Ethnogenesis and the Construction of Ethnic Identities

Every morning in Bishkek’s Ala-Too Square, soldiers stand guard next to the Kyrgyz flag while speakers blare out the national anthem. On the cold and rainy morning of 15 May 2003, President Askar Akaev, high-ranking politicians and academics attended a special flag-raising ceremony. This ceremony marked the beginning of a two-day international conference on Kyrgyz statehood. After the flag had been raised and the soldiers had taken their guard, the politicians and delegates attending the conference went to the Kyrgyz National University. Here, the President unveiled a new statue of the eleventh-century poet and philosopher Jusup Balasagyn in front of the main entrance to the university. Balasagyn was most noted for his book *Kutadgu Bilig*, or *Beneficent Knowledge*, in 1069, which outlined laws and moral codes within an Islamic context. In his speech at the unveiling, Akaev praised Balasagyn, calling him: ‘a great fellow countryman [zemlyak], a well-known compatriot, one of the symbolic representatives of our ancient culture, [and] one of the symbols of our whole society’ (Akaev 2003f: 336). Akaev also noted that: ‘The majestic figure of Jusup Balasagyn – a sage and state-builder [gosudarstvennik] – finds new importance and new scope in the thousand-year memory of our people’ (Akaev 2003f: 340). The President argued that by linking the present with figures of the past, he was supporting a national revival, ‘when a new epoch of power calls our people to form a national spirituality [dukhovnost’], in the context of universal human values. Today, it is important to return to the spiritual wealth of the past, which is our great cultural heritage’ (Akaev 2003f: 337).

At the same time, Akaev added another dimension to the relationship with Balasagyn. He stated that Balasagyn was a leader of a Kyrgyz uruu, Chigilei, which today is argued to be the ancient name of the uruu Cherik. In his closing remarks, the President announced: ‘By opening the monument to Jusup Balasagyn, we, his descendents, carry out the sacred duty to the great son of Kyrgyzstan’ (Akaev 2003f: 342). The implication was that the continual goal must be to improve and strengthen the ‘state’ and to focus on the moral development of the people by drawing
on (secular) social values elaborated through the government’s account of history. This representation places Balasagyn within a sanýra of the Cherik uruu, but also as part of an officially sanctioned genealogy of the Kyrgyz people. This latter ascription promotes him as a national hero, whose actions and moral virtues should be emulated in the present. In short, the government appropriated the sanýra to narrate the formation of the state.

These actions and morals are encompassed in Akaev’s use of the Russian term ‘dukhovnost’, which translates into English as ‘spirituality’. Here, dukhovnost does not describe a set of religious beliefs, but rather a set of morals connected to the maintenance of the Kyrgyz ethnic values, as Akaev described them through the seven precepts he formulated from his reading of the Manas epos (Chapter 6). Morality, as Caroline Humphrey (1997: 25) has described, is an ‘evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities’. Akaev’s use of dukhovnost recalls the strength and importance of the ancestors’ moral values which acted as a guide for the ‘Kyrgyz people’. This association of strong moral virtues attached to a genealogy of national heroes develops a notion of ‘exemplary figures’ (Humphrey 1997). By focusing on the positive characteristics of an idealized past, however, he also points to a lack of morals in the present, which threatens the unity of the people and the strength of the state.

GENEALOGY AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

Akaev’s constructed genealogy clearly links the Kyrgyz people of today and Balasagyn. This is not following an individual descent line, but is a general charter for the nation and state through prominent figures, which highlights their collected values. The line drawn between the people and concept of the nation and state reveals the traces of the discursive formation of the relationships it creates. In this manner, genealogy can serve as a methodological tool. In this, I follow David Owen’s (1994: 221) definition of genealogy as ‘[a] historical reconstruction of how we have become what we are which acts as an immanent critique of what we are and which is directed towards the practical achievement of human autonomy’. The methodological use of genealogy attempts to uncover the ideologies behind our conception of ourselves, as was Owen’s concern with focusing on the history of philosophical movements, and, in particular, tracing Immanuel Kant’s concept of maturity and his intellectual legacy in modernity. I employ this methodology as a study of the present, which traces the discursive elements employed to construct contemporary images of our identities.

There are two issues which represent the basic concerns of this methodology. First, genealogy is used to identify and analyse the a priori assumptions of our social life. The values and beliefs which form the basic concepts a person’s identity are developed through experiences which are internalized and contribute to the formation of