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**Migration, Development, and the ‘*Toi Economy*’:
cultural integration of remittances in Northern Kyrgyzstan**

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Despite the efforts of international aid organizations and state agencies, the migration stream from Kyrgyzstan leading north to Russia and Kazakhstan continues to defy formalization and regularization. This migration stream is made possible through informal social networks, into which the migrants’ remittances are then invested. This transnational labor strategy must also be situated within a domestic process of urbanization, which the Kyrgyz population is taking up in response to rural underemployment. Social networks act as the conduits for finding employment and housing both domestically and abroad, as well as forming the structural logic of how remittances are spent back in Kyrgyzstan. The logic behind the consumption and saving of this money, and the way old traditions (*obichiye*¹) are being adopted for new purposes is the focus of this essay. I will also address the way migration is challenging some of the subjugating practices of kinship obligations. Because migration arises out of and then reinvests back in to these networks, the opportunities for developing the Kyrgyz economy must be closely attuned to their operations.

Kyrgyz migration overview

My research has focused on the northern part of Kyrgyzstan so I will first outline how the north fits into the broader migration dynamics of the country. The majority of research on Kyrgyz migration has focused on southern states (*oblast*) as the primary source of migrants. I do not argue against the prominence of migration originating from southern oblasts, but instead seek to highlight the critical role of northern oblasts in the labor migration strategy of the country as a whole. Compared to the more densely populated and water-scarce southern oblasts, labor migration is less common in the northern oblasts² which enjoy a greater abundance of arable land and suitable pastures. Nonetheless, the lack of well-paying jobs across the whole of Kyrgyzstan has made migration a national phenomenon affecting

¹ Italicized words refer to the commonly used Kyrgyz term. Italicized *and* underlined are Russian loan words. The north of Kyrgyzstan is essentially bilingual and some Russian loan words are dominant.

² Made up of Naryn, Talas, Issyk-Kul and Chui oblasts and the administratively distinct city of Bishkek.

every community. Before we can separate the northern and southern migrant streams, we must realize that several factors cloud the migration picture in Kyrgyzstan.

First, official statistics by state agencies are taken on aggregate, without clear differentiations by region, and are themselves largely incomplete because no formal documentation is required of a migrant upon leaving the country. The Ministry of Labor, Unemployment and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic places at 300,000 the number of Kyrgyz citizens currently working abroad (Interview 43). However, official statistics are hampered by the undocumented nature of these movements, leading other experts to figure that over half a million or up to 600,000 migrant workers (Marat 2009) go abroad each year. These figures present the absence of nearly 12% of the Kyrgyz population (Ratha 2008), which accounts for over a third of the working age population (Sarygulov 2005). Given the circular patterns of migration in Kyrgyzstan, the current emigrant stock does not represent recent returnees, so the number of people engaging in external labor migration far exceeds the yearly departure. Some estimate that over 1.3 million has migrated in search of work internally or outside the country (Elebaeva 2004).

Secondly, external labor migration is part of a national trend characterized by an exodus of labor resources from rural communities headed towards to urban centers. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the closure of most industrial enterprises, coupled with an unyielding absence of internal or foreign investment into rural areas, households have reinvigorated smallholder agriculture and livestock raising as their primary local strategy against widespread underemployment. Labor migration has emerged as the other viable alternative. However, migration out of the country is not the first option. When asked about the likelihood of migrating, respondents in southern oblasts were 4 to 8 times more likely³ to choose internal migration rather than leaving the country (Ergeshbaev 2007, p.11 Table 3). In another village survey of labor migrants in Batken oblast, 45% of those already departed reported going to Bishkek or Osh (Thieme 2008, p.330). Thus, international migration must be understood as part of a larger migratory strategy that is being employed by the Kyrgyz population itself in the face of inadequate social and economic development.

