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### Moving people and the fabric of society: the power of felt through time and place

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## Moving people and the fabric of society: the power of felt through time and place

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This article explores the relationship between continuity and change in Central Asian domestic felt textile production. In order to set this in the context of a pastoralist perspective, the paper draws on regional practices such as oral poetry and movement through landscape, as well as human–environment relations in order to reveal the dynamic and creative improvisatory process through which local textile production can be understood. In so doing, it examines whether Euro-American anthropology’s rejection of a ‘static’ notion of ‘tradition’ for one of hybridity (reflecting a critique of its own nostalgia), has inadvertently moved us away from a focus on the historical narratives of those we study, which is often at odds with their own concerns. The author argues that for ‘moving people’, it is the dynamics of orality, human–environment relations and the practice (rather than the evidence) of material culture that elucidates our understanding of the relationship between continuity and change. The power of felt is thus reflected in the apparently ephemeral, non-enduring, aspects of these practices, which are what makes them endure, continuously bringing the past into being for new cultural futures.

**Keywords:** felt textiles; continuity; change; improvisation; poetry; environment

### Introduction

My interest in movement, power and place in Central Asia centres on the domestic felt textile production of nomadic pastoralists across the region. This textile production reflects a particular dynamic, or approach to movement, which is manifest in people’s approach to land, animals, time and their own sense of being within their environment. I suggest that for many people in this region, their view of what changes and what is stable reflects an understanding of movement and stasis that for many centuries characterized the needs of nomadic pastoralism. This is a view of change which, having been constituted through a longstanding and continuously recreated set of relationships with the environment, is illustrated not only by domestic textile production, but also through other localized practices such as place making and the inhabitation of pastures and villages, as well as through trade and oral poetry.

I am not arguing that local textile imagery is the kind of ‘relic’ or ‘survival’ of past practices that Soviet academics such as Snesev proposed characterized Central Asian belief systems (already critiqued by European anthropologists such as Kandiyoti) (Snesev 1957 [1974], Kandiyoti 2002). Nor am I suggesting that only past practices contribute to local people’s view of the world. Nevertheless, the past is important and of interest both to people in this region and to anthropologists who work with them. Indeed, as Vitebsky argues, while in the ‘moral time of socialism’ it was desirable to sever one’s present and future from one’s past, this is an ideology which is now being redressed (Vitebsky 2002, p. 187). So, understanding the processes through

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which ideas about the past hold resonance and are reconstituted for those who live in the region now is of value if we want to understand how Central Asian societies have developed and changed during Russian conquest, Soviet rule and entry into the global economy.

My fieldwork among Kyrgyz herders has taken place mainly in mountain regions of the Ala Too in Kyrgyzstan and in Jyrgatal in Tajikistan throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The changes from socialism to post-socialism took place throughout the times I spent in the region, and these have formed the on-going, changing context of my study. As part of this research, I conducted an apprenticeship with three female Kyrgyz felt makers and did archival research on felt textiles in museums in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and St Petersburg. My most recent projects have been an ethno-historical study of nomadic felts across the whole Eurasian region, from the Caucasus to Japan, for which I have had to try to understand the broader historical processes at work, as well as a current research project into the Kyrgyz fashion movement. These research projects have pushed me to try to understand how nomadic societies in the Eurasian region develop, change and regenerate cultural practices through time, and to consider how current debates about the global and the local, and consumption and enskilment might be brought to bear on processes such as social and cultural development (Miller 1983).

As I deepened my study of Eurasian felts, what struck me in visual terms was the consistency of techniques, designs and motifs over a very large timescale, from before 500BCE to the present. One cannot presume that people from the past think or act in the same ways or for the same reasons as they do today, but it seems remarkable, given that Central Asian pastoral nomadism is a mobile and fluid process, that this aspect of their material culture has had such resilience. The paradox of continuity of cultural practices emerging through a lifestyle of apparent fluidity and change is heightened when one considers the on-going attempts during the Soviet period to transform the ‘traditional’ into the ‘modern’, and eradicate cultural practices linked to belief (Snesarev 1957 [1974]). More recent debates raised by Hannerz and others about creolization and hybridity have further emphasized the processual nature of ‘traditional’ practices and how people constantly draw others’ cultural practices into their own projects. Implicitly, therefore, one might assume that no form of material culture would remain stable, or even retain integrity over time (Hannerz 1987).

My aim in this paper is to address this paradox, and to attempt to incorporate a Central Asian pastoral perspective as well as a European academic one. I hope to achieve this by showing how, in Central Asian pastoralism, movement through both time and land is combined with a particular relationship with the environment to form a context for the creation and re-creation of domestically produced felt textiles.

### **The history of Eurasian felt**

Felt is a non-woven textile, created through knowledge of the properties of wool, which result in raw fleece shrinking and bonding together to form cloth when subject to hot water and friction. Felt making involves no use of bonding agents, nor glue, nor spun or woven thread. For Central Asian pastoralists, felt is a signally important textile, using only sheep’s fleece, available in large quantities from their herds – an easy-to-transport technology. It provides fabric for coverings and containers, insulation from cold and wind and even waterproofing (Bunn 2010a). It has been used over millennia for herders’ tents, floor coverings, animal trappings, bags and clothing by nomadic herders from the Caucasus to Mongolia (Herodotus 1954, Sima Qian 1961, Gryaznov 1969) (Figure 1).

