Russia (Lillis 2022). Moreover, Central Asians across the board are influenced by pro-Russian media (Lewis 2008, 227). These forces have all contributed to the region's inability to fall prey to the U.S.'s attempts of "democratizing" the countries. Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has had three revolutions and subsequent regime changes, the most of any Central Asian country: one in 2005, then in 2010 and 2021. These have been met with

conspiracies of the U.S. being behind them, and have resulted in relatively uncertain and ineffective attempts at restructuring the government for the betterment of the population, as corruption has been a persistent problem (Lewis 2008, 156). Since independence, Kyrgyzstan has been described as both an "island of democracy", and a "failing state"; today, it ranks much higher (115th) than any other Central Asian country on the Democracy Index, but lower (144th) than two other Central Asian countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) (Aijan 2017; Economist Intelligence Unit 2022; Transparency International 2022). The perception of Kyrgyzstan as a "failing state" has certainly affected migration to places like America. This context will serve well for the reading Chapter 3, which focuses on the role of Kyrgyz institutions in the acculturation process and examines my interlocutors' views on the failings of bureaucracies in Kyrgyzstan.

Despite the influence of foreign policy on the movement of people, money, and ideas from Kyrgyzstan, David Lewis (2008) cautions against viewing the competing Russian and American foreign influence on Central Asia as a "new Cold War", because competing shifts in foreign policy between the U.S. and Russia has not had as much of a direct effect on the average Central Asian's everyday life (226-27). This is relevant to consider, as it indicates that the role of foreign policy in the everyday lives of migrants may not be so pervasive. Modern American imperialism has been a geopolitical force in Kyrgyzstan for decades, but the outcomes on the ground have been minimal. This became especially true after the terror attacks of 2001, when the U.S. started to use Central Asia strategically in its operations in Afghanistan, operating a U.S. air base at Manas Airport in Bishkek from late 2001 to 2014 (Dzyubenko 2014). The U.S. has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into bilateral aid to the country alone from 1991 to 2005,

while American charities and civil society representatives have been active in efforts to promote human rights and democratization. But public polls have meanwhile suggested that the Kyrgyz do not trust the U.S. as much as their closest ally, Russia (Lewis 2008, 227). Also, unlike Russia and China, the U.S. has not directed much trade and foreign investment in Central Asia in the post-Cold War era. Russia still remains a much bigger hub for Kyrgyz migrants than the U.S., primarily for reasons of geographical and linguistic convenience; and it is also not uncommon for Kyrgyz to move first to Russia and then to the U.S. But the rival politics of the U.S. and Russia has certainly affected the politics of everyday life for Kyrgyz-Americans, especially in the era of the Russia-Ukraine war. The war initially had an enormous impact on both the Russian and Central Asian economies, leading observers to speculate that Central Asians would start migrating to the West in much bigger numbers (Lillis 2022). The future trajectory of the Russian economy is still a matter of debate, but the everyday political tension that comes with the war and earlier foreign relations is still present in the ways that Kyrgyz in Chicago fit into the social lives and perceptions of Americans.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided important context around the Kyrgyz as a people, especially the multifaceted roots of their ethnic identity and their place on the global stage as a people on the move. I have specifically identified four ways in which Kyrgyz people generally create identity in the past and present: 1). through various sub-ethnic categorizations, especially *uruus* (tribes) and *uruks* (clans), 2). through a shared language, 3). through their regional differences, and 4). through a sense of national identity that is historically rooted in Russian and

Soviet imperialism. The complexities of ethnic identity are crucial to address in a project on the Kyrgyz community in Chicago, because the shared identity of being "Kyrgyz"—despite being way more complex than simply an "us and them" identity—is the foundation of their community. It is the shared ethno-national identity that holds precedence over any and all ancestral or regional differences among the Kyrgyz in Chicago, and formal efforts at community development in Chicago entail efforts of patriotic unity that resemble efforts of state-building in the Kyrgyz Republic for the sake of unity in times of crisis. Many migrants in Chicago are themselves in times of personal crisis and major life changes, so identity takes on an important meaning for them in the creation of community.

The following chapters will take on a distinctly ethnographic approach to studying the Kyrgyz community in Chicago. Kyrgyz identity, as it was discussed here, will play a pervasive role in these analyses, and the way that Kyrgyz-Chicagoans organize themselves in a multicultural environment will be a matter of deep focus beyond the important contextual framework.

CHAPTER 2: THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONS IN THE KYRGYZ COMMUNITY OF CHICAGO

This chapter examines the role of different formal organizations in forming community among the Kyrgyz of Chicago. I primarily focus on the Kyrgyz Community Center (KCC) and the restaurant Jibek Jolu as the two most popular places in Chicago for Kyrgyz people. These two organizations serve as spaces that bring members of the Kyrgyz population together, as well as bases from which the Kyrgyz community develops. My analysis concerns both of these aspects. I explore the specific ways that the KCC fosters community growth in a deliberate manner, and how it fits largely into the classical sociological concept of community according Ferdinand Tönnies—though I also use my observations to complicate some aspects of Tönnies's Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft ("community"/"society") dichotomy. I also examine how both of these organizations function as spaces according to Kyrgyz residents' mobile relationship the urban setting of Chicago, and how they define Kyrgyz identity within the multiethnic social environment of the city and of the "ethnic economy"—or "a labor market structure that enables immigrants to procure employment through ethnic group membership" (Bubinas 195).

The decision to focus on the Kyrgyz Community Center and Jibek Jolu emerged because these were the two organizations that were brought up the most by the Kyrgyz-Chicagoans I talked to, who had all been to both of them at least once. It seemed impossible to have a conversation with a Kyrgyz-Chicagoan without the name of at least one of these organizations coming up. Secondly, these organizations are frequently discussed in the Kyrgyz media in reports on their compatriots living in America. Lastly, I made an effort to visit both of these spaces and

conduct interviews in them. Based on the ethnographic material that I have gathered in my fieldwork, I argue that these organizations together strike a necessary balance between community formation as a purely social means and as an economic means via the ethnic economy. The evidence I have gathered from my interviews reveals that these community organizations complement each other by working both for and against the forces of globalization, cosmopolitanism, and urban/suburban diffusion. The organizations' popularity among Kyrgyz residents of Chicago and the richness of their community-building practices forms a system of mutual purpose that balances the two extreme dimensions of the acculturation process—assimilation and separation—and fuses elements of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.

The Basis of Community

I first visited the Kyrgyz Community Center on a Tuesday night in early January, 2023, in order to interview one of the three key people running it[1], whom I will call Jyrgal. The KCC is located one block away from downtown Arlington Heights, which is a suburb about twenty-five miles northwest of Downtown Chicago, in an old-fashioned two-story brick building with an enormous parking lot. The sign out front advertised *Manas Express,* a Kyrgyz-run business located on the second floor. The KCC occupied the ground floor and basement of this compound, though there seemed to be no visible exterior signage to indicate that it was there when I visited. It seemed like a highly popular place which did not need a special marker for drawing crowds, with its location and reputation spread by word-of-mouth and their website.

[1] For the sake of confidentiality I am omitting his exact position.

When I arrived the KCC, I approached the glass front door. It was locked, but I was swiftly let in by a young man of about my age (early twenties) who had been sitting in one of the three gray cushioned chairs while conversing with his friend in Kyrgyz, and thus saw me coming. I asked if Jyrgal, with whom I had arranged a visit, was there. He said "no," so I took a closer look around the place. The front lobby was small and relatively plain at first glance. Nevertheless, Kyrgyz decorations dotted the walls, and coming from the large basement was the sound of Kyrgyz pop music and young children playing on a ping-pong table. Families with kids of different ages came and went from the basement, shaking the hands of everyone they saw—including myself—with a "salam" ("hello" in Kyrgyz). The atmosphere seemed to have a vibrance and bustle to it that was distinctively and indescribably Kyrgyz; I felt like I was back in Bishkek. The similarity was reinforced by the apparent linguistic habits of the people there, as the two young men in the chairs would sometimes switch to speaking Russian when a new friend entered, though they mostly stuck with their native language.

The signage from outside appeared within. On the wall above the upward staircase was another sign pointing to *Manas Express*, with a differentiating sign marking the Kyrgyz Community Center. Clearly these were distinct organizations, but the name of the business indicated that it was also associated with Kyrgyzstan, where Manas is the national hero. I later learned that this was a Kyrgyz-owned trucking company which frequently hired members of the Kyrgyz community. Propped up on a table beside the gray chairs was a flier for a "Жаны Жыл" (Kyrgyz for "New Years") party nearby, featuring disco and karaoke. At the beginning of the hallway leading out from the lobby, on the right hand side, two glass cases featured Kyrgyz memorabilia. One was full of trophies for the "Yntymak Cup" (*yntymak* being the Kyrgyz word

for “harmony” or “friendship”). The other was filled with items of traditional Kyrgyz artwork and crafts, including many traditional symbolic patterned clothes, quilts, and hats. There was also a wooden doll, a Kyrgyz flag, a model yurt (the bird’s eye view of which is the main symbol on the Kyrgyz flag, while a front-facing view is the official logo of the KCC), and a model of a *komuz*, Kyrgyzstan’s national musical instrument.