I would like to foreground the importance of the north in the overall migratory phenomenon. The internal migration strategy is mostly geared towards Bishkek, which acts as the economic and cultural hub of the country. Due to the illicit status of internal migrants living on the city's outskirts, and

³ The variation is accounted for by the respondents' age group - with those under 20 years of age showing the greatest desire to leave rural communities. The study substantiates that the desire to leave rural areas, as well as interest in working abroad, diminishes with age.

the prohibitively high costs of formal housing in the city proper, the extra step of external migration is often a further consequence of internal migration. Survey data confirms that residents of Bishkek have a higher propensity for temporary migration abroad, while there is no such correlation in any other part of the country (Agadjanian, Nedoluzhko and Kunskov 2008, p. 637). Furthermore, most returning migrants state their intent to return to Bishkek, rather than to their rural sending-communities of origin⁴ (Thieme 2008). Thus, the northern part of the country, noting the relative affluence of Bishkek and Chui oblast in particular, must be understood as a repository for internal migrants, a destination for returning migrants and a node of interconnectivity among social networks that propitiate the mostly informal external migration flows.

So how many migrants are coming from the North? In the absence of official data, we can use several sources to arrive at a good estimate. The ILO claims that 46% of migrants reported northern oblasts as their place of residence, including 19% of the total from Bishkek (ILO 2009, p. 21, Table 3). Similarly, a representative of RSK Bank (Kyrgyzstan's largest, domestically owned bank) reported the distribution of remittance throughout the country going 60% to the south, 20% to Bishkek and 20% to other northern oblasts (Interview 25). However, due to the internal migration process outlined above, many of those stating Bishkek as their place of residence are likely to claim southern oblasts as their 'home'. The director of Zamandash, the most prominent Kyrgyz diaspora organization, claimed that 30% of migrants living in Russia [the destination for 75% of all external migrants (Lukashova and Mankanbaeva 2009)] are from the north (Interview 7). I believe that from this picture, we can assume that northern migrants make up approximately one third of the roughly half million Kyrgyz now working in Russia and Kazakhstan: about 150,000 people.

As the Kyrgyz population finds itself increasingly on the move, social networks are used to overcome the vulnerabilities that are exposed when households leave behind the mutually-supportive kinship networks found in rural communities. Rather than seek out underdeveloped modes of social support from government or private actors, migrants and their families utilize existing traditions and adapt them to modern realities. Remittances become the main way to mobilize the resources needed in these networks in order to: transition to Bishkek, keep up relations with rural relatives and establish new households and new social identities in the transitory dynamics of modern Kyrgyz life.

Remittance Flows

⁴ Migration back to a rural sending community is rarely expected except when the migrant is the youngest son of the patriarchal household. In which case, he and his wife are obliged to take care of the husband's parents in old age.

In a World Bank report on the highest proportion of remittances relative to GDP Kyrgyzstan ranked fourth in the world, with transfers totaling over \$320 million (IOM 2008), accounting for over a quarter of Kyrgyzstan's GDP (World Bank 2009). According to the Asian Development Bank, the average annual remittance income was \$1,331 per household (ADB 2009), of which they claim \$400 is saved. What is critical in this remittance consumption is that over 70% of remittances (Schmidt & Sagynbekova 2008) are spent before the migrant returns [while other surveys have placed the figure higher, at 85% (Marat 2009)]. However, remittances are not a blank check but part of a powerful transnational relationship that is built upon social reciprocities (Portes 2003). The sheer scale of these figures, and their dispersal throughout every settled area of Kyrgyzstan, means that these small, cooperative decisions have the potential to revitalize many local communities.