Regional groups who still make or use felt today (albeit far less than in the past), include Turkmen, Uyghur, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Mongols, as well as related groups from the Caucasus. There is an integrity of regional techniques and styles among the felt of pastoralists



Figure 1. Kyrgyz *betelgen shyrdak*

of this region, but there are also specific techniques and styles which unite some groups but not others. For example, Turkmen and Uyghur (despite their present historical and distant geographical separation) both use a pressed-felt technique to make similar floor felts and have a well-developed, similar pattern construction which could arguably be traced to their common history in the Oghuz Turks of the sixth to the eighth centuries (Bunn 2010a); Kyrgyz and Kazakhs use applied techniques to form very similar patterns which some historians suggest is linked to their common presence in the Kipchak confederacy of the ninth and tenth centuries (Ivanov 1959). Uzbek felt designs lie somewhere between the two, perhaps attributable to historical links during the Golden Horde period; Mongol felts use almost no colour, and only one applied technique – quilting – which gives their felt a uniquely monochrome, rhythmically textured quality.

Known production of felt in the region dates back 4,000 years to archaeological discoveries of felt clothing found in Xinjiang, but evidence of a specifically nomadic production of felt dates to around 500 BCE from the frozen *kurgans* (mound tombs) of Pazyryk in South Siberia, excavated by Rudenko in the 1920s (Wayland Barber 1999, Rudenko 1970, Bunn 2010a). That the contents of the tombs belonged to nomadic pastoralists is clearly indicated by the number of horse burials, sheep bones, animal husbandry equipment and associated artefacts therein (Gryaznov 1969, Rudenko 1970). The finest quality of felt at Pazyryk was similar to that used in today's Kyrgyz and Kazakh *kalpak* hats. Techniques and motifs still encountered on felt artefacts in the region today are clearly evident. These include the use of couched-on contrasting-coloured cords for motif outlines (used today in Caucasian and most Turkic Central Asian felts) and the more unusual positive and negative mosaic-work used on the felt *shabracks* (saddlecloths) (also common in contemporary Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Caucasian felt).

In terms of pattern, Pazyryk cruciform chevron motifs evoke Kyrgyz and Kazakh *tört muyuz* (four rams' horn) patterns; stylized antler patterns recall amulet motifs on Kyrgyz and Kazakh felt tents. The heart transforming into ram's horn motif is almost identical to the *jürök* (heart) pattern used on today's Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Caucasian felts. The *umai* (mother goddess) pattern used on Pazyryk saddlecloths is also still common on Kyrgyz and Kazakh felts. Such patterns have been noted on Turkic felts since the late nineteenth century, but are also illustrated

in eighth-century AD Uyghur manuscript paintings, in later Persian miniatures and on Ottoman felts (Bunn 2010a).

Quilting, taken to a fine art by Mongolian pastoralists, was not used on the Pazyryk felts, and is first found on felt from the Noin-Ula tombs of the Xiongnu in Mongolia, five centuries after Pazyryk. An initial comparison of the Noin-Ula felts with those from Pazyryk has suggested to historians concerned with ethnic 'origins' that the similarity of the monochrome quilted Xiongnu felts to those made by today's Mongols provides 'evidence' that they may have been their direct antecedents (Farkas 1992).

The above examples are very provocative to historians or ethnographers who are interested in cultural links, or thinking about 'cultural transmission' in a linear kind of way, as if such techniques and designs are communicated from the past to the present through intentional design. Such historical relationships were frequently posited by Soviet ethnographers and historians, such as Ivanov, who first drew attention to the visual coherence between Turkic and Caucasian felt motifs, linking it to possible 'ethnogenesis' of Turkic groups such as Kyrgyz and Kazakhs in the Kipchak confederacy of the ninth and tenth centuries CE (Ivanov 1959). But more contemporary examples also raise similar questions. Why do groups of Kalmyks, separated from the main Mongol nation and living near the Caspian Sea, continue to make felt in the Mongol style, and Altai Kazakhs in Mongolia retain the Kazakh use of colour and cut-out felt, despite long-distance separation from the main Kazakh nation?

Because material culture in particular provides visual 'evidence' of this kind, it is very tempting to try to make links between cultural artefacts without accounting for the people who made and used them, and to assume this kind of cultural knowledge is conveyed almost like genetic material, as 'parcels' of information which are handed down, or are passed through, specific family lines intentionally, reproducing a kind of static traditional product or cultural form. However, at the foundations of such a view is an *a priori* approach to the social creation and recreation of cultural practices, which assumes that the form or evidence has been there from the start, and that participants intentionally and overtly convey it through replication. In fact, such forms more commonly come into being through people making cultural artefacts in the company of others, each participant bringing their different histories and knowledge to the occasion in a more informal and improvisatory process (Hallam and Ingold 2007).

These kinds of questions can be addressed in relation to Eurasian domestic felt making by turning to the context of movement and animal husbandry within which such textile activities take place.

