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The Taste of Place and The Nature of Trust:
Natural and Heritage Foods in Post-Socialist Kazakhstan

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Anthropology

by

Julia Elizabeth Mc Lean

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Taste of Place and the Nature of Trust:
Natural and Heritage Foods in Post-Socialist Kazakhstan

by

Julia Elizabeth Mc Lean

Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Nancy Levine, Chair

This paper explores Almaty city dwellers' use of two place-based descriptors—*zhailau* and ecologically clean—to describe rurally-sourced natural and heritage foods in urban Kazakhstan. In contemporary Kazakhstan, as among other industrial and post-industrial societies, ideas surrounding rurally sourced foods extend beyond questions of urban-industrial hygiene or quality control, and point more powerfully to the perceived moralities instilled in foods sourced from different places. These places may be concrete geographic locales, or more abstract rural idylls; nevertheless, in either sense, they are felt to imbue food with valuable indigenous nature-cultures otherwise lacking in everyday urban life. Building upon four months of fieldwork in Almaty and surrounding suburbs, I analyze the experiences of individuals living in and strongly identifying with a cosmopolitan hub, yet actively engaged with rural spaces and livelihoods. I argue that *zhailau* and ecologically clean foods embody a sense of inalienability and community felt to be

missing from commercially produced or imported counterparts, and serve as comestible vehicles of rural, primordial nature-cultures amidst the formative powers of Soviet socialism and contemporary transnationalism.

The thesis of Julia Elizabeth Mc Lean is approved.

Akhil Gupta

Yunxiang Yan

Nancy Levine, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

For Khaulan

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Introduction

This paper explores the value assigned to rurally-sourced craft and heritage foods in post-colonial Kazakhstan. In contemporary Kazakhstan, as among other post-industrializing societies, ideas surrounding rurally-sourced foods extend beyond questions of urban-industrial hygiene or quality control, and point more powerfully to the perceived moralities instilled in foods sourced from different places. These places may be concrete geographic locales, or as I argue here, more abstract rural idylls—nevertheless, in either sense, they are felt to imbue food with valuable indigenous nature-cultures otherwise lacking in everyday urban life. Here, I focus specifically on city dwellers’ use of two place-based descriptors—*zhailau* (Kaz., summer pasture) and *ekologicheskij chistaya* (Rus., ecologically clean)—to describe rurally-sourced foods in urban Kazakhstan. *Zhailau* refers to alpine pastureland, and the movement of Kazakh nomadic pastoralists from winter village to summer grazing grounds. Ecologically clean is a newer, scientifically-oriented term, found across the Soviet Union, referring to the perceived purity of the landscape from which a food is sourced. Both terms, although separate in their meanings, allude to common themes surrounding authenticity, cultural sovereignty, place and place-making in contemporary Kazakhstan.

Rurally-sourced foods acquire value through their perceived ability to showcase elements distinctive to a landscape. These elements extend beyond the material conditions of a particular locale—the soil, topography, microclimate, or microbiota—and include the social customs and food production processes of the people dwelling within a place. Craft and heritage foods are material, sensuous, shareable, and most importantly edible nature-cultures (Haraway 1998; Latour 1993) through which consumers access “the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within [a place], and in doing so, have left something of themselves” there (Ingold 2000:189). These foods make visible both the form of the object’s production and its attendant social relations;

they are imbued with and are the bearers of the social identities of their makers (Mauss 1990[1925]; Weiner 1992). Through the production and consumption of craft and heritage foods, individuals create, maintain, and publicly display their relationships both with one another, and with the land itself.

I suggest that by eating zhailau and ecologically clean foods, felt to embody nature-cultures missing or scarce in urban contexts, residents of Almaty too dwell in the rural space, and cultivate a sense of Kazakhness in a cosmopolitan, industrialized setting. I do not claim that attitudes toward rural or historical Kazakh life are unambiguously positive; neither do I suggest that Almaty residents seek to consume a majority rurally-sourced diet. Far from it, industrially-distributed and imported foods constitute a significant and socially-valuable portion of everyday meals. Nevertheless, over the course of my fieldwork, I noted among Almaty consumers the popularity of and value assigned to rurally-sourced foods, and to the nourishing effects of time spent in nature more broadly. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which zhailau and ecologically clean foods acquire and create meaning among urban consumers living in Almaty. In a young post-socialist nation, experiencing simultaneous ethnic revival and transnational social and economic expansion, why are these rural foods desirable to urban Kazakhs?

Methods and Methodologies

Although this is an urban ethnography, it is often an ethnography of urban-rural relations, analyzing the experiences of individuals living in and strongly identifying with a cosmopolitan hub, yet actively engaged with rural spaces and livelihoods. The study is based upon three months of ethnographic fieldwork in Almaty, a city of 1.2 million residents located in the foothills of the Trans-Ili Alatau mountain range, within the Tian Shan Mountains, which extend into Kyrgyzstan and China. The mountains, visible from all corners of the city, provide a striking backdrop to an

industrial skyline. To the south of the city, reachable within fifteen to twenty minutes' drive, lies the Ile-Alatau National Park, a protected nature area featuring thick forests, alpine meadows, glacial lakes and many wild and edible plants, including the feral apples for which the city of Almaty (formerly Alma-Ata, or “Father of Apples”) was named. The park is largely undeveloped and unoccupied, though outside the protected area lies a series of small settlements scattered along the hillside. From a purely physical standpoint, the change of atmosphere at the city's edge is striking. The air is bright and clean, the scent of the earth verdant, and the roads quiet.