Communities worldwide have responded to these processes by stretching webs across space using networks (Castells 1997) or engaging in transnational practices that connect multiple sites, which are exemplified by remittance transfers (Portes & DeWind 2007). Wages from abroad do not simply buy more basic goods, they also reshape the identities of those who spend them (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan 2003) (Freeman 2001). In Kyrgyzstan, these identities are still built up through ceremonies based on communal feasting and gift exchange. Survey data has shown that migrant-sending households have twice as high a propensity to spend their income on ritual ceremonies as non-remittance-receiving households (Ibragimova 2008). The reason given in the report to explain the propensity to spend on ceremonies is a desire to "receive blessings from relatives or make sacrifice so that their family members overseas were successful in work" (Ibragimova 2009, p. 59). Celebrations to commemorate the beginning or end of a migrant's journey in order to attract good fortune (*kuday*) are common, but *tulu*, as this type of ceremony is called, is only one component of a robust gift-exchange system in Kyrgyzstan, and hardly the most resource-intensive. A well-executed report by the OSCE on Kyrgyz labor migration notes that "the tradition of organizing large scale feasts in order to mark joyful and tragic events exist from ancient times, but these celebrations became richer and larger given the use of migrant remittances" (Lukashova and Makanbaeva 2009, p. 53). This investment in feasts and ceremonies based on life-cycle events, calling upon reciprocal exchange within social networks, is what I am calling broadly the '*toi* economy'.

Remittance Embeddedness

What my exploratory research on remittance-receiving households has shown is that Kyrgyz migrants are in fact very involved in maintaining their investment in the cultural economy of Kyrgyzstan, even if they spend most of the year living and working in Russia. Most striking is that labor migrants

continue to invest in the local '*toi* economy' even if they have taken up citizenship abroad and are uncertain of their plans to return. The main question I set out to answer is why migrants are continuing to invest in feasts, communal gatherings and gifting in rural, urban and semi-urban communities of northern Kyrgyzstan if they find themselves living as international laborers and consumers. There are several reasons why these practices are still of paramount importance to migrants and to the communities they have left behind.

To conceptualize the process, I would like us to consider the cultural dynamics of remittances in Kyrgyzstan as a seesaw. Remittances form the fulcrum around which this entire dynamic of change is oriented. The modernization of the Kyrgyz economy, the changes it has undergone in the post-Soviet period evident in greater access to cash and mostly Chinese commodities, forms the plank which affects the up and down pressure on cultural norms. On either side, on the seats, we find traditional cultural practices that are being reinvigorated, or we can say going up, and those cultural norms that are being contested or altered – going down. Kyrgyz households are using the opportunities afforded them by the relatively recent remittance flows, bringing an influx capital to nearly every village and town, to invest in local processes and social practices. However, this transnational economic capital is often converted into social or symbolic capital, which holds value in the local economy, not necessarily invested into profit-generating or labor-employing enterprises. My analysis will try not to essentialize Kyrgyz practices to protect some pre-modern cultural aesthetic. The aim is to outline how cultural traditions and social networks based on kinship and locally-derived reciprocity are still critically important vectors through which Kyrgyz households spend their remittances. Before I outline the cultural features that are finding renewed strength in this local economy, I would like to clarify the importance of the '*toi* economy', which may seem insignificant, as it represents less than 10% of total remittance spending (Lukashova and Mankanbaeva 2009, p. 58).

Remittances are used differently depending on the location of the household⁵, though the provision of basic necessities will always be the first priority. The purchase of housing and then a car often comes next. In rural areas, investment in cattle or the yearly purchase of inputs into farming will often be of greater importance than a car. But for all of these tangible investments that seem to exist outside the '*toi* economy' there is often a corollary investment into social capital. The completion of a new house [as well as finishing its roof or starting its foundation], the purchase of an apartment, a car or other expensive consumer goods are all occasions to be commemorated with a feast to which a part, or

⁵ In the *novostroiki*, they are most heavily skewed towards housing, and usually spent, initially, on the purchase of illicitly 'grabbed' land to which their close relatives then move to, and then construction of a home on that property.

the entirety, of one's social network is invited. What should also be made clear is that there are no firm rules for these norms, and *tois* should be accepted as flexible and variable according to local practices in the different parts of the country. *Tois* can be condensed, so that several important items or occasions are celebrated together. When a family does not have sufficient means, the *toi* can be postponed or cancelled altogether. In fact, illness and poor health to any close family member will almost always override the need to hold a social event. Medical care notwithstanding, many households want to embed their large purchases into the local '*toi* economy' to be able to incorporate their wider social network into their economic progression.