### **Movement and Eurasian pastoralists**

'A real Kyrgyz man', said Devlet, 'does not grow things or live in the village. A real Kyrgyz man wants to live in the mountains, ride a horse, and keep sheep, taking them to the pastures.' (Fieldnotes, Ysyk-Köl, 1995)

This remark, made in a casual conversation, might be dismissed as manifesting a classic romantic Central Asian discourse of nomadism, rooted in the past. But I would argue that such comments, spoken sincerely, rather reflect a common historical, social and environmental sense of what it is to be a pastoralist in this region. They also demonstrate the importance of movement and animals for the way many local people still think about their lives, histories and existence, despite the on-going changes of the past 100 or more years.

The Kyrgyz and Kazakh word *köçmön* means literally 'moving people' and stems from the root word *köç* meaning to roam, to travel or migrate. From this root word comes many other words associated with movement such as *köç* (caravan), *köçüü* (moving), *köçbashta* (to

start to migrate) and *köchö* (street). The Russian word for nomad is *kochevnik* and also stems from this Turkic root word. While some scholars of the region have argued that mobility is not a necessary or significant feature of pastoralism, and that it may be better to concentrate upon economic aspects of animal husbandry, avoiding the term ‘nomadism’ altogether (Salzman 1980, pp. 1–7), in the Central Asian case I would argue that movement has been foundational to the pastoralist way of life and comprises a core feature of how pastoralists in the region describe their former lifestyle. As such, ‘nomadism’ remains a useful term both to use and to explore.

Moreover, until recently, movement was not seen by many Central Asian pastoralists as a deviation from a sedentary norm; it was rather the basis for a qualitatively different mode of life. That migration is another way of living in the world, rather than one adopted when the ‘default’ position of being settled is not possible, is crucial for understanding the importance of movement for people in this region. The history of experience of movement for Central Asian nomads has made them attuned to its significance on many levels: practical, social, environmental and in terms of belief. Khazanov, writing of Central Asian nomads, reiterates this point: ‘Despite its poverty and other drawbacks, nomadic life is thought by nomads themselves and by many onlookers to have one important advantage . . . “quality of life”’ (Khazanov 1983, p. 1).

For Central Asian pastoralists in general, movement has had a range of manifestations, including historical migration for conquest and war, for animal husbandry, for hunting, for trade such as the Silk Road trade, for pilgrimage, as refugees (most recently from the Russian conquest, the Soviet regime and inter-ethnic violence), and as migrant labour. These different kinds of movement can reveal a range of understandings about change, stability and transition. While my focus is on historical migrations and those linked to animal husbandry and pilgrimage, all aspects of migrations are relevant to this discussion.

### **Historical migrations: movement through time**

Historically, the great migrations of peoples such as the Sakha, Ancient Türks, Uyghur and Mongols across Eurasia may seem like repeated ebbs, flows and reconfigurations of moving people. Since pastoral nomadism began in the region, groups have expanded, moved out from their pasture heartlands, formed multi-ethnic khanates, attracted others to their banners and extended their influence across large regions of the steppe, then withdrawn (Mackerras 1990, Sinor 1990, Humphrey 2002, p. 262). The coherent visual legacy of ‘animal-style’ art from 500BCE, left by early nomads on stones and on all manner of material culture from the Ukraine to Mongolia, including the Pazyryk material, has been taken by many scholars as evidence of the first nomadic ‘empire’ with unified cultural practices (Lubo-Lesnichenko 1989, Bunn 2010a). The Mongol Empire led by Chingiz Khan comprised a series of migrations over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which at one time extended from Hungary to China, and included Mongol-, Turkic- and Tungus-speaking people (Humphrey 2002, p. 262). The most recent Kazakh expansion of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries was the last nomadic khanate in the region (Akiner 1995).

Such khanates drew in many allied groups, and were often led by charismatic leaders, some of whom gave their name to the dominant group, as illustrated by the example of Uzbek Khan. When they later disbanded and the smaller component groups dispersed, in some cases new dynasties would form, while other groups carried on as before, and yet others became absorbed into thriving neighbours’ clans as distant ‘relatives’, incorporated into their future genealogies. Thus, although ethnic groups in the region today retain strong, quite fixed senses of their history and identity, contained in systematically set out genealogies, or *sanjyra*, the dynamic of pastoral

nomadic group formation in this region is actually very fluid, involving changing allegiances and continued re-alignments. It has emerged and been re-generated through such historical processes over a long period, a dynamic Abramzon describes as akin to 'crystallization' (1971, p. 46).

This historical dynamic provokes many initial questions about what underlies the apparent coherence of material culture such as domestic felt-textile production, and challenges the historical framework through which European, Russian and American scholars have assumed that such cultural forms are 'transmitted' or 'passed down', associating them with particular family branches, clans or ethnic groups, transmitted through one, usually male, line. If ethnic groups have regrouped and realigned through history, the stability of the regional felt textile tradition is all the more remarkable.