Arriving mid-winter, and leaving as soon as the snow began to melt, my observations and the extent of my movement were shaped significantly by the seasonality of my visit. Fieldwork took place in the time of year least hospitable to visit rural areas or spend significant time outdoors, and I was initially unsure of whether, or in what capacity, city residents might venture into the mountains amid the cold and snow. Yet, despite heavy snowfall, frigid temperatures, and frosty roadways, I immediately noticed the extent to which many city dwellers continued to devote their recreational time to long walks and picnics in the nearby mountains throughout the winter. I had entered the field with an interest in food, heritage, and post-colonialism, but it was this feature of winter living—this determination to engage with the rural in any season—that focused my attention on the profound importance of nature and rurality in everyday life.

Nearby Shymbulak ski resort and Medeu ice rink are busy throughout the winter months, yet the mountains beyond these hubs remain cloaked in snow, their trails sometimes hidden beneath waist-deep icy mounds. Still, residents were keen to exit the city and spend time among the mountains, both at the weekend and in moments of free time during the work week. At times we followed well-stomped trails and sledding hills; on more than one occasion, we simply waded through fresh powder in search of a remembered path. Interlocutors primarily cited clean air as a motive to leave their urban environs. The valley in which Almaty is located functions as a bowl of

sorts, holding pollution in a grey-brown cloud of car exhaust and smoke from burning coal and refuse. Many days over the course of my fieldwork, the air smelled and tasted of chemicals. Outside this bowl, however, the air is crisp and fresh. City residents were vocal about this distinction, and many sought refuge in nature to soothe their bodies from the city's ills whenever possible. Some undertook arduous hikes toward a specific destination; more often, though, we drove partway to our destination, meandered toward a particularly scenic spot, picnicked, and meandered home. Along the way, we might splash our faces with the pure water from a mountain stream, or eat dried and frozen berries or apples from summer branches which had withstood the snowfall.

Much of my initial network of interlocutors was formed along these walks. Time in the mountains functioned as both a social and therapeutic activity, as friends and acquaintances met in nature to warm one another's hands along the trail, or if we had begun picnicking, catch up over a warm fire, a bite to eat, and several cups of tea. In a point repeated by interlocutors, these types of activities—breathing clean air, drinking mountain water, and sharing food in the forest with both friends and strangers alike—were restorative not only to the body, but also the spirit. They cultivated a distinct type of person, what interlocutors often referred to as “mountain people.” “Mountain people” were distinguishable by their moral character, descriptions of which included terms such as pure, generous, modest, honest, humble, kind, empathetic, and peaceful. These qualities were thought to be inculcated in and by the rural space, and placed at risk by the urban. Interlocutors described the city as a necessary but dangerous phenomenon, a place of positive economic and intellectual growth, yet also of jealousy, narcissism, and deceit. Hence the importance of exiting this sphere and restoring oneself in nature, whose healing qualities could dispel the vices, both physical and symbolic, of urban life.

Significantly, I noted how much of the same language interlocutors used to describe “mountain people” was also, in separate conversations, broadly applied to so-called “village people,” “real Kazakhs,” “old Kazakhs,” “the ancients,” and nomads (Rus. *kochevniki*, Kaz. *köşpendiler*). Taken together, this overlap suggested a widely perceived difference between rural and urban moralities, wherein rural persons and places are associated with an authenticity, humanity, and essential Kazakhness thought to be missing from contemporary urban life. Nature, unlike cities, was seemingly perceived as stable and primordial, safe-keeper and restorer of both the integrity of individual persons and of Kazakh cultural heritage.

My interlocutors come from a diverse set of social and economic backgrounds. They range in age from twenty to seventy-five. Approximately two thirds were born and raised in Almaty; others relocated to Almaty in pursuit of education or employment, but were raised in other, smaller towns and villages scattered across the north, south, and east of the country. The majority are ethnically Kazakh, but non-ethnic Kazakhstanis were often quick to note that their families had lived in Kazakhstan for multiple generations. Most adults are well-educated professionals, who work in journalism, media studies, corporate management, and university and secondary school education. Younger individuals are either presently in university or are recent graduates with career interests in topics such as literature, biology, agricultural management, psychology, and graphic design. Specific economic circumstances among interlocutors vary considerably according to whether they are retired, work in the public or private sector, or have steady employment.

My relationships with interlocutors shifted among guest researcher, interested foreigner, or ‘adopted daughter’ into the household. I introduced myself most often as an ethnographer or cultural historian. Conversations took place primarily in Russian, oftentimes mixed in English as individuals who had studied the language were keen to practice. When interlocutors preferred to speak in Kazakh, I relied on friends to translate. My data collection, while certainly targeted, came

together largely spontaneously as a complex of fragments of conversation and inter-locking scenarios, which as they accumulated began to point to broader patterns and themes. I relied primarily on participant observation, organic conversation, and thorough notation of the material culture around me. I spent much of my time trekking in the mountains, chatting with interlocutors while we walked and observing their interactions with other hikers along the trail. Many weekdays were devoted to shopping for and preparing family meals with female friends, as well as assisting with housework. I also spent significant time at the Almaty green bazaar, where I spoke with vendors and observed their interactions with local shoppers. In addition to time spent in the city center, I stayed approximately three days each week with a forester and his family, living between two households—one at the edge of Almaty, and the other, a farm, in the Ile-Alatau National Park, a roughly half hour drive outside city limits.