When Jyrgal arrived after much delay and introduced himself, he led me down a hallway into an enormous carpeted room with chairs stacked on its periphery, and then down another hallway into his office, decorated with another array of Kyrgyz symbols. This is where we had most of our conversation. Jyrgal’s English was very good for a non-native speaker, and he had a poised and professional way of presenting himself. He was originally from Osh in the south of the country, but then moved to Bishkek to go to university. In 2015 he came to the States in order to finish his M.B.A. at a prestigious university on the East Coast. He graduated two years later and then got work in Chicago, which was where he moved in 2017. He was by then working in the I.T. department of a major bank. The main reason he had come to Chicago was because, in his words, “all my friends are here.”

The statement about choosing a destination based on the proximity of friends represents a common state of mind among Kyrgyz people in Chicago. They arrive in the city simply because they know people there. A deeper logic behind Kyrgyz people coming to Chicago has to do with community organizations like the KCC and Jibek Jolu. This was partially revealed when I asked Jyrgal why, in his opinion, so many Kyrgyz had chosen Chicago as place of residence. He paused before answering, said “good question,” and sat back in his chair and laughed. After another pause, he said: “I don’t know. Maybe relatives? Friends? In my case, that was the thing. Like,

there are fifty [...] states, right? But when you have friends or someone who can guide you, that's easier, so that's why they tend to come to Chicago first, and then when they see something from other states, they might move, but most of the time, they come and then they stay here. Because Kyrgyz people have businesses and all that stuff, so they can hire them." In other words, employment opportunities in Chicago are one reason for Kyrgyz migrants to settle down there long-term and form communities where they could meet each other and generate meaningful relationships. These relationships would lead to more business interactions and provide greater incentives for others to come.

Six months previously, I had received a response similar to Jyrgal's from another interlocutor—whom I will call Rakhat—when I asked him the same question over lunch at Jibek Jolu. He was a man in his mid-twenties who had also come to the U.S. seven years earlier, in this case because his father was a successful Greco-Roman wrestler who had been accepted for a O-1 Visa (issued to people with "extraordinary ability or achievement"). His father had originally come to open a Kyrgyz restaurant in Philadelphia, but moved to Chicago because he heard there was a bigger community there. "My dad came here because he heard there are a lot of Kyrgyz people here, and he personally knew some of them, [...] for people who don't really even speak English, it's a huge relief that they know someone there. So they come here, and they have a room ready for them, at least." Rakhat's answer to my question reveals another layer of incentivization for moving to Chicago: potential accommodation from their compatriots. And it was not just him who said this—providing accommodation for fellow Kyrgyz people in need has been described to me elsewhere as a common display of hospitality among the Kyrgyz diaspora.

Based on various people I talked to, three specific motivations for moving to Chicago could be identified: Kyrgyz friends and acquaintances, Kyrgyz employers, and temporary places to stay. These social and economic formations are the fundamental basis of the larger Kyrgyz-Chicagoan "community," which in turn leads to the formation of community organizations and spaces like the KCC and Jibek Jolu. A slightly more complex combination of social and economic factors that I observe in community formation is indicative of what "community" really means in an urban, multi-ethnic, late capitalist setting. To understand how this works, it is useful to look deeper into the anthropological understanding of "community" that was addressed in the previous chapter, and the ways in which this understanding can be applied to the unique Kyrgyz-Chicago setting. For my analysis, this entails a discussion, from a modern perspective, of arguably the most influential book on community in the social sciences: Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* ("Community and Society" (1887).

In today's everyday language, "community" is often interchangeable with "population" when discussing immigrants or minority ethnic groups. But in anthropological literature, it is increasingly being criticized for its overuse and "conceptual fuzziness," as described by Ann Grodzins Gold (2008, 3). By summarizing it as "evok[ing] a group of people who have something in common and who are actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion" (2), she implies that "community" entails a deeper sense of social relations than "population" — the term which merely states the existence of a group with something in common. As Gold discusses, the consistent differentiating quality of the term "community" from similar terms evoking a group (like "state" or "society") is that it is almost always used with a positive connotation (2). The origins of this, in social scientific theory, can be traced to the Tönnies's

Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft; according to Gold, "no author who writes about theories of community fails to nod to Tönnies" (5). Tönnies's book lays out a comprehensive theory that dichotomizes these two social phenomena, associating Gemeinschaft with mutual purpose, kinship and locality and Gesellschaft with individuality, self-servitude, industrialization, and globalization. Tönnies's account of Gemeinschaft deals with European peasant societies as well as other rural communities across the globe, while his account of Gesellschaft is focused on capitalism in a way that highly resembles Marx's *Capital*. According to Tönnies, the basis of Gemeinschaft is *Wesenwille* ("natural will"), while the basis of Gesellschaft is *Kürwille* ("rational will.") This terminology was later adopted by Max Weber in his own critique of capitalism and Western society, and discussed by Emile Durkheim (Inglis 2009, 818, 815). It has thereby become important to the language of classical sociology and many subsequently developed schools of the social sciences, especially within anthropology.

However, even though European sociological thinkers from the late-19th and early 20th centuries such as Tönnies were influential in their view on the global spread of capitalism from the West, their ideas have been portrayed in recent years as inapplicable to the contemporary form of globalization, largely because they are too focused on society within the context of the nation-state. David Inglis (2009) argues that Tönnies's theory of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft an exception to this perceived trend and is actually quite relevant to the contemporary era, despite the fact that Tönnies is generally received less favorably by modern scholars than his contemporaries such as Weber or Durkheim. Indeed, Tönnies specifically states that a capitalist or a merchant, who according toTönnies is a quintessential members of a Gesellschaft, has no national or group attachments in the way that members of a Gemeinschaft do, and thereby

enables globalization: "[Gesellschaft] is like an emanation, as if it had emerged from the heads of the persons in whom it rests, who join hands eagerly to exchange across all distances, limits, and scruples, and establish this speculative Utopia as the only country, the only city, in which all fortune seekers and all merchant adventurers have a really common interest" (Tönnies [1887] 1940, 88). Here, he is describing the role of international capital in globalization. It is in this way that the modern-day forging of immigrant communities and identities in cities like Chicago may be seen partially as a response to the impersonal and international nature of global Gesellschaft.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm makes a similar point in his essay "Nations and Nationalism in the New Century" (2008), albeit in a context that specifically adresses xenophobia and nationalism, describing a "[current] time when the politics of exclusive collective identity, whether ethnic, religious, or gender and lifestyle, seek a fictitious regeneration of Gemeinschaft in an increasingly remote Gesellschaft. The process which turned peasants into Frenchman and immigrants into American citizens is into self-regarding group identities…" (93). While Hobsbawm's use of words such as "fictitious" to describe the phenomenon of sub-communities within societies is too derogatory to be applied to my analysis, I agree with his basic point that the spread of Gesellschaft leads to the development of multiple distinct Gemeinschafts, and I believe that this is a useful way of understanding the emergence of a Kyrgyz community in Chicago. However, the fine distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft is complicated in this case by the fact that the *ethnic economy* is a critical aspect of community formation among the Kyrgyz in Chicago. To substantiate this point, I will look deeper into the origin and purpose of the Kyrgyz Community Center—an ostensibly non-profit and Gemeinschaft-centered

institution—combined with a for-profit institution like Jibek Jolu, and show how they both contribute to the Kyrgyz community in a way that combines both Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft sensibilities in their own separate ways.

The Kyrgyz Community Center was founded in 2016 and registered as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit organization with the U.S. Department of Justice. Its website currently states that "the mission of KCC has four complementary and synergistic components: Kyrgyz Culture, Intercultural Community, Education, and Integration to Society" (Kyrgyz Community Center 2023). When I asked Jyrgal why he got involved in the Community Center, he gave an answer that resembled the organization's stated mission: "We are the first generation who came here," he told me, "so the path that we are gonna build is just going to be the way the second generation will follow. So we just want to make sure that the children that we are raising here are not basically just getting assimilated, and then they don't know what's their culture, what's their language, and everything. We want them to be integrated into the culture here as well, so learn and get all the best that they can get from the American culture, and then not forget what they have from Kyrgyz culture."