This framework is further challenged by the way that felt making is conducted and communicated through lived domestic practice. Among nomadic pastoralists in this region (although not among settled people) felt is made by women who bring their mothers' repertoires of techniques and motifs with them when they come to live in their husbands' homes in these patrilocal societies. The path of communication of technique and pattern is thus through women who move location when they marry, rather than through a fixed male line (Bunn 1995/6, 2000).

As women make felt, they work in groups, sharing patterns, borrowing other women's techniques, copying motifs they like from within a wider repertoire, rather than aiming to duplicate exactly any previous felt design. While the lead felt makers frequently have an idea of the designs they are going to draw, they tend to begin with the sense of a pattern within a whole, rather than exact reproduction of a previous piece. Skilled women never use stencils or pattern outlines, and nothing is ever directly copied, unless for felts made for recently introduced 'catalogues' distributed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Figure 2).

An acknowledged expert who can both draw and cut the patterns and who practises good stitching techniques will lead the proceedings, and people of all abilities may take part, following a similar working process to that of apprenticeship: younger and less experienced stitchers learning through observation and imitation rather than direct instruction. There is no precise plan in relation to available materials, with colours often running out before the patterns are complete, and new shades being introduced. When stitching such felts together, women work in groups, each one working on specific sections. Thus, the process of drawing and sewing felt between generations of felt-making people is conducted through practice and in groups. Women produce felt together, drawing on a repertoire of cultural motifs and techniques, exchanging aesthetic influences acquired through a lifetime's practice, including patterns learned from their mothers, in their new marriage-homes, or simply from passing acquaintances. This is more a process of cultural improvisation than simple replication or transmission of specified cultural forms (Bunn 1995/6, 2000, Hallam and Ingold 2007).

In relation to the intergenerational communication of felt making, it is also the case that it is not exclusively women who make felt, although this is common practice. In some cases, sons make felt and husbands and brothers also contribute ideas and make suggestions, as well as give their physical assistance with the practical work. Moreover, not all daughters learn from their mothers: some simply do not, or choose not, to acquire the necessary skill. The local learning context is one where the child has to show a wish to learn, an aptitude and an interest; no one is made to do this. But if they express interest, they will be shown. In the Soviet period and since, with more women going out to work and spending less time at home, fewer women have made felt, or shown their daughters how to make it, and so felt is less frequently made, illustrating how easy it is for one small historical change of working practice to create rapid changes in material culture and local skills and knowledge. However, contemporary developments such as tourist art and NGO export of goods through catalogues also illustrate how such cultural practices continue to be adapted and re-emerge in new forms.

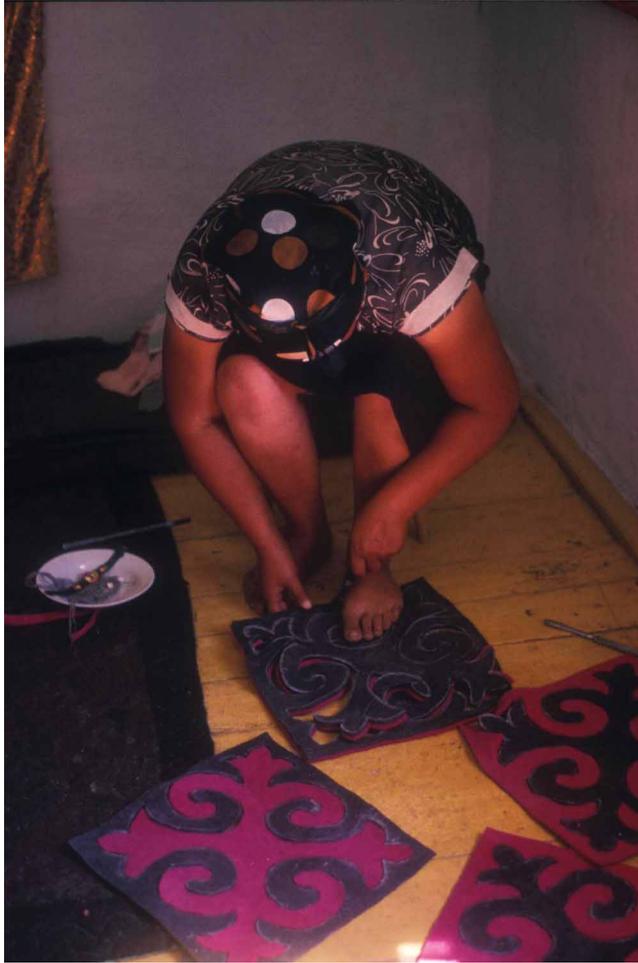


Figure 2. K. cutting out *shyrdak* positive and negative pattern motifs

Thus the domestic pathway for the creation and re-creation of Eurasian felt traditions cannot be a simple reproduction of forms and techniques through a linear historical pathway, since such practices emerge in the production and creation of felts between groups, rather than any system of exact cultural transmission. Here forms and techniques come into being in the activity itself, and while drawing on both tacit and embodied knowledge and many historical references, this knowledge is continuously regenerated through regional population dynamics as well as through marriage and the movement of women.