Background

Contemporary Kazakhs trace their heritage to a confederation of nomadic tribes of Turkic, Mongol, and Hun origins, believed to have come together as a delineated ethno-national group in the early 16th century in the Zhetisu (Seven Rivers) region of present-day southeastern Kazakhstan. The Kazakh Khanate encompassed the territories from the Caspian Sea in the west to the northwestern border of China in the east; and from the south Siberian Russian border in the north to the Syr Darya River in the south. Kazakhs maintained a mobile pastoral way of life. Moving in established seasonal patterns between winter and summer camps, the everyday lives of Central Asian pastoralists were structured around the care and keeping of livestock, complemented by small scale agriculture and foraging practices. The array of practices prescribed by mobile pastoralism served to maintain social relations within and between communities (Olcott 1998; Masanov 1995; Khazanov 1983; Tolybekov 1971). While I do not suggest that this ecological

strategy was monolithic—it adapted and readapted variously to accommodate changing political, ideological, and environmental conditions through time—I do seek to emphasize its importance as the central practice by which historical Kazakh culture generated, articulated, and transformed, and around which Kazakhs continue to conceptualize their own ethnonational heritage in the present day.

The Soviet sedentarization and collectivization campaigns of the 1930s, however, marked a sharp turn in Kazakh history, profoundly altering the mobile pastoral way of life and initiating a rapid reorientation toward Soviet ethno-nationhood (Hirsch 2005; Olcott 1995). Of all political measures launched in Kazakhstan under socialism, Cynthia Werner argues, “the severe economic and political strategies launched by Stalin in the 1930s by far have had the greatest impact on Kazak (sic) household and inter-household structures” (1997:86). While the first collectivized farms opened in Kazakhstan in 1921, the shift to a grain-based economy began in earnest in 1930. As part of the first Five Year Plan (1928-1932), the Kazakh Central Committee decreed the sedentarization of the nomads and their incorporation into collective farms, previously populated primarily by Russian peasants and Soviet deportees. By 1933, ninety-five percent of the rural population had been collectivized. Over the course of the next twenty-five years, despite devastating famine and the virtual collapse of the livestock sector, collectivized farming would continue to grow, repurposing "under-utilized" pastures as farmland across Kazakhstan (Pianciola 2004). While animal husbandry would resume in the 1950s, the social and economic structure of these ventures were profoundly different than those organized prior to Soviet incorporation (Khazanov 2012). Meanwhile, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, approximately six million Soviet displacements, of an estimated 120 ethnic groups, were relocated to Kazakh territories to participate in emergent agriculture, industrial enterprises, research organizations, and military

operations. By 1939, the Kazakhs, constituting less than forty percent of total population, were rendered a minority in their own homeland (Dave 2004).

Though Soviet rulers' plans were indeed comprehensive, it is important to emphasize that they never sought to erase all signs of historical Kazakh identity. Rather, as Soviet nationality policy progressed under Stalin, the development of individual 'national cultures' became a central concern to each Soviet republic. Each officially recognized Soviet ethno-nation was required to define its Great Traditions, to be protected, perfected, or if necessary invented by specially designated institutions (Hirsch 2005, 1997; Slezniak 1994). The Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic was thus defined not only territorially, but also by its religion, language, material culture, and agro-economic structure, carefully groomed according to Marxist-Leninist frameworks. These efforts were designed to simultaneously valorize national identities, while also discrediting historical patterns of collective identity, to be replaced by universalistic Soviet values. The Stalinist slogan "nationalist in form, socialist in content" captured this dynamic, in which cultural expressions were permitted and indeed encouraged so long as they furthered state interests.

Among these national features, nomadic pastoralism, although no longer a living tradition under socialism, remained a defining element of the Kazakh ethno-national concept. However, the ideological lens through which this cultural heritage was interpreted changed. Soviet leaders classified pre-revolutionary Kazakh society as "patriarchal-tribal" or "patriarchal-feudal" in the Marxist scheme of evolutionary development. Nomadic pastoralism, as foundation to this social structure, was deemed backward and anti-modern. Though some material and folkloric elements of nomadism persisted—and indeed livestock herding, as an economic livelihood, continued, albeit in sedentarized, collectivized form—Kazakhstan's nomadic legacy was reframed as an archaic way of life to be progressed beyond.

The Soviet city, meanwhile, was deliberately crafted as a distinct cultural universe, characterized by social and economic strategies discontinuous from those utilized in the countryside (Verdery 1991; Buckley 1998; Ledeneva 1998; c.f. Anagnost 1997). State strategies to ‘civilize’ through urbanization entailed both the mass migration of citizens from countryside to city, as well as the transformation of rural spaces into urban centers (Anderson 2006). Factors such as language, education, residence permits, and resource allocation cultivated a strong sense of entitlement among city residents, and further cultivated a sense of difference between urban and rural Kazakh citizens. Rural spaces, conversely, were both practically and symbolically presented as backward and uncivilized on the one hand, and culturally authentic and unspoiled on the other. Socialist state-sponsored folk festivals served to reify this distinction, and were used to engage in identity politics and reproductions of cultural hierarchies that differentiated rural (traditional, indigenous) and urban (modern, cosmopolitan) citizens (c.f. Ching and Creed 1997; Creed 2011). Nevertheless, as rapid urbanization occurred under state socialism, many urban Kazakhs continued to spend summers in the native villages of their parents and grandparents, and maintained relationships with relatives living in rural areas. The majority of my friends and acquaintances living in Almaty recalled these days wistfully, and often described their experiences outside the city as pivotal to their proper upbringing. It was in the village, I was told time and again, that they “learned how to be Kazakh.”

Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Kazakhs have found themselves caught in a profoundly ambivalent position: as simultaneous bearers of a post-colonial ethno-nationalist revival, and as citizens of a globalizing world. Contestatory histories and reinvigorated symbols, rituals, and moral codes have sought to reach over the Soviet period, and to imbue the present order with a sense of stability and primordial continuity. These processes are complicated by equally powerful discourses advocating cosmopolitanism and global economic engagement as

fundamental to contemporary Kazakhness (Sarsembayev 1999; Schatz 2004, 2000; Suny 2001). The countryside continues to be broadly regarded as the “cradle” of traditional Kazakh culture, first jeopardized by 20th century Soviet state practices, and since independence increasingly at risk of further destabilization due to the urban-oriented economic agenda of the sovereign Kazakhstani government (Yessenova 2005).

Soviet-era discourses, meanwhile, retain significant interpretive power in capturing perceived post-colonial continuities or disjunctures in political and economic viability, notions of morality, and relationships with heritage and progress (Beissinger 1993; Kuzio 2002; Yessenova 2005, 2002). As observed by Grant, although Soviet cultural constructions were often dismissed as artificial impositions from above, these ideas were nevertheless integrated into local cultural vocabularies, and remain symbolically productive in contemporary contexts (1995:8). Attitudes toward rural lifeways “have been sustained and refashioned in the aftermath of Socialism,” Saulesh Yessenova argues, such that, from the perspectives of many urban Kazakhs, rural peoples and places are regarded as “autochthonous—those who belong to ‘different ‘times’ as well as places” (2005:678).

Moral Geographies, Places, and Place-Making

Nature and the rural space, as accessed and experienced through zhailau and ecologically clean foods, is a flexible concept encompassing both geographically locatable locales and—perhaps more potently—imagined, symbolic states of being. I am guided, therefore, in this analysis by notions of moral geography, place, and place-making. Places are products of ordinary engagement with one’s surroundings (Basso 1996), often informed by ideas about dwelling, wherein the self is understood an unfolding of relations within one’s environment (Ingold 2000). Not simply known or felt, places are something people do (de Certeau et. al 2000; Rose 1999). They are discursively

constructed nodes of relations, which signal particular social modalities (Appadurai 1988; Harvey 1996, 1989). Places evoke and organize a web of ideas, images, practices, relations, sentiments, and semantic categories, through which people construct and constitute their understandings of lived experience (Williams 1977:128-135). Importantly, notions of place are neither precise nor stable; and indeed, by foregrounding human actions, interactions, and perceptions in the creation of a seemingly singular ‘place’ we allow for multiple places, or constructs, to be co-present. Places must be understood as both multivocal, exhibiting a range of contested and contradictory representations and imaginings; and multilocal, framed by horizons that are not only local, but also regional, national, and even global (Rodman 1992:646-47). Any place-based sense of locality and centeredness intrinsically coexists with an equal sense of peripherality, or of places and processes located beyond oneself and one’s everyday interactions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

It is this sense of peripherality, of dwelling and belonging both within and vastly outside, and of the moral sentiments attached, that leads us to the notion of moral geography. A moral geography is “a spatial imaginary through which people locate themselves and others as moral persons,” such that particular people, practices, and objects belong in certain spaces, places, and landscapes, yet not in others (Thomas 2002:369). Moral geographies illuminate the interdependence of geographical constructs such as space, place, landscape, territory, boundary, and movement with the sociological/cultural constructs of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so forth (Creswell 2005). Within the term, morality implies the ambiguous and variable senses of goodness, virtue, or lack thereof attributed to particular people or places. Geography indicates the spatial links and orientations between these peoples and places. Taken together, theories of moral geography explore the sense of ideological value people ascribe to certain places vis-a-vis their own lives. Further, ‘moral geography’ harkens to the term ‘moral economy’ (Scott 1985; Thompson 1971) to denote a wider idea of economy than one driven solely

by the self-interested individual. Moral geographies, like moral economies, are shaped by the desires and obligations that people feel toward one another. The ways in which individuals navigate these perceived moralities gives shape to their subjectivities, and imaginings of possible pasts or futures in various social contexts (Thomas 2002; Rasmussen 2008). What sorts of moral ‘places’ or modes of dwelling, then, do residents of urban Almaty create or engage with through rurally-sourced foods? How, by consuming zhailau and ecologically clean craft and heritage food, do they themselves dwell in the rural space from an urban setting, and why?