Here he makes the important distinction between "integration" and "assimilation," which is often made in both popular and scholarly media. Lee and Green (2010) describe integration as when "individuals maintain their cultures and are able to accept and adapt to the host's cultures" and assimilation as when "individuals fully adapt to the host's cultures, while they become more alienated toward their own cultures" (2). Jyrgal makes it clear that ethnic community and urban assimilation do not have to be in constant tension with each other, but can complement each other in a healthy cosmopolitan balance. While the distinction between "assimilation" and

"acculturation" may be viewed as a simple dichotomy, a more complete picture places these two processes within a larger process known as *acculturation*—which simply refers to two different cultures being affected by contact with each other. Though acculturation is a multidirectional process, it is logically viewed more often in the context of a subculture being affected by a dominant culture, rather than the other way around. "Berry's Model of Acculturation", first developed by psychologist J.W. Berry in 1992, is divided into "assimilation", "integration", "separation" and "marginalization" (Worthy et al. 2020). This is a model by which the Kyrgyz community in Chicago may be viewed, in that it is formed within a larger cultural environment which is made up of many different subcultures. The cosmopolitan "host culture" can also be viewed accurately as a capitalist "society" that is facilitated by the global spread of Gesellschaft and leads to the development of a Kyrgyz Gemeinschaft.

For Kyrgyz-Chicagoans, when it comes to both aspects of integration for—where immigrants both "adapt to the host's cultures" (or "host society") and "maintain their cultures"—the KCC plays an important role. The KCC runs weekend classes in Kyrgyz language and culture, which also aim to teach people how to properly live in the U.S. "Each and every person who is living now in Chicago, they are a role model for their kids, right?" Jyrgal said, "and for other kids as well who were born here. So I think that's why they have to be educated, they have to know all the rules and the law of all the local suburbs or the cities where they live, and then, of course, they shouldn't forget about their culture and the language, so they can give it to their kids. So in the future, like maybe the next generation, they might continue the same thing here as well, and then speak the language, and then know all the prospects from here." Other events held at the KCC include movie screenings, private events such as baby showers and

weddings, and holiday and ritual celebrations. Kyrgyz and Muslim holidays and rituals, like Independence Day, Noruz (Persian New Years), and Iftar (meals during Ramadan after sundown) and American national holidays like Thanksgiving, are celebrated lavishly. The Thanksgiving celebration had been particularly large that year, featuring appearances from the mayor of Arlington Heights and delegates from the Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkish, and Turkmen communities. Jyrgal also helps organize group chats in Telegram and WhatsApp to help newly arrived people find jobs. All of these things fit somehow into an intent to attain the "integration" aspect of the acculturation process, whether it involves helping immigrants adapt to American society, or helping them maintain their cultures-of-origin.

But there was one annual event which Jyrgal was especially excited to talk about, the profound meaning of which he was proud to explain: the sporting tournament that happens every year between different Kyrgyz communities across the country, called the "Yntymak Cup" (this is what was referred to on the encased trophies I had seen earlier). The event takes place in a different city each time; the previous year, it had been in New York, and the tournament before that had been in Chicago. They draw crowds of several thousand each year and include people from the main Kyrgyz-American communities in thirteen different states, including Chicago, New York, Ohio, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington State, Virginia, and Texas. The tournament features ancient Kyrgyz national games like *ordo*,[2] *toguz korgool*,[3] and *arkan tartysh*[4] (*Limon.kg* 2021). Jyrgal explained the importance of the name: "yntymak is a friendship, right?

[2] A game that resembles bocce and is a simulation of a battlefield. Teams throw a tompoy (bone from a cow's forearm) into a circle containing sixty-eight alchiks, which are bones from a sheep's forearms representing soldiers that surround one "khan," which is an old coin representing a general. The goal is to "knock out" the alchiks and the khan (Gowdy-Chase, 2016).
[3] A Central Asian mancala game (World Nomad Games 2022).
[4] A Kyrgyz version of Tug of War.

We just want to make the friendship stronger, so that's why we come together as well, not only in our community, but other communities as well, in different states."

Notably, Chicago hosted the Yntymak Cup during the same week that Kyrgyzstan celebrated 30 years of its independence and the Kyrgyz Community Center opened in its new location in Arlington Heights. The intersection of these three events was reported several times in the Kyrgyz media (*Limon.kg* 2021, Usenbaeva 2021). When the KCC was founded in 2016, it was on the North Side of Chicago, near the Lincoln Park area where Kyrgyz people largely moved when they first started coming to the city. A specific area was even known informally as "Kyrgyz Village" (*Limon.kg* 2022). Since then, however, the Kyrgyz have become increasingly spread out, and have diffused into various suburbs particularly to the north and west of the city. Common destinations included Arlington Heights, Huntley, and Des Plaines, according to information gathered from my interlocutors. It is for this reason that the KCC moved to Arlington Heights on September 4th, 2021 with the help of Manas Express. As Jyrgal put it, "they used to live there [on the North Side] a lot and now when they have kids they tend to move to the suburbs. So that's why we got this building here, so now it's back in the center of the community."

According to traditional notions of communities, whether they be in villages and towns or in urban enclaves, this type of population diffusion makes prospects of community formation more difficult. This is especially true in an urban environment where cosmopolitanism abounds in the way that Tönnies describes. Though it should also be noted that during this time, the overall population of Kyrgyz people also increased. In this sense, the establishment of the community center in Arlington Heights responded both to the growing number of Kyrgyz in

Chicago and to the diffusion of the population, which had increased susceptibility to assimilation. As we will see, Jibek Jolu underwent the same process in recent years. This reinforces the way that both of the organizations discussed in this chapter serve not just as organizations, but as spaces.

Jyrgal also spoke of a program that was somewhat in the works but had not yet come to fruition: a summer camp for kids in Kyrgyzstan (currently advertised on the front page of the website with the message "more information coming soon"). Regarding the purpose of this program, he said it was "so they can go back and then basically learn from their peers, not from their parents or their grandparents." Jyrgal also said that he did not know whether this summer camp for kids in Kyrgyzstan would be organized by the community center or by a private business of some kind. This is something he additionally discussed in relation to the programming and language classes for adults that were not held at the community center at that time, though they were still advertised on the website. "If private schools are doing the better job in their field, there's no point for us to do the same thing and then compete with them and try to get to that level. So that's why the people tend to go to that school and then just get to whatever they need, and here we don't provide that. And because it's a non-profit organization, we don't have volunteers who can do that as well. And then the private schools, they charge and it's their job, so that's why they do a better job in that." This attitude reflects the limits of Gemeinschaft for a non-profit organization in an urban environment, and the importance of the market and even the "ethnic economy" to provide community services when it must; this will be explored in more detail in the next section.

The plan for the summer camp also reflects the importance of Kyrgyz-American children visiting their homeland, which was something I had been told by Rakhat in an earlier interview. "A lot of Kyrgyz are afraid of that, that their kids will just become Americanized too much," he told me, "so they send their kids to Kyrgyzstan, to their relatives. For years, sometimes. Because they don't want their kids to grow up here just thinking 'oh yeah, there's that country over there.' The relative smallness of our community is a huge factor in that. Like, we think: there's not that many Kyrgyz…we have to, you know, preserve culture. [...] compared to the world, it's just, you know, five million Kyrgyz people; it's very little. [...] And it's good we have a country of ours at all. A lot of bigger ethnicities don't even have recognition. So yeah, we're patriotic. "

Rakhat contends that the smallness of the Kyrgyz population contributes to the sense of urgency with which urban ethnic communities are formed, similarly to how Jyrgal stresses how the newness of the Kyrgyz-American population gives people like him a responsibility to help form community in his generation's children. Rakhat's use of the word "patriotic" also reveals the sense of unity that Kyrgyz people have when they come to the U.S., despite the tribal and regional differences that pervade life in their homeland, as was described in Chapter 1. Rakhat also implies that the feeling of smallness contributes to the feeling of patriotic unity, which is logical, given that recent Kyrgyz migrants are not used to being surrounded primarily by non-Kyrgyz people—let alone people who have no idea what Kyrgyzstan is. The urgency and alienation that results from this feeling causes people to adjust accordingly by solidifying their united identity within their community.

Overall, it is clear that the KCC plays a critical role in building community among the Kyrgyz in Chicago and facilitating a healthy manifestation of the acculturation process.