Apart from festivities tangentially related to large purchases mentioned above, migrants and their families frequently invest remittances **directly** into the *toi* economy. This investiture is not explained by mainstream economic models, but by the logic of reciprocity and the valuation of social and symbolic capital (Mauss 1970). However, as celebrations have become monetized, the capital that used to be offered from relatives in the form of furniture, clothing, cattle, bedding and other goods, as well as in manual labor needed to put on the *toi*, is now increasingly called on in cash. This trend is more pronounced in the urban areas where more of the festivities are held in catering halls and costs are correspondingly higher. Nonetheless, the monetization of gifting even in rural and semi-urban areas is a dominant trend, which dovetails neatly with the increasing flows of remittances Kyrgyzstan has enjoyed in the last decade. Thus, a significant portion of remittances are given directly as cash when their family members living in Kyrgyzstan are obliged to attend *tois*. Yet if migrants can refuse to opt out of the '*toi* economy', why do so many of them have local celebrations alongside large purchases, for life-cycle events that take place in Russia and spend their remittances for the feasts of their relatives? The answer lies in the benefits that arise out of the '*toi* economy'; this is what I see as the upswing of the seesaw.

Remittances reinforce traditions

A primary driver of remittance investment into the '*toi* economy' is the inferior social position that Kyrgyz migrants are subjected to outside their home country, specifically when living in the Russian Federation. They are considered primarily as economic inputs who are similar enough culturally to fill a demographic deficiency. Tragically, in Moscow and St. Petersburg, they are even seen through a xenophobic and racist lens, stripping them of basic human rights, dignity and safety (Marat 2009). Consequently, migrants construct "alternative epistemological frames within an existing repertoire of symbols and meanings" (Rankin 2001, p.50) which already exists for them in Kyrgyzstan. Instead of mutely accepting the subordinate social position that is afforded them in the global cities of the

postcolonial labor market, they stubbornly construct new identities tied to local practices. Thus, migrants come back to Kyrgyzstan to great praise and effusive appreciation from those they have supported. The money they have given out to their families is paid back in the acquisition of symbolic capital.

Most of the migrants' social universe is aware of the expenditures made on the part of the migrant through their remittance-receiving household. Especially when they conduct large *tois*, such as weddings, we are witness to the fashioning of an alternative personal identity from the one they face in the host country. Upon their return, migrants stand to gain a lot of psychological support and encouragement. As they make the rounds of minor gift giving and participate in local celebrations they are praised lavishly as a '*maladetz*' or '*ananayin*' and enjoy the prestigious designation of being successful members of the local community⁶.

Aside from the symbolic capital, which is accorded in the form of prestige and praise, migrants can also count on being paid back materially. A critical arena of reciprocity is childcare. A widespread phenomenon involves parents of migrants taking care of the grandchildren left behind, for which remittances are frequently called upon. But even for families living in Russia, the first steps of a child, a circumcision or other major event, will often have a concomitant celebration back in Kyrgyzstan. This is especially true for weddings, for which migrants will almost invariably have a *toi* in the sending-community. When a migrant comes back to Kyrgyzstan to have a triumphant wedding celebration or commemorate their child's progression, they are coming to be paid back for all of the outlays they made directly and indirectly through their remittance-recipients⁷.

I will add that the '*toi* economy' is also a crucial source of networking that encourages further migration. Not only are the celebrations, extravagant feasts and well-built homes of successful migrants visual and material stimulus for potential migrants, the reciprocity created in gifting makes it easier to ask for favors and get connections to work abroad. *Tois* act as hubs for connecting with possibly distant relatives who can later help them find a job. In my research, almost every migrant found a job through relatives or close friends, with whom they invariably broke bread with at some prior *toi*. If someone is not invited to a *toi*, it is seen as a rupture in the relationship: after which connections for finding work abroad would be unlikely. Because private employment agencies and government-run offices are

⁶ This symbolic capital can backfire, as some migrants will cease returning frequently or not return at all when their migration has been unsuccessful, because they are ashamed of not adequately displaying their merits.