The Taste of Zhailau

In the collective imaginary, the bucolic ideal of ‘zhailau’ has grown to represent Kazakhness in perhaps its purest form, untouched by Soviet or contemporary influences. The word lacks a Russian equivalent. Kazakh dictionary attempts to grasp the meaning of the term variously describe zhailau as: summer pasture; seasonal movement toward summer pasture; to dwell within a place; or to arrange, organize, and make right. Zhailau also features in many idiomatic phrases, wherein its means to be on friendly or good terms; to live in harmony; or to miss, feel lonely, or yearn¹. Drawing upon descriptions by urban Almaty residents, zhailau is figured as an unspoiled paradise of sorts, a locus amoenus where Kazakhs live peacefully with one another amid verdant mountain meadows and below clear, bright blue skies. In a conversation with Maria and Nurlan, Maria spoke of zhailau as “fresh, spacious, unlimited. We drink qymys² and are together. For city people [zhailau is] a rest, in nature, away from artificial.” Nurlan nodded, continuing: “To Kazakh people, zhailau is a symbol of good land for sheep and other cattle. And if sheep and other cattle are main riches of Kazakh people, that’s why zhailau is the symbol of good land for good life.”

¹ *Sozdik* Kazakh to Russian dictionary, retrieved 10 April 2015.

² A beverage of fermented mare’s milk, a staple component of the traditional Central Asian steppe diet.

Such descriptions are supported and reinforced by bucolic images of zhailau ubiquitously displayed throughout urban centers: from television, billboard, and print advertisements, to bus stop decor, to food and product labelling, to mass-produced artwork sold by street vendors surrounding the green bazaar. Around the spring holiday of Nauruz in particular, a dominant image in festival media was that of vast pasturelands dappled with yurts (*Kaz. kīiz üyler*), surrounded by smiling families cheerfully completing chores or relaxing together in the soft grass. To speak of zhailau is to speak of goodness, amity, and plenty³. Deeply rooted in the nomadic history of the nation, zhailau is more than a place or an economic activity, but is rather a comprehensive way of being in and of the world, understood as uniquely and emblematically Kazakh.

I first heard the word zhailau used specifically to describe not a place, but a particular taste, in a conversation with Saule, sipping tea after dinner and discussing the days errands, including a trip to a nearby grocery store. I recounted to Saule how, earlier that day, I visited a high-end supermarket and noticed that they had pre-packaged qurt for sale. Qurt is a pebble-shaped cheese of nearly indefinite storability, prepared from curds which are heavily salted and molded into balls or ovoids, then air-dried until fully desiccated. The resulting product is very hard, dense, and sharply flavored. It may be snacked-upon as is, or crumbled and eaten with other dishes, including tea. In Almaty, qurt is most commonly sold by the kilo at the green bazaar, as well as by street vendors carrying any range of products from pickled vegetables to old books and Soviet-era trinkets. The Aimanbayevs, who kept their own cows, made it themselves each summer. Thus to see qurt, seemingly the humblest of foods, dressed up in at the grocery in neat little robin's egg blue boxes, adorned with ornate gold leaf labelling, and costing nearly four times the price of its

³ Jeanne Feaux de la Croix (2011) has also described zhailau in Kyrgyzstan (*Kyr. jailoo*) from a rural perspective, where summertime zhailau epitomizes both “the good life and the hard life,” as a nexus of food, wealth, health, and beauty, coupled with significant, and growing, economic and environmental challenges.

domestic counterpart, struck me as incongruous. Listening to my observation, Saule looked at me blankly.

J: I was just...surprised, that's all. It's qurt, of all things! At the nicest grocery store in town! I mean...who would buy it there?

S: It's a cheese. [bewilderedly] Grocery stores sell cheese.

I explained myself. How could such a simple homespun product, readily available at the bazaar or from any number of street peddlers—some of whom were selling directly outside this very supermarket—be profitable in stores? And at such an inflated price! Who would buy it?

S: [pausing] Ahhh. I see. Why not buy from the old woman?

J: Yes, why not buy it from an old woman?

S: Yes, this is better. Always from old woman.

I asked if she had she ever tried supermarket qurt.

S: No, no, no. [shaking head emphatically] It doesn't taste good. Factory qurt tastes like a factory. You cannot taste zhailau.

I asked her to elaborate—what does factory qurt taste like, and what did she mean by 'taste zhailau'? Factory qurt had no complexity of flavor, she explained:

S: It is simple, one taste, no grass, no wind...maybe plastic, maybe the metal inside the factory? Or...I don't know, it tastes like the factory. It all tastes the same. No, no, it's no good at all.

J: Then why do people buy it?

S: Maybe if you are rich, maybe you have money, maybe you are lazy... [voice trailing] Maybe these people buy at the supermarket... I don't know these people, but no I do not buy. I don't like it. You should always buy from an old woman. Or make at home.

J: And good qurt? What is good qurt?

S: Good qurt, the taste...the taste is zhailau...It should taste like the animals...The animals, and the grass! The grass they eat, Julia, they eat, and the flowers, and the wind when it is dry. You know qurt? On the earth in the wind?

She recalled the drying process, wherein qurt is laid on a blanket in the sun to dry.

S: Like this. And good qurt, it must be made in a woman's hands. A woman should hold it with her hands.

Here she mimicked the molding of qurt into round balls, and then to elongated pellets, dimpled with the fingerprints of the cook.

S: This is good qurt.

J: Do qurts from different places taste the same?

S: Oh yes, different! [nodding head emphatically] Yes, the qurt from my home, from Taraz, is different from the qurt here. Very different.

J: Why?

S: Different grass, different climate, I guess. [shrugging] Taraz is desert. [gesturing to the hills outside our window] Now we are in mountains.

I asked her if the difference was profound enough to detect without prompting. If, for example, she were anonymously given Taraz qurt here in Almaty, would she know it was from her hometown?