Crucially, this all makes up the very foundation of the organization. The KCC, as a tax-exempt non-profit organization run entirely on volunteers and donations, has the explicit purpose of forging community and aiding integration. So, when compared to an organization like Jibek Jolu, which plays an integral role in community formation but also functions as a for-profit organization, it has a distinct way of maintaining itself within the Kyrgyz community of Chicago. The next section of the chapter will analyze Jibek Jolu and thereby explicate its difference from the KCC and the diversity of the organizations' impacts on the community.

Jibek Jolu

Jibek Jolu was founded at the end of 2009 by Marat and Medina Bilimbekov, who gave an extensive interview last year in Russian with the Kyrgyz online publication *Limon.kg* (2022). Marat said that he had first come to the U.S. in 2007, at the age of 22 through the Work and Travel program, from the mountain city of Karakol, which is the fourth largest city in Kyrgyzstan. He had originally moved to South Carolina, which initially appealed to him much more than Chicago. "The city [in South Carolina] was big and had a personal atmosphere: it was warm with many tourists and beaches, everything was beautiful, and the people were warm and generous. If I were to originally end up in Chicago, I would have left without hesitation, as this place has a different atmosphere with much turmoil." However, Marat was grateful in retrospect that he had a classmate who was able to help him move to Chicago, where there was a community of about one hundred Kyrgyz at the time, and immediately feel at home with his fellow Kyrgyz. He said that with thousands of Kyrgyz there, the relationships of the community

members to each other are not as intimate as they used to be, but that the addition of the Kyrgyz Community Center, and the generosity of its donors, had helped.

Marat and his friend had started Jibek Jolu because they sensed how much Kyrgyz in Chicago were getting to miss the cuisine of their homeland just as they were, and wanted to capitalize on that homesickness. The future success of the restaurant was originally doubted by the ownership of the small pizzeria from which they were renting. However, the specific way in which the restaurant took off is indicative not just of the good business sense Marat possessed, but also the power of the community. New workers and customers immediately started coming through word of mouth when they heard that a Kyrgyz restaurant had opened, and the owners therefore never needed to spend a dime on marketing; one of the first workers was Medina, who later became Marat's wife. Other Kyrgyz restaurants also started to open up, but none of them survived as long as Jibek Jolu. This Marat and Medina attribute to their own smart business practices (*Limon.kg* 2022).

Altogether, the success of Jibek Jolu allowed the "ethnic economy" to take off by way of Kyrgyz food. In her ethnography of Indians in Chicago, Kathleen Bubinas says that ethnic economies "cater to the needs of their ethnic group, service the general population, and sell goods and services to other ethnic groups" (196). Jibek Jolu's facilitation of the Kyrgyz-Chicago ethnic economy is indisputable today; it is an extremely popular destination for both Kyrgyz customers and employees. Several of my interlocutors suggested that we have our interview there. And just like the Kyrgyz Community Center, the restaurant has adapted both to the growing Kyrgyz-Chicagoan population and to its suburbanization. The restaurant used to operate entirely out of Chicago proper, but opened two new locations in 2020, in the northern suburb of

Glenview and the Western suburb of Naperville. The Glenview location is by far the largest one, with an interior decorated elaborately by a Kyrgyz designer, and a new location in the Western suburb of Des Plaines is in the works (Limon.kg 2022). I originally visited my very first interlocutor in his home in Des Plaines; we then drove to the Jibek Jolu in Glenview for lunch, and on the way he had a video conversation with his friend who was working in the kitchen there. In this way I was immediately able to witness the effects of the local Kyrgyz ethnic economy in person.

The opening of the two new suburban locations was done with the investment of Manas Express, the Kyrgyz trucking company that hosts the building where the Kyrgyz Community Center is located. This company has thus helped with the importance of the ethnic economy and the community in various ways. Trucking is also a very common profession among Kyrgyz in Chicago, though this is a fairly new development. Ten years ago, it was taxi driving that dominated the employment of new Kyrgyz immigrants. This is something that is made light of in a 2014 article posted by the Kyrgyz news organization *Azattyk* describing "forty-four facts about Chicago-Kyrgyz"; fact number four states that "contrary to stereotypes, not all Kyrgyz in Chicago work as taxi drivers" (Nurov 2014). This stereotype has effectively been supplanted by a stereotype of trucking, as I found out when I talked to a Kyrgyz-American in New York; when I asked her what she knew about the Kyrgyz community in Chicago, she said: "I know there is a big diaspora in Chicago, they do a lot of work on trucks!" Marat and Medina of Jibek Jolu discuss trucking their interview with *Limon.kg*, offering the rare perspective of those who have been in Chicago for as long as ten years and had seen the dying out of the taxi economy for

Kyrgyz people (2022). They contend that the reason for the reduction of Kyrgyz taxi drivers is the introduction of Uber in 2016.

All this being said, the relative smallness of the Kyrgyz community affects the ethnic economy in a few ways that must be mentioned. This can be explained by comparing the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan ethnic economy to its Indian-Chicagoan counterpart, the subject of Bubinas's ethnographic work. As of a 2019 Pew Research Center report, Chicago has the second largest population of Indians in any U.S. city after New York, with around 238,000 people. Comparatively, there are under ten thousand Kyrgyz in Chicago, as I have learned from the many estimates that I have heard and that people have told me. There are also well over a billion people of Indian ethnicity in the world, compared to around 5 million Kyrgyz. We have seen that the smallness of the global Kyrgyz population creates a sense of urgency in retaining national identity for future generations, judging by the comments of my interlocutor Rakhat. It also affects the ethnic economy in two distinct ways, which I will discuss below.

First, it creates unity among all the Kyrgyz in Chicago within Kyrgys establishments. Unlike in Gandhi Marg (the area of Chicago where many Indian businesses are) where the staff and clientele of the restaurants and shops are divided sharply between North Indian and South Indian (Bubinas 2003, 206), Kyrgyz establishments cater to all Kyrgyz in Chicago, irrespective of the regional differences between people from different parts of Kyrgyzstan that divide them socially. This is true in the case of the Kyrgyz Community Center as well. Even though friend groups among the Kyrgyz in Chicago are frequently divided up by which region they are from or which dialect of the language they speak, this is not a phenomenon that is observed in any formal Kyrgyz establishment, be it for-profit or non-profit. I partially discovered after first interviewing

a Kyrgyz-Chicagoan who was not very much involved in the Kyrgyz Community Center, who emphasized the regional divisions among his fellow Kyrgyz Chicagoans—and then interviewing Jyrgal, who helps run the KCC, who said that this may be true outside of the KCC but is not something he had noticed at all. I told him about the difference between his description of unity and my previous interlocutor's description of division—and his response was that "here, in Community Center, we have like a thousand or two thousand people coming in and out, right? So [...] when they come, [...] they just blend together. That's what we see. And then maybe they are out, maybe, I don't know…But from my point of view, I don't see that thing."

The KCC's ability to unite all Kyrgyz people under one ethnic umbrella is interesting and admirable when one considers the interethnic tension in Kyrgyzstan that was addressed in Chapter 1 of this project. In certain ways, the role of the KCC is similar to the state-building efforts analyzed by David Gullette in his chapter entitled "The Geneaology of the State" from *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic* (2010). Gullette argues that the patriotic celebrations engineered by the Kyrgyz government in the years leading up to the 2005 revolution were merely attempts to save President Akayev's image in times of polarization and crisis among the Kyrgyz people, especially following the 2002 Asky tragedy when police fired on anti-government protesters (Gullette 2010, 167, 174). He links this style of patriotism to the colonial ethnogenetic theories of the Soviet Era and the rise in Kyrgyz nationalist violence against Uzbeks. In an earlier chapter from the book, Gullette explores more organic ways that Kyrgyz people have forged ethnic unity in times of Post-Soviet crisis, where people decreasingly relied on support from those with ancestral ties through *uruus* and *uruks*, and increasingly relied on the people immediately surrounding them in their lives (Gullette 2010, 107). Both these

examples represent a common theme throughout Gullette's book that the Kyrgyz people discard their traditional interethnic divisions in times of crisis and change. Many Kyrgyz people who come to Chicago are similarly in times of crisis and change as they migrate, so the KCC plays a role in uniting them among their compatriots. Migrants also turn to distinctly ethno-national, rather than tribal, forms of identity when they are faced with the sudden smallness and invisibility of the Kyrgyz population in Chicago. This is, likewise, what is happening in the case of the KCC.