⁷ Gifts are seen as coming from households, not from individuals (Werner 1997), so any remittance-supported gifts given by the relative living in Kyrgyzstan must be regifted with an equivalent value, whether the other family has remittances or not.

almost insignificant sources of job creation, the social capital built through the 'toi economy' propels the cumulative causation that has steadily increased the number of migrants working abroad since 2004. As a result, the 'toi economy', which has existed for generations as a way of maintaining close ties between semi-nomadic kin groups, is finding its structures adapted and repurposed for the modern population movements that have sent a substantial portion of Kyrgyzstan beyond its borders.

Cultural down swing

While feasts and their attendant gifts have been used to strengthen traditional social practices, they have also opened up disjunctures that allow remittances to be used in ways that break apart spaces of subordination in Kyrgyz society - thus pulling down on the seesaw of cultural norms. In my research, these new cultural opportunities are often afforded to women who face an imposing social obligation under the patriarchy of Kyrgyz household dynamics. Once Kyrgyz women marry, they leave their natal household, and often the village or even oblast where they have lived their whole lives. They join the new patrilineal household of their husband as the lowest-ranking adult member. The '*snaha*' is then subject to the demands of the female head of household and can return infrequently, and only for short periods of time, to see her relatives. In light of the prevalence of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, combined with high unemployment and pervasive alcoholism, many young Kyrgyz women may find themselves trapped in undesired relationships. If they choose to leave a troubled marriage, they then face shame (*ujat*) which prevents them from returning to their communities of origin. However, I have come across instances in which remittances, or the act of migration itself, obviates the subordination experienced by Kyrgyz women. A single mother can buy an apartment for herself in Bishkek, or a divorced sister of a migrant can build a new home for herself and her children in another village. The women claim that this would not have been possible without transnational opportunities.

This is possible in Kyrgyzstan for several reasons. First, the migrant stream in Kyrgyzstan is more gender-balanced than in neighboring Uzbekistan and vastly more accessible for Kyrgyz than Tajik women. It is common for Kyrgyz women to work abroad, and they can often evade kidnapping simply by leaving the location where such an abrogation of their rights would occur. Second, some families would rather see their daughters married off rather than take up labor migration, but the low barriers to exit mean that a young girl can choose to make the decision herself⁸; with the help of her social network, of course. As we can see, some cultural norms are discarded or neglected through active

⁸ This may be more common in the northern sites where I've conducted my research, rather than in the more conservative southern regions, where Islamic practice is more closely adhered to and women may face greater restrictions.

participation in migration and the use of their remittances, allowing new social identities to be realized outside the normally subordinate subject positions offered to young women in undesired patriarchal relationships.

It bears mention that emancipatory opportunities are not available for all subordinate social positions in Kyrgyzstan, even while it may create new opportunities for social groups based on other distinctions such as gender or caste (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, Rankin 2004). Survey data in Kyrgyzstan shows that the poorest quintile of households is the least likely to send migrants abroad (Agadjanian, Nedoluzhko and Kunskov 2008, p. 644). Furthermore, the poorest households are often unable to hold their own *tois* or attend those of others because of ill-health⁹ or general deprivation. In such instances, exclusion from festivities is less shameful than participating empty handed. Unfortunately, disengagement from social networks leaves these households even more distanced from the connections needed to send their family members abroad¹⁰. Thus, the '*toi* economy' may continue to function as a social differentiator that upholds class distinctions, in which wealthy households enjoy greater remuneration in social circuits of reciprocal exchange (Werner 1997). Thus, while local traditions can be broken apart for the emancipation of some groups, they will keep their form and maintain social inequities for others.

Opportunities for Development

I turn now to the opportunities that this fluid assessment of cultural practices tied to remittances offers the Kyrgyz people. Most citizens of Kyrgyzstan feel that they have a poorer quality of life than they did 20 years ago and continuing political instability means that economic rehabilitation is not soon likely to come from the top down. I believe that remittances are of immense economic importance to the country and offer opportunities for self-empowered development. As I have shown above, the transfer of wages earned abroad is often reinvested into social and symbolic capital, which Western market logic often considers a 'waste' (Marat 2009, Interview 32). I concur that there is a glaring absence of remittances being invested into income- and employment-generating enterprises in

⁹ It seems to me that this explanation is offered as the only acceptable reason for failing to meet kin-based, social reciprocities. As a result, unsuccessful migrants also turn to this explanation to explain why their tenure was cut short or why remittances and social participation are less than expected.