The above discussion and the practices of people themselves both seem to confirm a process of cultural improvisation, illustrating the continuing flow and dynamic nature of cultural projects. They also reveal how more classical, static ideas about cultural transmission, tied to an idea of reproduction and repetition of old forms, are flawed. However, these conclusions do not explain the on-going coherence of both techniques and motifs, nor why the art of groups such as Uyghur and Turkmen appear to remain consistent through both time and space.

Part of the answer, I think, can be seen in the process through which people have conveyed their own histories and cultural ideas in general, orally through epic poems, songs, riddles and

tales. In such forms of communicating the past, poets continually sing and re-sing their stories to local audiences who themselves may intervene and contribute elements which confirm or restructure the poem. These epics, told in different forms across the region are told and retold, but not simply reproduced. Rather, epics from each region contain episodes of stories told in other regions through which the intertwining nature of each group's past is revealed. The singer draws on elements and episodes pertinent to his own group's history, and does not aim to exactly reproduce the words of former poets, but rather uses the key elements, themes and phrasing to assist each newly created and improvised version of the poem (Bunn 2000, Lord 1960). Thus, in Central Asian epic poetry, no two performances of an epic are the same, even when sung by the same singer. Rather than reproducing old forms exactly, he is improvising around known and evocative themes that bear strongly on the past.

The continued retelling of oral epics brings a particular relationship between myth and history. A story that is told is not to be copied down, but remembered, told, and retold in different ways. The advantage of the oral tradition over the written word is that it can grow and change as the singer and audiences themselves change. However, while new elements and episodes may be added for new audiences and dignitaries present, many are 'one-offs', while others, whether key historical events or important resonant themes such as birth stories, battles or feasts remain, so that what the audience engages with is not simply the past, but a pattern of the past moving forward. In the process, histories such as the Kyrgyz epic, *Manas*, through being recreated, are conveyed in such a way that myth and history are not mutually exclusive (Hatto 1977, 1979, 1990, Lord 1960, Wasilewska 1997, Dubuisson 2010).

Thus, the first Kyrgyz President Akayev announced that the *Manas* epic contained all that the fledgling Kyrgyz state needed for its new ideology. The tales such epics tell seem timeless, as if the events they recount happened only yesterday, and as if their insights for how life should be lived remain forever undiminished. Thus one could argue that epics tell the greater story about being human anywhere. They carry details of history and lifestyle, but they also reveal social and cultural patterns, working on many levels and with multiple meanings. They have an aesthetic and a form, a rhythm and content which conveys this bigger picture in a resonant way, which is why they are neither just history, nor tales, nor genealogies, but epic poems.

I would argue that this improvisatory, multi-layered approach to history can be equally applied to the cultural recreation of nomadic felt textiles in this region, and goes some way to account for their consistency and coherence through time. Felt patterns, like elements of epics, are resources that people can draw upon, redraw and reconfigure. The core aesthetic, forms and imagery remain consistent, although not necessarily constant, even if adapting for changes in lifestyle.

Furthermore, if the performance of epics or making of new felts is improvisatory, then themes in epics and motifs or patterns in felt can be perceived as matrices: elements of timelessness through which the performance or creative act of making are given form, hence their apparent stability of form. For while apparently 'stable' and interpreted as markers for linear time, they are in fact a means of crystallizing or synthesizing the 'larger picture' of epic time or dynamic textile composition. This incorporates both historical references and the socio-poetic connectedness people perceive exists between themselves, the animals they work with and their mountain environment. Their scope as matrices lies in their potential for variation, their resonance on many levels to history, memory making, social relations, work with animals and their coming into being through acts of performance or creative making. Thus the timelessness of such designs equates with a dynamic mobility, which through improvisatory performance is generated in the kind of liminal space which anthropologists such as Turner (1990) also equate with ritual.

The resonance of such forms, however, is not just manifest in their dynamic improvisatory aspect, but also in their aesthetic. This, I argue, lies in the special relationship that is engendered between people and land by moving through it, and the specific relationship with nature that this way of working with animals entails.

### **Movement through land**

The most familiar kind of movement through land for pastoralists in the region today is the annual migration: the cyclical round of moving animals from winter pastures to spring and summer pastures and back to winter pastures again. This kind of movement is completely bound up with the requirements of local animal husbandry and the need for pasture on which to graze. My fieldwork has been among mountain pastoralists in Kyrgyzstan, but steppe migration has many similarities, although it covers greater distances. The move to the *jazdoo*, or spring pastures after winter, is a real uplift for those who move. Animals give birth during this time, so there is much work, but it is also often the time for a feast or celebration. Spring pasture in lowland areas grows early with nourishing short-lived grass, important because herds are thin and weakened after the winter (Leeuwen *et al.* 1994). Some grasses continue to grow, so that spring and autumn pastures may double up. Above the spring pastures are the alpine meadows, the true *jailoo*, or summer pastures, where grass is low growing, but very rich and highly valued, used only in high summer. Moving to the *jailoo* in May is a particularly treasured time. The Kyrgyz *jailoo* has a unique place in people's sensibilities, as a site of health, clean air, mountain water and nourishment. This is their motherland, and, were it possible, they would choose to be buried there when they die. Time there is very busy as milk and meat products are processed for the winter. Suddenly, in late August, a chill wind – 'the yellow wind' – will blow and these pastures become yellow overnight. Then it is time to think about moving down again to the *küzdöö* or autumn pastures.