That being said, the smallness of the Kyrgyz population in Chicago (and globally) affects its ethnic economy in a way that pertains to the final aspect of what makes something an ethnic economy as it is described by Bubinas, involving the ability to serve the needs of their ethnic group and provide their goods as commodities to other ethnic groups as well as the general population. Indeed, an ethnic economy is not just an economy by and for a specific ethnic group, but one in which ethnically specific commodities are created for, and sometimes also by, other ethnic groups or members of the general population. Because the Kyrgyz community in Chicago is so small, it must diversify its ethnic economy in order to sustain itself. This is one hidden reason why Jibek Jolu is so successful as opposed to other upstart Kyrgyz restaurants in Chicago: it appeals to a wide range of customers besides just the Kyrgyz. This is something that my interlocutor Rakhat inadvertently explained to me when he claimed that Jibek Jolu is targeted much more towards non-Kyrgyz than other Kyrgyz restaurants in the area, which is why it is the most famous among non-Kyrgyz. He compared it specifically to a Central Asian Halal restaurant called "Baicafe," which describes itself on its website as serving "authentic Russian Kyrgyz cuisine" that "take[s] great pride in improving upon your favorite Kyrgyz dishes in new and

creative ways" (Baicafe n.d.). Rakhat told me that "[Baicafe] is in the city. It works late night, and Kyrgyz people just go eat something for, like, working late nights as taxi drivers, they sit there. It's more informal in terms of everything. They just eat there on a regular basis, and Americans don't go there, usually, because it's…it's not as nice there." As it turns out, Baicafe is no longer in operation (*Limon.kg* 2022).

Furthermore, Jibek Jolu does not, strictly speaking, just serve Kyrgyz food. Even though, in my experience, the menu at Jibek Jolu is very similar to a menu one would find in Kyrgyzstan, its owners state that it has a "mixed cuisine." "It could be said that we cover the cuisine of all countries," says Medina in the *Limon.kg* interview, "this immediately becomes clear to Americans when we answer their question that *Jibek Jolu* translates as 'Silk Road.' The caravan goes along the Silk Road and it is very exciting." What Medina describes is the excitement of different cultures coming together along the iconic trade route. In the spirit of this, the kitchen staff at Jibek Jolu consists of people from many different backgrounds including "Mexicans, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Uighurs, and Ukrainians" (2022).

Interethnic community-building among the Kyrgyz goes beyond just Jibek Jolu, and indeed beyond just the ethnic economy. A lot of this has to do with both culture and language. This largely includes the other three Turkic-speaking Central Asian groups—Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Turkmen—which have related languages, a common colonially inherited language (Russian), and similar Central Asian Turkic and Slavic cultural characteristics. It also largely includes Turks, who are linguistically and culturally similar to Kyrgyz in their own way, and Russians. My first interlocutor—the one whose home I visited in Des Plaines—was a beginner in the English language. He lived as an undocumented migrant, working temporarily for a

Russian-language window installation company in order to make a living while he learned English, with the goal of both improving his language skills and being granted asylum (interestingly, he was learning English over Zoom with someone in Kyrgyzstan, which he said was because the English classes in Chicago are too expensive). This is one example of how the Russian-language economy functions as an ethnic economy. But my interlocutors also made it clear that they identify much closer with other local Central Asian and Turkic ethnic communities than with local Russian or Slavic communities. Jyrgal says that the Kyrgyz Community Center keeps in touch with comparable institutions among groups like the Kazakhs and the Uzbeks. "The cultures are similar to each other," he told me, "and then everyone is, like, in the same shoes. They're coming from their country to here and then adopting and all that stuff, so yeah, we do have some events happening [...] between those communities. Like sometimes we invite them or sometimes they invite us if they have a big event."

Conclusion

The Kyrgyz Community Center and Jibek Jolu are two organizations that are similar for the Kyrgyz community in Chicago, both as organizations and as spaces. They both bring new or already established immigrants closer together and strengthen the Kyrgyz social network across the city and its surrounding areas. In this way, both of them help to strengthen the atmosphere of Gemeinschaft among the population against a modern, urban, and multi-ethnic atmosphere of Gesellschaft. However, they are also markedly different in one critical and fundamental way: the KCC is a nonprofit, while Jibek Jolu is for-profit. In this way, Jibek Jolu takes on a unique form of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft combined together, manifested as the ethnic economy. The

KCC, being run by volunteers and donations, does not rely on the ethnic commodity to build community but is able to do so independently. However, it also focuses heavily on economic and social integration into society, in addition to Kyrgyz cultural preservation, thereby also contributing to the economic prosperity of the local Kyrgyz. All in all, the unique functions of these two organizations complicate Ferdinand Tönnies's dichotomy of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in a way that allows one to function within the other, cultivating a relatively balanced and healthy acculturation process.

CHAPTER 3: THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN THE KYRGYZ COMMUNITY OF CHICAGO

In this chapter, I examine the role of institutions in community development among Kyrgyz people in Chicago, especially the government and the law. This entails first distinguishing between institutions and organizations, and clarifying the different roles that they play in the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community. I then examine the strong atmosphere of social obligation among these community members, and the transnational roots of its substitutive relationship to formal institutions. More specifically, I look at how the informal way that institutions are run in Kyrgyzstan affects the acculturation process of people who are adjusting to the United States. In order to explain how the law is involved in a surprisingly large portion of Kyrgyz-Chicagoans' everyday lives, I also analyze the role of undocumented migration and the perceived (il)legality of community members themselves. Taken together, I argue that informal institutions play an enormous role in developing Gemeinschaft-like community among the Kyrgyz in Chicago, but that in some instances an over-reliance on informal institutions and organizations can lead to a disregard for safety as well as opportunities for community members to abuse each others' trust. Also, given the prevalence of undocumented migration, the maintenance of informal institutions is often necessary for people out of fear, and this can cause them to be stuck in a state of informality.

Theoretical Background: A Larger View of Community

In the previous chapter, I examined and compared the role of different formal organizations in community formation, one being nonprofit and the other being for-profit. This chapter builds on the ideas of the previous chapter by putting community formation in the context of institutions, and discussing their relationships to organizations. This requires distinguishing between organizations and institutions as social entities, which is something that is done inconsistently and differently by scholars throughout the social sciences. Economist Douglass North is one scholar who is ubiquitous in literature on institutions, even outside of his discipline. He defines them as "the rules of the game in a society or, more formally,…the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction" (North 1990, cited in Rogers 2017, 133). As several have pointed out, there is a difference between institutions and organizations, where organizations are not themselves the "rules of the game" but groups of people who participate in the game and follow the rules (Rogers 2017, Khalil 1995). Gary Bouma (1998) defines institutions as "sets of norms which apply across a variety of specific organizations," and organizations as "structures of social relationship, social actors arranged in positions and roles," arguing that the importance of making this distinction is immense (1). This distinction is important for my work because organizations and institutions play different roles in the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community. The Kyrgyz Community Center and Jibek Jolu as they were described in the last chapter are not institutions but organizations.

The structural relationship between institutions and organizations is described insightfully by sociologist Jonathan H. Turner (2003), who says that institutions are the "macro-level forces" of "social reality" (4). He also identifies the "core social institutions of

human society" as economy, kinship, religion, polity, law, and education (3). At the "meso-level" are "categorical units"—the basic forms of which are groups, organizations, and communities—and "categoric units," which are "formed by the distinctions that people make and use: gender, age, class, ethnicity/race, region, and the like" (4). Finally, the "micro-level forces" are "encounters of face-to-face interaction" (5). Institutions operate at the macro-level because they are the most overarching in their influence on the various smaller-scale social processes. Using Turner's model, the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community itself will not be considered an institution, but a smaller-scale entity that is governed by the rules of institutions, whether they be of the state, of cultural conventions, or of something else. Turner's conception of institutions is useful in the way that it explicates how they permeate into every facet of humans' everyday lives.

Given the extremely broad ground covered by the conception of institutions described above, it is important also to look at North's differentiation between formal and informal institutions (1991). The former consists largely of "constitutions, laws, [and] property rights," while the latter consists largely of "sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct" (97). In a simplified sense, formal institutions are akin to "written rules," while informal institutions are "unwritten." In my analysis, I use informal institutions as a means of describing the unwritten rules or conventions which shape the interactions of Kyrgyz-Chicagoan individuals. Applying this distinction to the institution/organization distinction, there is a multi-dimensional distinction between formal institutions, informal institutions, formal organizations, and informal organizations. I use informal organizations to mean individual groups of people within a community that are not "official" in the legal sense, such as networks

of friends and relatives or illegal smuggling groups. This classification is important here because other scholars have used "informal institutions" to mean what are really informal organizations—unofficial individual groups of people—which in this analysis function distinctly from informal institutions. The previous chapter was focused mostly on formal organizations; this chapter "zooms out" conceptually by looking at the relationship between institutions, organizations, and community. This chapter also zooms out geographically, in that it examines the transnational relationship between both formal and informal institutions in the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan.