¹⁰ Not to mention all of the other benefits that social networks are critical for in Kyrgyzstan such as: access to higher education, adequate healthcare, local job opportunities and access to better mechanical and labor inputs in rural communities (see Sabates-Wheeler 2010 for a good discussion of agricultural labor pooling based on kinship in rural Kyrgyzstan)

Kyrgyzstan¹¹. However, I am not advocating we redirect the money spent on the 'toi economy' be replaced with more 'productive' economic ventures. Apart from several instances of business-savvy remittance recipients, mostly concentrated in Bishkek, the 'toi economy' still provides the best return on investment for many migrants and their families. I argue that these structures should not be disregarded but rather engaged to offer development opportunities for Kyrgyz communities.

There are five reasons why the cultural norms actively employed in the country offer an opportunity for migration-driven development to take root in Kyrgyzstan:

1) Ease of communication

What is unique to this labor migration channel is that travel to Kazakhstan and Russia is visa-free and relatively cheap¹². Initial barriers to trying one's luck on the international labor market are minimal, so migrants often lack concrete remittance plans and eschew formal migration agents. They simply go and see what they can get. Because of the ease of movement, migration tends to be circular and there are strong incentives to maintain networks of mutual support when return is eminent (Newland 2009). Subsequently, information is easily shared between families since phone calls are relatively frequent (most respondents citing at least weekly contact) and visits occur at least yearly¹³. Due to this relatively robust knowledge-sharing framework gaps in information that often impair trust and cooperation in other diasporas are more easily overcome (Carling 2008, p. 1464). Hence, the opportunity for cooperative remittance investment is more favorable than elsewhere.

2) Pre-existing investment in the local economy

As I have explained above, the Kyrgyz migration dynamic exhibits an openness towards the social redistribution of international capital. This transference of economic into cultural and symbolic capital shows the heightened willingness of migrants to invest into their communities. Symbolic capital notwithstanding, I have found a significant number of concrete investments, leading to wealth-generation in local communities. Apart from the prominence of home construction, which has a

¹¹ This can be explained by the bureaucratic maze, rife with corruption, through which entrepreneurs must navigate with minimal hopes of success in order to start any formal business in Kyrgyzstan. As well as underdeveloped business training and entrepreneurial experience, especially in rural areas.

¹² One-way train tickets from Bishkek to Moscow are around \$100 and air-fare is \$200-400 each way. Migrants often live in cramped, unofficial rentals in Russia to keep costs down, while relatives or friends help them in the initial transition period. Thus, costs to entry are minimal and the risks of failure (from deportation, not finding a job or poor health) can be borne by nearly all but the poorest Kyrgyz households.

¹³ Especially now that *patentas* and other documentation – allowing for legal employment for up to 1 year - require reentry into the country for renewal. *Patentas* have been introduced in July 2010 to formalize the work of service sector migrants who are not employed by official businesses: such as nannies, home care attendants and private doormen. It remains to be seen whether these new documents will help ease the uncertainty over documentation that many migrants are constantly in fear of.

redistributive effect in employing laborers in non-migrant households, migrant families have used remittances to:

a) engage in market trading b) open up small shops c) build for-profit communal bath houses (*banyas*) d) buy cattle to sell milk products or for resale and e) provide interest-free loans to relatives.

3) Acceptability of informal lending

Lending money is a common means of financial reciprocity whereby a household feels 'obliged' to lend to another in its social network, to meet unexpected or overwhelming expenditures. However, I interviewed several wealthier families that felt similarly 'compelled' to undertake credit-lending operations on a regular basis because remittances had placed them in an income category above their peers (especially in the *novostroiki* and rural areas where use of micro-credit agencies is still nascent and wracked by exorbitant interest rates). These reluctant lenders complained of the difficulty collecting from neighbors bound only by informal contractual agreements, yet still maintained their operations. Thus, remittances have led to small-scale financial services arising out of preexisting modes of economic relations.