In the past, people moved on to the *kyshtoo* or winter pastures in November or early December. Following sedentarization in the 1930s, most Kyrgyz herders settled in villages over winter and were based at Soviet *kolkhozes*, taking the animals on migration from spring through to autumn. Some over-wintered in lowland village houses known as *kashars* or *zymovkas*: higher winter dwellings or homesteads, but sheltered from snow and wind. Compared to valley lowland pastures, conditions at these sites are often very harsh, with temperatures falling to  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$  in deep winter. In the area of the Ala Too where I did part of my fieldwork, the whole village attached to the *kolkhoz* was built high in the mountains, simply so that the animals would not have to move down to the valleys in winter. This change in lifestyle was compounded by the replacement of the main pack animals, the Bactrian camel, *töö* and the yak, *topoz*, in the Soviet era, as people travelled up to the pastures in jeeps, buses, Niva four-wheel drives, and simple Moskvich cars, all of which were, remarkably, capable of making the journey to the high mountain pastures. Animals and goods followed in lorries, although herders might drive the animals separately.

Alongside annual migration, daily life in the mountain pastures is also a constant process of movement. Each day sheep, cows and horses go up to different local pastures, depending upon weather, the animals' requirements and the need for these pastures to rest. Herdsmen are constantly moving the animals, and do a little hunting or set traps in between watching sheep, training their binoculars on mountain crags and snow melt for signs of snow leopards, *arkar* (wild sheep) or eagles' nests.

Women mainly stay in the *aiyls* (encampments) and are more home-based. Most herders' wives do ride and make journeys, but their daily routine gives them less need to than men. In my experience, moving through the mountains with women mostly involved going for walks,

collecting plants, roots and wild flowers, and catching butterflies with children in free afternoons. But women often stay at home near the *aiyl* to clean, cook, process milk and meat products for winter, look after children, make felt and also play host to visiting neighbours from nearby camps, offering them *chai* and bread, fermented mare's milk (*kymyz*) or yoghurt (*airan*). Thus the mountain landscape, while vast, seemingly empty and quite still to the foreign visitor, to the trained eye is (at certain times of the day) teeming with life: men going about their work, travelling on horseback; occasional women collecting wild onions or rhubarb; children playing; and general visiting of neighbours.

In the past, Central Asian pastoralists were often described by foreign visitors to the region as 'wandering nomads'. Nothing could be further from the truth. Migrations are carefully planned and organized along known migration routes to pastures that belong, or belonged, to specific groups (Bunn 2000). The planning itself is, however, of a very dynamic kind. The ability to respond both to the needs of animals and the change of the seasons and move to suit their needs involves an intimate, embodied and tacit local knowledge, employed so that people know when to migrate, move pasture, hunt and so on. Men and women both know their land closely, though in different ways. They know when the *jailoo* is tired and where to set traps; they know the plants, where the snowmelt will attract the wild mountain sheep, and whether there is a snow leopard in the area. They know the land through travelling through it, through knowledge of local animals, through hunting in it, through growing up in it, through training their eyes to see the smallest movement at the furthest distance that could herald an approaching fox, or a rider, or a car. They know it through inhabiting it.

I was told that in the past Kyrgyz herders had sung calendars for each region which revealed when to move with the animals and why; what signs to look for; how the stars should be; what the wind should be doing; what the grass should be like. I could find no one who could sing such a calendar, but the renowned Kyrgyz *akyn* (poet), Togolok Moldo, includes such an almanac-poem about how to deal with the forty coldest days of the year in his works (Zen-hua and Imart 1989, pp. 124, lines 9–28). My own host in Geng Suu *jailoo* recounted some of the signs which he followed to help predict the best times to move through the weather and animals' mating patterns:

*Arkar and kulja* (wild sheep) don't mate according to the stars. If they mate in the valley early in October, spring will be early and good. If they mate late in October, spring will be late. The reindeer, on the other hand, mate according to a group of stars called *Ürkör* – the Pleiades. Many things relate to these stars. In May, *Ürkör* will go to sleep, and they will sleep for 40 days. When they reappear, by the end of June, all the grasses will have gone to seed and the flowers are ready – everything is ready, ripe. While *Ürkör* are asleep, *kymyz* (fermented mare's milk) will have strong medicinal properties. Around the 30th of September, *Ürkör* will be at its peak, 'At the top of our heads.' At dawn *Ürkör* will be at *jang bash* – our hips. Once they are below *jang bash*, *Ürkör* will go to sleep again, around the 20th of December. If *Ürkör* are sleeping when the reindeer mate, spring will be good. But if they are still awake when the reindeer mate, the spring will be changeable and dangerous.