The first part of this chapter concerns the transnational relationship between Kyrgyz and American informal institutions, and its effect on the community of Kyrgyz people in Chicago—or, the reckoning of institutional differences between the host country and the country-of-origin. The second part focuses on the role of illegal migration (which is itself entwined in a tense network of institutions) in community formation. These two topics are interconnected in that they both represent a community-specific example of the four-way relationship among formal/informal institutions/organizations. They also each affect the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community in their own way.

The Tension Between Kyrgyz and American Institutions

Throughout my conversation with my interlocutor Rakhat over lunch at Jibek Jolu, he kept referring to the fact that Kyrgyzstan was more "informal" than the United States. Many of my other interlocutors spoke similarly about this idea, even if they did not use the term "informal" specifically. But in my conversation with Rakhat, we talked especially extensively

about this idea, and I chimed in with my own observations from studying abroad of how Kyrgyzstan seemed more "informal." We started to dwell on the concept of institutions after I suggested that people in Kyrgyzstan seemed more patient and accepting when it came to the shortcomings of them.

"I mean, we gave up on our government a long time ago," he responded, "so people learn how to rely on themselves and other people, but not institutions, because they don't work. Or bribery. Like, it's so common to bribe officials in Kyrgyzstan for the smallest things. I wanted to renew my passport, the lady told me 'oh, come back in two weeks', I said 'no.' I gave her some money and a nice chocolate bar, she said 'okay, come in three days.'"

"How much money did you give?" I asked.

"Not a lot. *Pyatsot som*." (500 soms, which is equivalent to $5.71 USD). "Or the road police," he added. "Everyone bribes the road police; it's common. But you have to take into account that they can't survive off their salary. So they have to rely on that."

I responded by suggesting that perhaps in America, similar corruption occurs when small towns implement unreasonable or fluctuating speed limits in order to get money from people passing through who make mistakes, as was my experience one time.

"But like, at least they formalized it," he said. "No, I just wanted to say that back at home, no one would give a crap about it, if it's in the rules or not. Those things are normal."

When Kyrgyz people come to the U.S., they face a different culture around public officials and police, and their attitudes change in certain ways, but not others. According to Rakhat, Kyrgyz men (specifically) are significantly more afraid of the police in America than in Kyrgyzstan."Back at home, no one gives a crap about the police. Like, my friends fought police

officers—like, punched them. It's fine. They don't respect them. I mean, here, they can pull a gun on you." He also mentioned that "people tend to be more law-abiding here, because we believe that cops work here." But the social atmosphere of fear works both ways; it can also factor into people being, in some circumstances, less law-abiding or less moral. When Rakhat was describing how his friendships with Americans were different from his friendships with Kyrgyz people, he said: "One of the things that amazed me [in the U.S.] was that your friends, potentially, not like close friends, but people you know, can potentially call cops on you, easily. For example if they know that you're drunk driving. And they will think it's a good thing to do, like you can kill someone. Someone from Kyrgyzstan would never do that." Rakhat implied that this attitude of "stick[ing] up to your friends" (in his words)—even in the face of unsafety—is caused mostly by a lingering distrust of Kyrgyz cops that "don't work", but also partly by a fear of American cops that do work. After discussing this, he said that he missed the way that friends in Kyrgyzstan would stick up to each other "in a more profound way."

These examples represent overarching conventions of loyalty, trust, and expectation that Kyrgyz people create for each other both at home and in America, at the expense of formal institutions such as law enforcement. The examples above are essentially the result of a greater emphasis on informal, rather than formal, institutions. This is because they represent the expectations people have which are not codified by the state or enforced punitively, but—in the words of political scientist and sociologist Hans Joachim-Lauth (2000)—codified by "social acceptance" (24) and enforced by way of "auto-licensing", which refers to "self-enactment and subsequent self-assertion" (24). This is true when it comes to the normalization of bribery as well as "sticking up to your friends" by not calling the cops on each other. When Rakhat says that

people in Kyrgyzstan learn how to rely on each other due to the fact that institutions don't work, he is describing what Lauth calls "substitutive" relationships between informal and formal institutions—that is, one substitutes for the other and they are functionally equivalent (25). Lauth compares this to "complementary" and "competing," though substitutive interactions appear to be a more prevalent form in Kyrgyz-Chicago based on my conversations with interlocutors. In the substitutive case that I have observed, the balancing influence that non-functional formal institutions have on functional informal institutions is disproportionately present in Kyrgyzstan, and when Kyrgyz people move to the United States they make some adjustments according to the fact that formal institutions are more functional there. Obviously, this is a very simplified and specific way of viewing the highly complex roots of formal and informal institutions, but the substitutive relationship of formal and informal institutions, as described by Lauth, is at least part of the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan acculturation process.

The formal/informal institution dichotomy is, in this context, parallel to Tönnies's Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft theory, as a social atmosphere with a greater emphasis on informal institutions is more characteristic of Gemeinschaft. This is because the psychological root of Gemeinschaft is "natural will" (*Wesenwille*). One aspect of natural will is a "sense of duty" that Tönnies ([1887] 1940, 152-54) argues is created not by written law but by memory. In this sense it is different from "rational will" (*Kürwille*), which is the psychological basis of Gesellschaft. A greater emphasis on informal institutions as opposed to formal institutions is correlated with a greater emphasis on Gemeinschaft as opposed to Gesellschaft, because it entails people's reliance on each other rather than on physically encoded "rules of the game."

As I review my conversations with Kyrgyz-Americans, I recognize Tönnies's idea of duty in Gemeinschaft. Several interlocutors of mine describe what may be called a social obligation that Kyrgyz people have toward each other which cannot always be put into words on paper or orally. As someone I talked to named Aigerim put it, "I definitely feel like if there's a person from Kyrgyzstan, I think I know the code to how our interaction is to be organized." She then went on to explain what she calls an "all-or-nothing approach" to friendship that Kyrgyz people have. "If you called someone a friend, then you'd make yourself available and accessible 24/7," she told me, "and there's an expectation that you'd be willing to share not only your time, but also your resources." She also said that "if a person shows up at your place and says 'I don't have anywhere to live', you find a small corner in your place for that person." There is no law stating that this must be so, but there is a social expectation; in this sense, the expectation of sharing your resources is a powerful informal institution and a hallmark of a community-oriented social environment driven by memory and "natural will" rather than "rational will." As mentioned in the previous chapter, this kind of benevolent social environment forms the basis both of community and of Kyrgyz migrants' willingness to move to Chicago, as they know that people there will be willing to help them.

Aigerim also described this Kyrgyz-American social environment as a "very close and [...] very taxing [...] expectation for friendship, as well as for family. Yes, as well as for family. You know, and the closer the bloodline, the more expectations." Her mention of "bloodline" serves as a reminder that social obligation among the Kyrgyz people is rooted in old traditions of relatedness as well as modern circumstances. In *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic* (2010), David Gullette traces the extent to which social obligation is bound by *uruus*

and *uruks* in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. Some people provide services to others, both symbolic and material, based on shared ancestry, and expect that others will do so in return. Other people, however, pay absolutely no attention to this, but the obligations of help and assistance among family members are still huge factors in their lives (Gullette 2010, 101). According to Gullette, expectations like this are often managed through shame—in other words, people are shamed for not following the expectations of their family (108). Gullette demonstrates this by describing how women are shamed for not accepting their new husbands following bride abductions. This tradition of bride kidnapping, which is highly controversial and illegal but still practiced in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, certainly does not transfer over to Chicago—but Gullette uses it to exemplify, to a dramatic effect, the way that shame is applied in order to manage family obligations. This is one way that people's "sense of duty," functioning as an unwritten formal institution, is enforced through measures that are not legally punitive but more psychological. Ferdinand Tönnies, from whom I drew the concept of a "sense of duty", extensively discusses shame as the basis of morality within someone's *Kürwille* (natural will) in a Gemeinschaft, and laments the corresponding lack of morality in a modern, capitalist Gesellschaft.

But in an environment such as Chicago that is large, impersonal, and disorienting for people coming from Gemeinschaft-oriented foreign environments, there are limits to the way that obligation can be managed. For instance, Aigerim also described an instance in which some Kyrgyz-American friends of hers were conned by their compatriots. "[A] Kyrgyz person and her husband, they moved to Chicago thinking that they could rely on the diaspora, and what happened was that they were tricked by the people from the diaspora. Lied to. And I think they lost some money because the person who promised to give them an apartment took the money

and there was no apartment." This couple, she said, then moved to Pittsburgh, but found themselves living in a dangerous neighborhood, so they moved back to Chicago. This example shows the relationship between formal and informal institutions, in that informal expectations—as opposed to formal procedures—enable people to take advantage of others' trust without easily facing legal accountability. When maneuvering an environment multitudes larger than a small Kyrgyz village or even a medium-sized Kyrgyz city, informal management does not work. In Rakhat's anecdote about being surprised by Americans' willingness to call the cops on their friends, we can identify another potential drawback to Kyrgyz social environments which is related to the formal institutions of a Gesellschaft: people are willing to put their loyalty to each other above the safety of others.