S: No, no, I cannot... [pausing, then inhaling] But... The old women, they know. My friend's mother, in the village, she knows. [This woman, in her early sixties] can tell you what milk will taste like by looking at it. She can *see*. I can't do that. But she—she can. She can look at a cup of milk and say, 'Oh, this will be sweet'

or ‘oh, this will be sour,’ or this ‘oh, this milk is spoiled.’ She can say ‘this is better milk than that milk.’ And she doesn’t need to taste, doesn’t need to smell, she can see the, look at the milk and she knows. She knows! [giggling] Maybe some day I will know, I don’t know, maybe.

When Saule spoke of the ‘taste of zhailau,’ I noted her word choice—using a term referring not simply to grass or pasture, but instead to a state of being in and of a place. Zhailau taste evokes an emotional response, recollective of a pastoral idyll, in which Kazakhs are imagined to live in balance with one another, with their herds, and with the land itself. Zhailau flavor stems from this landscape—not only the grass, the wind, the sun, the mountains or the desert, but also the people dwelling with it, whose touch is essential to “good qurt”. As Saule emphasized: “good qurt, it must be made in a woman’s hands. A woman should hold it with her hands.” This attention to physical contact and tactility, to the food’s careful formation and sculpture in the hands of its maker, suggests an intimacy, wherein through touch a food acquires some essence of the producer herself. As the producer’s fingers dimple the surface of the cheese, so too is her dwelling imprinted upon the food. By eating zhailau qurt, Almaty residents gain access to a zhailau nature-culture they do not themselves inhabit. Factory qurt, conversely, lacks the social qualities of its zhailau counterpart. Tasting anonymous, mechanized, and artificial, it too is imbued with the character of its production process. Mass-produced qurt appeals only to “rich” or “lazy” people, and is both alienated and alienating from Kazakh sociality.

Notably, the appropriate person to prepare zhailau qurt, according to Saule, was elderly and from a village, a pattern which repeated in Saule’s admiration of her friend’s mother’s milk expertise. Age and rural context granted these women authority as keepers of Kazakh tradition and domestic knowledge. In a separate conversation, several weeks prior, Saule and a friend, Assel, described shepherds who produce zhailau food as “a special type of person to do this work. Not

everyone wants to do it, or can do it. Who understands and wants to be near the animals...like we [the Kazakh people] were before.” People who dwell in the zhailau space are imagined to possess character qualities intrinsic to a Kazakhness unaffected by Soviet or contemporary neoliberal subjectivities. They exist in both a different ‘time’ and place than that in which Saule locates herself. Zhailau lies at the periphery of Saule’s lived reality, knowable and valuable, yet beyond her everyday interactions. She can taste zhailau, but she neither lives it nor, she admits, fully understands it. Nevertheless, by eating foods originating from zhailau contexts, such as homemade qurt, Saule and other urban dwellers can symbolically participate in the zhailau idyll, consuming the zhailau landscape and the moralities within it, and in doing so affirming their connection to Kazakh territories and traditions.

Such discourses also carry a political undertone, as mountain pastures and the foods they produce are conflated with the titular, ethnic Kazakh nationality, potentially at the exclusion of other, in particular non-Turkic, ethnic groups residing in Kazakhstan. Kazakhness is imagined to find its eternal home in the zhailau space; by choosing to eat zhailau-sourced foods such as qurt, milk, meat, and other pastoral products, city dwellers engage with this highly politicized ethno-national subjectivity in a relatively apolitical fashion. As Feaux de la Croix has also argued of *jailoo* and Kyrgyzsness, ethnic Kazakhs’ continued enthusiasm for the zhailau space may be linked to a sense of refuge, “from a predatory state, from cosmopolitan city stresses, moral, environmental—and possibly cultural—‘pollution’” (2014:59). Invocations of pure mountain pasturelands coincide with notions of ethnic nationhood tied to state and territory, in such a way coming to look like a secure, eternal native land.

Ecologically Clean Foods

Discourses and practices surrounding ‘ecologically clean’ (*ekologicheski chistaya*) and natural (*naturalniy*) foods, though not directly associated with Kazakh heritage practices, similarly point to the perceived purity, both physical and symbolic, of the natural landscape and humans’ activity within it. In Almaty, though notions of ‘ecologically clean’ foods are often ambiguous and contradictory in their meanings, collectively they may also be understood as a multi-vocal call for a sense of accountability, environmental stewardship, and social sovereignty in terms of food production and choice in the post-socialist space.

Importantly, the term “ecologically clean” is not limited to Kazakhstan, and indeed has cropped up across the former Soviet Union to describe foods harvested by hand, preferably in rural areas, minimally if at all processed, and circulated among social networks, or at very least in hand-to-hand marketplace exchanges (c.f. Blumberg 2014 on Lithuania; Caldwell 2011, 2007 on Russia; Jung 2014 on Bulgaria; Gabriel 2005 on Russia). The term in some ways resembles North American and Western European “organic” and “Slow Food” movements. However, as suggested by Melissa Caldwell, that which distinguishes “ecologically clean” from other natural food trends is the sense of geographic regionalism felt to be imbued and transmitted by ecologically clean foods. Grown in national soils and circulated among co-nationals, these foods upon ingestion are felt by consumers to both create and constitute bodies politic (Gabriel 2005; Caldwell 2007).