4) Cooperative savings groups

Of particular interest for the prospect of integrating remittances into local development is the practice of cooperative savings groups. These informal organizations are banded around neighborhood proximity, friendship or kin relations and frequently with *odnoklasniki* (classmates of the same local high school). These traditional small gatherings (known alternatively as *sherinay* or *oturush*) often act as a purely social endeavor, where one family prepares a suitable meal for the gathering and rotates the duty on a weekly or monthly basis – while the costs are borne by the group as a whole. However, many households also 'play' *chornaya kasa* (black box), a Soviet holdover. In this social formation, each family will pay-in a predetermined sum that is given to one of the participating households. The families often buy jewelry, a household appliance, or just use the cash for a special purpose. Both of these cooperative schemes are widely in use and universally accepted as a way to make some extraordinary investment. There are concerns over free-rider problems, where some families will opt out after getting their share, but because most cooperatives are small and closely connected, and the sums usually well within the group's means, they are widely enjoyed and adopted. Remittances were involved in less than half of the recorded instances but remittance recipients had no qualms when remittances were involved and the opportunity to embed remittances into similarly structured collaborations seems highly plausible.

5) Accepted history of reshaping cultural norms to modern realities

The '*toi* economy' has easily weathered the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet usage. In fact, the need for connections and social networks is as strong as it was in the Soviet era. More recently, the monetization of gifting in Kyrgyzstan has also shown the resiliency of cultural norms to change. It is now widely accepted that gifts should be given in cash¹⁴. Monetization of gifts has meant that *tois* may often pay back the hosting household and offer a monetary dividend for hosting the event. However, I have never encountered anyone arranging *tois* for profit, because the logic of the enterprise is centered only on building up non-economic capital and collecting the debt of past gifts.

The flexibility of the customs explored above suggests that the same practices can be taken on board development projects. Currently, migrants and their families often lack concrete plans for their future remittances and are content with investing them into the '*toi* economy'. Were new arenas for channeling investments through social networks to arise, I am optimistic that they would be readily adopted into the existing cultural logic of remittance spending.

Conclusion

I have sought to highlight the fluidity and adaptability of the cultural practices of modern Kyrgyzstan as they interface with the increasing mobility of the population and monetization of the economy. Remittances create opportunities to weaken subordinating social practices for some social groups while strengthening traditional norms in others. As such, the '*toi* economy' has already been refashioned in the face of domestic and transnational labor realities. The onus is now on developers and, more importantly, Kyrgyz communities to create avenues for remittance investment that offer cultural and symbolic capital to senders while also paying back financial capital to the community. Migration is not a panacea for economic depression, but the willingness of Kyrgyz migrants to continue investing in their homeland provides encouragement for Kyrgyz communities to improve their own wellbeing in spite of political turmoil and macro-economic uncertainty.

I would like to caution against an overenthusiastic reading of my analysis, which would set the '*toi* economy' as the inviolable path to the rejuvenation of the Kyrgyz economy. Social networks maintained through gifts, feasts and voluntary labor create an expectation not of return, but of indebtedness (Werner 1998). This indebtedness seems to be most often an amorphous social insurance with no specific purpose other than to keep up close ties with the kinship community. The '*toi* economy' has been employed to bond together families dispersed by the transfer of women to their

¹⁴ Especially in urban and wealthier rural networks where dollars are preferred to local *som*.

husband's patrilineal household, but is now used to keep transnational networks fastened to a locally-formed epistemology. While these reciprocities of debt keep families emotionally close, while their members are far apart, there is no predetermined agenda of mutual benefit inherent in these systems; in the minds of their participants they exist for a social, not an economic, purpose. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown that the '*toi* economy' forms a core logic to the way in which a third of Kyrgyzstan's GDP enters the local economy and inevitably guides critical economic investment.

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