In this discussion of people's "all-or-nothing" loyalty to each other based on relatedness and shared identity, there is a clear resemblance to the way that Kyrgyz politicians are accused of corruption and nepotism based "tribalism" as described by Gullette (2010) in his book (and mentioned in Chapter 1 of this project) (18). But Kyrgyz people in Chicago generally do not retain traditional ancestral divisions, because even in Kyrgyzstan—where the presence of other Kyrgyz people and Kyrgyz traditions is obviously more prominent—these types of divisions are dying down in favor of overall ethnic unity. Therefore, accusations of "tribalism" among Kyrgyz-Chicagoans would be similarly unfounded, and more convincingly attributed instead to the emergence of informal institutions and organizations under elements of strain and scarcity (as is experienced by new immigrants).

The relationship between informal institutions and legal transgressions plays a role in a surprisingly large portion of everyday life in the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community, even things that

are mundane on the surface. An example of this can be seen in the way that Kyrgyz-Chicagoans prepare and eat food. My interlocutor Aigerim told me that "there is a different attitude towards food in Kyrgyzstan. There is a cult of food. [...] People like to lay out big tables with food. That's how people make friends; that's how people show their appreciation, it's like you feed people. That's why we have so many restaurants, I think, and almost everyone can cook. Food is a language." To illustrate this, she pointed to the fact that households in Kyrgyzstan make a point of always preparing plenty of food for their guests and expecting that they eat it. In this sense, food is a language of hospitality and of social expectation that functions as an informal institution in forming community. The difference in attitude towards food in the U.S. presents Kyrgyz migrants with a regular challenge in the acculturation process.

However, the role of food in community development is also intimately tied to several formal institutions. One example is religion, specifically Islam, which is a very important institution that should be considered. Islam functions as a formal institution in the sense that it provides written "rules of the game" from the Quran that govern the role of food in everyday life. One major difference between Kyrgyzstan and the U.S. is that pork is almost never available in Kyrgyzstan and Halal meat is more readily available. According to Rakhat, different people respond to this aspect of the acculturation process differently, and it depends largely on how religious people are, which is caused by a mix of family background and personal choice. Some people become less religious when they come to the U.S. while others become more religious. Rakhat fell into the first category; he said that he started "questioning" Islam while at Turkish school and now is a self-described Atheist who eats pork without his parents' knowledge. He contends that people who become more religious do so out of fear that they and their families

might become too "Americanized." He also says that Kyrgyz people sometimes even travel out to Amish communities in order to obtain meat that is strictly Halal.

The role of food in the community is also connected with the laws of the United States in an often incongruous manner. In the northern part of Kyrgyzstan, horse meat is extremely popular. People from the north whom I have talked to have said that *beshbarmak*—which is noodles with horse meat, sometimes substituted with lamb—is the true national dish of Kyrgyzstan because it is the "only food" that is found in Kyrgyzstan but not in the surrounding Central Asian countries. Several of my interlocutors questioned this narrative because the dish is only found in the north of the country and also has a Kazakh variation that is different mainly in the type of noodles used. Nevertheless, many Kyrgyz people consider this dish to be an important part of their identity, and horse meat is used in other common dishes such as *chuchuk* (a type of particularly fatty sausage). However, horse meat is, of course, illegal to sell in the United States. People therefore adopt various methods of obtaining it. One method is simply to sell horse meat anyway, which Rakhat says is the practice of one recently-opened supermarket in Chicago that many Kyrgyz go to. But he also says that it is generally rare to find horse meat sold on the market in the U.S., and that people generally get horse meat "informally." He said that "to get a horse slaughtered, you have to go to a farm and talk to a person, because you can't really buy it; they don't sell it. Talk to a person, they'll let you buy a horse and slaughter it." Aigerim told me that another common way for people to get horse meat is to smuggle it from Kyrgyzstan on the plane, which is of course also illegal. These examples, which represent more "informal" ways of getting horse meat than buying it on the legal market, again demonstrate what Lauth calls the "substitutive" relationship between formal and informal institutions—informal

institutions substitute for their formal counterparts when formal institutions do not work in their favor.

It is also important to look more deeply at the ways in which institutions affect organizations. A weakening of formal institutions not only can cause a substitutive strengthening of informal institutions, but it can cause a strengthening of informal organizations. Anthropologist Fran Markowitz (1992) describes this process in her ethnographic article "Community Without Organizations" using the case of an immigrant population even more affected by the institutions of their home countries than Kyrgyz-Americans. This ethnography is especially insightful here because it concerns migration from the Soviet Union, of which Kyrgyzstan was a part recently enough for some of my interlocutors to remember. Using her fieldwork on Soviet-Jewish immigrants in New York during the 1970s and 80s, Markowitz discusses how many people both in and outside the group would view these immigrants as having "no community," and instead view them as more individualistic, entrepreneurial, and deceptive, much like in a Gesellschaft (Markowitz even invokes Tönnies in her writing[[143]). She argues that despite such a perception, these immigrants actually have a very strong community, but unlike virtually all other immigrant groups in the U.S. it is not tied to any "formal organization." Rather, it takes the form of informal and seemingly invisible networks of kinship. She attributes this largely to a disillusionment with Soviet bureaucracy and a resultant deep-seated mistrust of both institutions and organizations in general, and therefore a turn to kinship and informal networks. What Markowitz shows is a real-life view of how, to use Jonathan H. Turner's theoretical conception, the macro-level force of institutions affect the meso-level forces of organizations and communities.

What Markowitz describes is an aspect of the transnational acculturation process which is resemblant of how the institutional environment of present-day Kyrgyzstan can lead to an attitude in the United States which is unique from other ethnic groups. But on the other hand, the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan case differs from the Soviet-Jewish-New Yorker in several respects. Every Kyrgyz-Chicagoan that I have talked to contends that they have a very visible and tight-knit sense of community, and it is inconceivable to me that a Kyrgyz person in Chicago might express the level of detachment that Markowitz's interlocutors felt when they would say that "no such community exists" (141). Relatedly, Kyrgyz in Chicago do operate formal community organizations, such as the KCC (and in New York, there is a somewhat similar non-profit called the Kyrgyz American Foundation). In addition to this, Kyrgyz-Americans have very strong informal ties. This difference in social organization is somewhat difficult to gauge; a more positive view of the USSR among Kyrgyz people likely plays a major role, as well as cultural differences between the two groups that predate the USSR. Regardless, Markowitz's ethnography adds valuable insight to the literature on how institutions and organizations can interact transnationally to create unique communities of immigrants.

One last critical aspect of the Kyrgyz-American community which is impossible to ignore, particularly when discussing institutions, is the prevalence of undocumented migrants from Kyrgyzstan in Chicago. The very state of illegality creates a particular kind of paranoia in which people strive to evade the authorities of formal state institutions in order to avoid deportation or other consequences. To understand this is to understand how the law permeates into every aspect of Kyrgyz people's process of "sticking up to each other." For the remainder of the chapter, this will be discussed using a mix of ethnographic and secondary sources. It will be

tied back to the concepts discussed thus far in order to further illuminate the community's relationship to institutions and explain why people may seem "stuck" in a state of informality.

The Undocumented Status of Community Members

People migrate from Kyrgyzstan to the United States through various means. Especially prominent are winners of the Green Card Lottery, refugees, and recipients of visa-granting programs for high-skilled and/or in-demand workers with good English skills. For most people in Kyrgyzstan, however, the paths to legal migration are not very plausible. Most Kyrgyz people do not have in-demand skills, and winning the Green Card Lottery is quite rare. Of the 72,000 Kyrgyz citizens playing the lottery in 2018 (within a population of 6.3 million), 1,500 received Green Cards, and only 3,581 Kyrgyz citizens received Green Cards between 2013 and 2017 (24.kg 2017, Ryskulova 2020). Furthermore, asylum seekers face stringent requirements. Therefore, many people find ways to come to the U.S. illegally.