Decisions about when to move within these ecological patterns are not random, but nor are they planned in a fixed, schematic way. People need to be alert, flexible and, most importantly, ready, so that through the accumulation of their tacit knowledge of environmental phenomena and the opportunities it provides, they know the time to let the grass rest, to put the rams with the ewes, to leave for the autumn pasture. Through the combination of such knowledge, and an improvisatory readiness for movement, they can respond to the situation and take action. In these cases, a fixed long-term plan is less useful than lived environmental knowledge and the ability to be prepared and respond to the requirements of the moment, to understand the nature of flux, and the flux of nature. Again, we see the need for an improvisatory approach, here in regard to planning and migration.

This dynamic approach also reveals how lived local knowledge incorporates aspects of the sacred as well as the mundane. Among herding families I have worked with in Kyrgyz pastures, these aspects of life are integrated in such a way that the boundaries between them are not as clear-cut as the European academic might assume. Indeed, the divisions we tend to assume exist between the sacred and profane may make it impossible for us to understand the relationships involved as the unity perceived by our informants (Descola and Palsson 1996). This is similar in vein to the way that ‘epic time’ contains details of local knowledge, historical events *and* mythical patterns. Elsewhere I have discussed this phenomenon in relation to animals as food. In this region food is treated as providing nourishment and wellbeing, but can also embody quite literal qualities such as happiness, reflecting an understanding of the whole sacred and mundane animal in relation to humans (Bunn 2010b).

In regard to moving through land, annual migrations have longstanding associations not just with travel, but also with celebration and festivity. The past Kyrgyz migration to the *jailoo* was described by Aitmatov as a unique and almost ritual occasion: an opportunity to show off the most beautiful harnesses, fine clothing, ‘the best horse of all, skill in arranging bundles on the backs of camels and wrapping up the baggage in carpets’ (Aitmatov, cited in Bunn [2007]). Young marriageable girls wore their best clothes. Brides put on their beautiful wedding head-dresses. Young *jigits* rode about and competed with one another on horseback. The journey was marked by cutting a sheep for a feast, and eating *borsok* (fried puffed bread): a means of inviting the blessing of ancestors who would feed upon the aroma of smoking fat. The migration passed *mazars* (holy sites) where people would stop at saints’ tombs or springs, and make offerings to ancestors, spirits of place or Muslim saints.

Szynkiewicz, writing of Mongol annual migrations made similar observations, noting that ‘the journey between camps is felt to be an event outside the ordinary run of life, people set out at an astrologically determined time, they put on special clothes and use festive harnesses for their horses’ (1986, pp. 19–20). Likewise Barth, in his *Nomads of South Persia*, while arguing that the Basseri have ‘a poverty of ritual action which is quite striking’, goes on to suggest that this is because the Basseri migration itself was their principal ritual (1964, p. 135). For my field informants, movement through land was a means of generating and reconstituting knowledge and ownership of all the features of the land through which people had travelled annually, a re-affirmation of the links which tied them to the land they knew, had managed and in which they were accustomed to spend a part of each year, passing and stopping at both pastures and *mazars*. The journey was familiar and known, along routes which belonged to them, past sites which were holy places, meant to be visited.<sup>1</sup>

Kyrgyz pastoral migration is therefore meaningful both as daily and annual lived experience and also in a ritual sense, a celebration of movement and a means of re-engaging with land in a cyclical way.

The role of *mazars* (Turkic holy sites) and *oboo* (Mongolian stone cairns) is particularly relevant here. Among Turkic pastoralists, *mazars* have always been visited during the annual migrations. As holy or natural sites, often inhabited by powers or forces (*ee*), or as sites that commemorate a person’s ancestors or a Sufi saint, they exhibit a synthesis of people’s understandings of ancestry or belief with their feeling for the environment. They are often situated at natural features such as cliff faces, tree groves, springs or caves, or at the tombs of family ancestors, tribal ancestors, or Sufi Saints (Aitpaeva 2009). People usually visit *mazars* for help with family problems, healing, to bless a marriage or to ask for fertility. They also have significance to shamans and healers who may visit potent sites to develop their training, and *mazars* can mark nomadic territory and migrations. The pathways to such places are important and often fixed. Great importance is attached to visiting them. Similarly, Mongolian *oboo* and burial sites

may be concerned with either natural features or clan lines. Their masters are known as *ezen* and they are visited in both Lamaist and non-Lamaist ceremonies where they are given offerings (Sneath 1992).

The significance of the powers in such sacred sites in this region is that elements of the environment: animals, stars, sites such as springs, groves of trees, tombs and lakes are considered to have power, or force, which gives them, in local views, the intentional capacity to intervene in the lives of people. Accordingly, pastoralists perceive their own destinies and those of other powers in the environment to be interconnected. This reflects a relationship with the environment for Eurasian pastoralists across this region that entails what Yukata Tani calls a 'philosophy of nature' linked to that of northern hunting people. This, according to Tani, is illustrated by common approaches to the environment, including notions of destiny, similar deities and animal keepers among both hunting peoples such as Eveny, and herding groups such as Kyrgyz and Mongols (Tani 1989, 1996; see also Vitebsky [2005]).