As explained to me by interlocutors in Almaty, ‘ecologically clean’ foods are those which come from unindustrialized areas, far from urban refuse and polluted air or water, and—in a point specifically reiterated by vendors and fellow shoppers—no history of Soviet nuclear testing⁴. They have presumably never been exposed to chemical fertilizers, additives, preservatives, or other

⁴ Soviet nuclear testing became a potent rallying point for the Kazakh nationalist movement in the late 1980s, peaking with the formation of the “Nevada-Semipalatinsk” movement in 1989. Located in northeastern Kazakhstan, Semipalatinsk (now called Semei) was the site of the first Soviet nuclear bomb; between 1949 and 1989, the Soviet Union conducted 456 nuclear tests here, 116 of them above-ground.

human interferences, and instead flourish in the vitality of nature alone. When I asked Maria what constituted an ecologically clean place, she explained: “Bees like it, other animals like it, so we know it is good.” Maria specifically placed her trust in the quality assessment of animals, living in nature away from human activity, not in that of humans themselves.

I never encountered ‘ecologically clean’ foods in supermarkets; they were exclusively sold at the bazaar, in one-to-one, personal transactions. Yet even at the bazaar, ‘ecologically clean’ products were rarely labelled as such. Vegetables and meats raised in nearby villages, and in particular apert apples from the surrounding Ile-Alatau mountain range, were presumed by shoppers to qualify as ecologically clean, often with little to no suggestion from vendors. Fruits and vegetables might be evaluated by the dust clinging to their skins, a slightly mottled appearance, small size, or sweet fragrance; and meats and dairy products by their village or region of origin. Most importantly, their rural, domestic origin, wherever that origin might be, seemed to be enough, so long as the product was neither factory-produced nor imported from farther afield than neighboring Kyrgyzstan. In this sense, these foods’ definition skirted interlocutors’ semantic definitions of the areas from which ecologically clean foods could be sourced. Rather, simply the geographical proximity and familiarity of the soils from which the food came, and the personal nature of the transaction—hand-to-hand, usually with a familiar seller—granted a sense of safety, authenticity, and ‘cleanliness’ to the food. The personalized nature of the production and sale of these foods not only made them more trustworthy, but also instilled in them with qualities felt to be lacking in industrially-produced foods or those sold anonymously in supermarkets.

Regions in Kazakhstan thought to be more ecologically clean than others also oftentimes overlap with regions assumed to be more ‘authentically Kazakh’. Shopping at the bazaar, I inventoried foods named for particular places, and noticed among them a consistent dominance of Altai-sourced products, which upon further inquiry were emphasized to be ecologically clean.

Their counterparts—both those hailing from other regions in Kazakhstan and others named only for their content, not their origin—fetched a significantly lower price tag. Altai-sourced honeys and herbal medicinals were especially sought-after. When I asked friends, vendors, and fellow shoppers, both ethnically Kazakh and Russian, why Altai products were so popular, they explained that northeastern Kazakhstan’s Altai was an ‘ecologically clean’ area. Unlike the west, it was untouched by oil industry; unlike the north, it had never undergone nuclear testing or radiation; and unlike the south and southeast, it was undeveloped industrially. For this reason, foods sourced from Altai were regarded as more healthful and nourishing than those from other areas. In separate conversations, unrelated to food practices, the Altai was also repeatedly referenced as a “good place to study tradition,” “where real Kazakhs live,” “different from us, not so Russified,” and “close to Mongolia”—itself a recurring theme in pervasive references to “freedom” and cultural loss under Soviet rule. The Altai is envisioned not only as a safe food-bearing landscape, but also as a haven of Kazakh tradition, pure in both a physical and a symbolic sense. By eating foods sourced from Altai, consumers nourish themselves both physically and spiritually amid the perceived risks of urban, industrial, globally interconnected life. Altai is imagined as physically and morally pristine and primordial; foods sourced from here embody and transport “clean,” pre-industrial nature-cultures to urban Almaty.

Outside the urban marketplace, living with a rural family who produced ecologically clean milk, my understanding of what such designations might mean was complicated further still. The Aimanbayev family maintained a small herd of cows high in the mountains outside the city, at the periphery of Ile-Alatau National Park. The family sold this milk among a small informal network of friends and neighbors, who specifically sought ecologically clean dairy sourced from mountain cows. Whereas urban toxins and factory additives were a persistent concern for city dwellers, this rurally-produced milk was trusted to be wholesome and free of impurities. The grass the

Aimanbayevs' cows ate and the air they breathed was beyond the reach of urban pollution, and as a result the milk they produced was highly valued as nutritionally and qualitatively superior, both by the family itself and their small but stable consumer base. When I first met Bahargul Aimanbayeva, she warmly served me fresh cream, butter, and qurt from her small herd, smiling as she proudly pointed out the golden yellow color of the milk, indicative of lush mountain pasture. Bahargul's daughter Aida also attributed her good health, thick hair, and slim figure to the "natural" foods she ate "where the air is clean." Her family's milk, she told me, was "good, with lots of vitamins, not like city chemicals." I was surprised, then, to see how one day Bahargul heated the fresh milk to sterilize it in preparation for sale. Onto the fire she dumped a small bin of candy wrappers, cookie packaging, rubber bands, and plastic bags. A trail of lime-green smoke, stinking of burning plastic, rose up from the fire and enveloped the uncovered pan of milk. Unperturbed, Bahargul stirred the milk and walked away to occupy herself with other chores. This, the milk so valued by the family and its customers for its pure and unpolluted mountain origin! Bahargul noticed my dismay and asked what was wrong. The plastic chemicals, I explained, pointing to the smoke. Bahargul seemed taken aback by my distress. She shrugged her shoulders. "*Nu ladna,*" she clucked, ah well, waving me away. "Don't worry, it's usual. Our milk is good milk." Aida echoed this unconcern. When I recounted the story to other friends and acquaintances, they too shrugged impassively. The milk, they told me, was still ecologically clean.