In 2010, political scientist Saltanat Liebert published an article discussing "the role of informal institutions in U.S. immigration policy" using "the case of illegal labor migration from Kyrgyzstan." As one of the only published papers about the migration from Kyrgyzstan to the United States, it is a very valuable source. Through data that was collected via interviews with Kyrgyz migrants in New York and Philadelphia, Liebert uses Lauth's (2000) aforementioned theory of different types of interactions between formal and informal institutions (complementary, competing, and substitutive) as well as a new type—accommodating—that was conceived by Helmke and Levitsky in 2003 (9). According to Liebert, the three types of interactions that are present in the Kyrgyz-U.S. migration process are competing, substitutive,

and complementary. Competing interactions, she says, are present among "migration intermediaries" and employment agencies that provide fraudulent letters of recommendation from U.S. citizens and companies for fees ranging from $150 to $2,000 (she describes these as "institutions" even though individual agencies would be more accurately classified as organizations) (14-15). Liebert argues that these intermediaries engage in "competing" interactions because they compete with formal institutions that assist in legal migration (14). She also identifies both "substitutive" and "complementary" interactions among employers such as childcare providers for whom there is a shortage of workers in their home country, and who therefore benefit from employing undocumented workers (18-22). This, in turn, adds the "formal economy" and substitutes for the work that was previously done by legal residents (19-22).

Last summer I asked Rakhat about the issue of "migration intermediaries" forging sponsorship letters, twelve years after the publication of this article, by which time the Kyrgyz-American economy had grown immensely. Rakhat told me that the act of forging letters from intermediaries or employers was "not a thing anymore" compared with the past. He went on to mention a different process that people often undertake in order to get to the U.S.: applying for asylum. The majority of asylum seekers, he said, create fraudulent stories. For example, he knew someone who "faked his document saying he was an Uzbek" during the height of popular anti-Uzbek sentiment and violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, and he knew other people who pretended to be gay in order to be given asylum. People like this, he said, will often forge text messages of death threats against them to use as evidence.

Another common thing for people in Kyrgyzstan to do is first go to Mexico and then sneak over the border into the United States. According to an article by *Radio Free*

Europe/Radio Liberty (RFL/RL), this is often done by people with Russian passports who pay private Russian companies to fly them to Mexico through several countries (Elkeeva and Najibullah, 2022). This process is akin to what Leibert describes as migration routes using informal institutions or organizations. The journey across Mexico and across the border is treacherous and sometimes deadly, and upon arrival many people seek asylum. The article states that many people come to the U.S. influenced by false promises and unrealistic expectations—such as being paid $25,000 to $30,000 a month for commercial truck driving, as some bloggers say, while a more realistic estimate of about $10,000 a month (Elkeeva and Najibullah, 2022). This provides another example of how Kyrgyz people's habitual trust in each other can have bad consequences, similar to the aforementioned example of conning described to me by my interlocutor Aigerim. The dangers of clandestine routes into the U.S., as opposed to formal, legal migration institutions, also provides an additional example of how safety can be jeopardized in a large social environment that relies on informal institutions, in addition to the example of people not calling the cops on each other due to loyalty.

My first interlocutor belonged to the demographic of people being described in the RFL/RL article. He was originally from the Osh region in the southwest of the country, close to Osh City. Before coming to the U.S. nine months prior to our interview, he had lived in Russia for ten years. He had come to the U.S. to live with his brother and knew almost no English at that point. He was working at a Russian-speaking installation company and had also previously worked for a moving company as a driver. He described himself as a refugee who was "waiting for the papers." To get to America, he had flown into Mexico and then spent several nights in a border camp while crossing over, but did not go deeply into the details.

In an environment where many illegal migrants live, people have incentives to emphasize formal institutions and organizations, and de-emphasize informal institutions. This is because interactions with formal institutions come with the risk of consequences such as deportation. Employers of undocumented migrants also have the incentive of not being caught paying their employees under the table. With all this in mind, it makes sense that Kyrgyz people in Chicago, who take with them a pre-existing culture from Kyrgyzstan that values informal institutions, would maintain this cultural value in order to evade the potentially punitive influence of formal institutions. When Rakhat says that Kyrgyz people in the U.S. fear American cops because they actually "work," and that Kyrgyz people don't call the cops on each other, the element of many community members' undocumented status as migrants must be taken into account. Even if this is not a relevant factor for every instance of interaction with authority, it is one thing that influences peoples' tendency towards both fear and mutual support in general. People who fear being in trouble with formal institutions and receiving legal discipline create systems of informal social ties in order to function.

Several drawbacks of an informal social environment have been identified, including a disregard for safety and the act of people taking advantage of others' trust. One might thereby conclude, on the one hand, that it would be beneficial for members of the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community to place more trust in formal institutions while still maintaining aspects of their informal culture. This involves placing more trust in law enforcement and legal migration paths, especially when the safety of others is considered. People could still maintain a benevolent and community-oriented social environment without relying too much on fellow community members, and complete a natural part of the acculturation process from a more "informal" to a

more “formal” environment. But the undocumented status of some Kyrgyz-Chicagoans creates a barrier to this aspect of the acculturation process, in that people are deterred by the risks and fears of formal authorities. It is in this way that many Kyrgyz-Chicagoans are “stuck” in their informal social environments.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the ways in which the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community is shaped by informal institutions, and how these interact with formal institutions as well as organizations. This involves a transnational acculturation process that manifests itself in various scenarios concerning mutual aid, food as an instrument of community, and clandestine migration. All of these things play some role in the way that Kyrgyz people maintain informal institutions in the United States, but the uncertainty of migrants’ legal status makes the reliance on informal institutions necessary and difficult for them to get out of, despite its drawbacks. By framing my ethnographic observations within theories of community, institutions, and organizations, I have provided an analysis that explicates several of the processes that occur within a complex web of social entities as they relate to the Kyrgyz community of Chicago. More research is needed, however, to more fully uncover the roots of this web and fully explain how institutions affect each other in this community.

CONCLUSION

In this project, I have explored the Kyrgyz Community in Chicago through various theoretical and methodological lenses, and through a wide range of perspectives across time, space, and the realm of theory. The one thing that I kept returning to, which serves as the basis of the project, is Ann Grodzins Gold's (2008) description of community as "a group of people who have something in common and who are actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion" (2). Dividing this statement into two, I started by examining the historical process of Kyrgyz identity formation and its place within the U.S. and the modern world, thereby showing how it came to give the Kyrgyz of Chicago a sense of commonality. I then looked deeply into the process of community formation from the perspective of two Kyrgyz-run organizations—the Kyrgyz Community Center and Jibek Jolu—showing the distinct role that each plays in both solidifying shared identity and fostering benign mutual assistance, which is intertwined with the ethnic economy. These two formal organizations, in addition to other organizations such as Manas Express, contribute enormously to the way that immigrants successfully acculturate in their new homes, both socially and economically, by generating a distinct form of community and ethnic unity.

Finally, I looked at the institutions that govern community organizations and the structural relationships between different levels of social reality. The organizations as described in Chapter 2 were thereby contextualized within different degrees of power and formality. The juxtaposition of chapters 2 and 3 gives me the opportunity to compare the role in the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community of formal organizations—nonprofits, restaurants, trucking

companies, etc.—with: 1). *informal organizations* such as networks of family and friends 2). *formal institutions* such as laws and constitutions, and 3). *informal institutions* such as conventions and codes of conduct. In order for a community to be created, informal organizations and institutions are absolutely integral. Networks of kinship, representing a type of informal organization, are the most necessary factors that bring Kyrgyz people to Chicago in the first place. This is evidenced by the interlocutors of mine who said that they moved to Chicago because of proximity to friends and relatives. And it is the Kyrgyz informal institutions which allow people to rely on each other for support, which can include food and places to stay. But once the community is established, it is the formal organizations which play the most versatile role, first and foremost because of their ability to unite community members under the singular "Kyrgyz" identity in spite of any interethnic divisions that may otherwise occur based on family, bloodlines, regions, or dialects of Kyrgyz. The political undertones of Kyrgyz ethnonational unity notwithstanding, this is a major force that brings people together through the challenging moments of the acculturation process, and perpetuates the existence of an undivided community. Furthermore, formal organizations play the role of providing Kyrgyz people with employment in a way that fosters community growth. Specifically, this occurs through the ethnic economy, which contains elements of both Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.

It is in this way that various social entities influence the Kyrgyz community in Chicago. Formal and informal organizations, as well as informal institutions, all play crucial roles in forming community. But specifically, informal organizations and institutions function more as forces that create community, while formal organizations function more as forces that sustain community. In other words, it is informal relations that primarily give Kyrgyz-Americans the

motivation to form systems of community, but it is the formal organizations that combine these communal occurrences in a cohesive manner.

These social entities are all part of a process of community formation that is complex and always ongoing, and that increases in depth as more people join the Kyrgyz-Chicagoan community and grow along with it. Future ethnographic research would be helpful in further untangling these social relations and serving the growing body of anthropological literature on migration and acculturation within a globalized world.

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