This seemingly illogical disconnect, wherein a food valued specifically because it hadn't been exposed to city pollution was prepared unproblematically over a flame of urban refuse, shed light upon the symbolic ideology behind ecologically clean and natural food discourses. In the eyes of the Aimanbayevs and their customers, the mountain milk remained clean and pure, despite

clear exposure to urban toxins⁵. Adding to the milk's trustworthiness and value was the type of network in which it was produced and circulated. Produced by a family for a family, with excess sold within a stable network of customers, the mountain milk carried with it an inherent sociality. The milk's healthfulness and value stemmed from the place and peoples by which it was produced; its handling after initial production seemingly mattered little. Imbued with the nourishing properties of mountain grass and rural livelihoods, the milk was regarded as both uncorrupted and incorruptible by urban vices.

A Taste of Place in Post-Socialist Kazakhstan

Be it Taraz or Almaty qurt, Altai honey, or local mountain milk—foods and the places from which they come “tell us who and what we are in terms of where we are (as well as where we are not)” (Casey 1993:xv). By eating foods imbued with the specific flavors of a regional ecosystem and imagined moralities of its inhabitants, individuals locate and stabilize themselves within a moral geography. Zhailau foods link Kazakhs with their mobile pastoral heritage, and by extension with a shared sense of national identity firmly rooted in the landscape. Ecologically clean foods symbolically link the eater to nature and the land itself, stable and secure amidst shifting political and economic regimes, and that which has and presumably will sustain its inhabitants in perpetuity. The ways in which interlocutors speak of ‘zhailau’ and ‘ecologically clean’ places suggest that these locales exist in an original, incorrupt, autochthonous state, idyllic and unspoiled by a complex and fretful modernity. Rural nature-cultures, and the foods they produce, are imagined as panaceas for the nutritional, social, and moral travails of modern, industrialized urban life. Evoking

⁵ This is not to say that no one is aware of physical air pollution and its harmful effects on food. Hiking outside of Almaty, both Timur and Nurlan were keenly aware of how far we were from the city center, and whether or not frozen fruits on the trees around us were “clean to eat.” Only at a certain elevation and radius from the city center did we begin to eat from the trees. Likewise, Aida suffered eczema on some patches of skin which she attributed to chemical additives in city food. She emphasized the importance of mountain air and mountain meat to soothe the rashes.

a nostalgia for an aestheticized, preindustrial past, itself continuously reinvented and reimagined according to present concerns, zhailau and ecologically clean foods embody a sense of authenticity, inalienability, spirituality, and community felt to be missing from commercially produced or imported counterparts. They serve as comestible vehicles of rural, primordial nature-cultures amidst the formative powers of Soviet socialism and contemporary transnationalism.

Values and meanings assigned to rurally-sourced craft or heritage foods in post-Soviet contexts have been interpreted as reflective of a pervasive concern over shifting national values, especially notions of economic morality, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the radical transformation of former Soviet republics since the early 1990s (Caldwell 2007, 2011; Jung 2014, 2009; Mincyte 2014, 2009). During the early years of transition, Melissa Caldwell observes, former Soviet citizens feared “that neoliberal capitalism, with its emphasis on anonymous market forces and single commodity exchanges, rather than continuous cycles of gift exchange that characterized state socialist economies, would destroy people’s relationships with each other” (2007:53-54; c.f. Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Nazpary 2002). In sovereign Kazakhstan, I suggest, discourses and practices surrounding zhailau and ecologically clean foods are too a legacy of this anxiety surrounding hegemonic transition. They furthermore articulate with broader social patterns within Kazakhstan to reach over the Soviet colonial past to grasp and reconstruct a sovereign sense of Kazakhness in the contemporary moment. To post-Soviet citizens accustomed to an intrusive government, the sense of intimacy and autonomy attributed to the natural space fosters a powerful sense of personal freedom and independence, distant and secure from the reaches of state. This ethos is imbued in and transmitted by foods sourced from natural spaces (cf. Caldwell 2011).

By consciously and deliberately linking craft and heritage foods and food practices to specific places and ways of life, individuals and communities reassert cultural distinctiveness in response to what they perceive to be increasingly entangled and homogenizing transnational

cultural and economic engagements. Zhailau and ecologically clean foods appeal to the egalitarian ethos of economic activity and everyday life under Soviet socialism, the predictability of which has crumbled since independence. They are also entangled in post-colonial nationalisms, resonating with a widespread nostalgia for the spirit of sociality which Kazakhs associate with a pre-Soviet nomadic-pastoral past, in which communities were imagined to live in rhythm with nature, unfettered by settled urban life. By consuming foods from imagined Kazakh idylls, consumers too dwell in these symbolic spaces, regardless of their actual residence or economic livelihood. In doing so, they cultivate a sense of authenticity, stability, and primordial sovereignty rooted in the natural landscape.

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