Humphrey (1996) and Tseren (1996) describe such an approach to the local environment among Mongolian herders as 'balance with nature'. My Kyrgyz informants called their way of hunting and herding animals in the Kyrgyz Ala Too as 'harmony with nature' (Bunn 2000, 2010b). Such descriptions of 'harmony' or 'balance' may sound romantic, but I argue that they reflect a view of nature held frequently by herders within this region where humans are perceived to be just one participating force in the environment, their life projects both impacting on and affected by other elements within it. This is not dissimilar to Viveiros de Castro's notion of perspectivism in Amazonia, also discussed by Swancutt in relation to Mongolian herding (Viveiros de Castro 1998, Swancutt 2007). Both discuss how locals in their regions consider other inhabitants and forces within the environment (whether animals, rocks or weather) to have similar social intentions and capacity to intervene in the socio-environment as humans. I suggest that this perceived interpenetration of people and other inhabitants of their environment is expressed in many ways, including: the general working relationship that people have with domestic and 'wild' animals; in terms of how people treat their environment; use the interior space of the tent; name the landscape; use animals as food; and in the ways they create designs on their material culture. This kind of approach to the environment, as Humphrey (1996), Hamayon (1990) and also Vitebsky (2005) describe for the wider Eurasian and Siberian region, reflects a way of living with the environment associated with the past practice of shamanism.

The relevance of balance is discussed by Hamayon, following Basilov, arguing that for some northern hunting people and nomadic pastoralists in the region, hunting in particular is inter-linked with human health and wellbeing, because to ensure a successful hunt animal souls must be repaid in the form of human souls (Hamayon 1990). The role of the shaman is to negotiate between animal masters or mistresses for an abundance of animals in the hunt, which then must be repaid, if not by illness and death within one's own community, then from another. While in Kyrgyzstan shamanism is largely a feature of the past, in my fieldwork, its on-going significance was illustrated on many occasions, such as when the daughter of a family friend became ill and the local *extra-sense* advised her father to put his rifle away in the family chest because he had been hunting too much and would be calling illness on his family. Here we see the importance of balance or harmony, the relationship between hunting and health, and human destiny and the environment. Recent literature by Pedersen (2001) and Willerslev (2009) identify similar practices among North Asian groups. (See also the special issue of *Inner Asia* on perspectivism [Humphrey *et al.* 2007]).

Thus, although shamanism as of old is rarely practised today among Eurasian pastoralists, the view of the world it entails can be seen in the perceived interconnection between powers in nature and animal and human destiny, manifest in many everyday practices. Vitebsky

(2005) considers that every time northern hunting people throw vodka on the fire to the spirits of the hearth they are 'doing shamanism'. Humphrey (1996) similarly proposes that every time Mongolian herders scatter milk to the four directions or to the earth and sky, such understandings are enacted. I would also suggest that when Central Asian felt-making women construct patterns and draw on specific imagery for their felts, they are incorporating such understandings into their designs. Indeed, at the start of felt making, practices such as scattering *kymyz* (fermented mares' milk) are frequently carried out among both Turkic and Mongolian pastoralists. Mongolian historian Batchuluun (2000) has noted a great many blessings made during felt preparation, several of which parallel shamans' songs.

This significance of both movement and 'balance' are seen in two core aesthetics of Central Asian felt. In regard to balance, a characteristic feature of Turkic design in Central Asia is its 'positive and negative quality' and the way that the pattern and background are equally balanced, so that one is not aware of a motif in a background, but an overall interlinked pattern. For example, in Kyrgyz *shyrdak* and Kazakh *syrnak* (cut-out mosaic felt) the pattern is so well balanced that motif and background are interchangeable (Figure 3). It is remarkable how skilled pattern drawers fill the field with pattern elements that constantly create positive and negative aspects of the same time. Only 'masters' or *usta* can draw these patterns. One such master told me that the only way she could do this was with her eyes closed (Bunn 1999). This 'positive and negative' aesthetic is particularly easy to achieve in these textiles because the motifs and background are cut out from two different coloured pieces of felt and interchanged. Alongside creating a very balanced pattern, it also means that nothing is wasted, indicating that felt making is part of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh responsive mode of engagement with the environment, which binds religious and eco-social domains of life. The principle is used in centre-fields, borders, and diamonds elements of composition (Bunn 1996, 2000, 2010a).

In regard to movement, the role of colour and quilting comes to the fore. In Kyrgyz and Kazakh felts, colour combinations are often complementary on the colour wheel, giving an



Figure 3. Blue *shyrdak* with centre field and borders illustrating the balance between motif and background

immediate visual ‘zing’ to the image created. The outlining of the positive and negative patterns with coloured threads and emphasis through parallel quilting contribute to the dynamic, moving, and at times disorientating, visual effect of the design, creating a sense of movement in similar vein to the work of artist Bridget Riley.

Mongolian felt design, while taking an ostensibly very different visual form, utilizes quite similar skills to execute the patterns, in that these quilted felts also employ an extremely balanced patterning system with no motif in a background (except on door felts), where motifs also interlock and there is an imperative of the relation between parts and a whole. Despite being monochrome, the white background indented with rhythmic quilted patterns also acts in a similar dynamic way to Turkic felt, although here the movement and visual impact are more in the vein of Escher than Riley.<sup>2</sup>

If aesthetic qualities relate to form and movement, then the imagery employed in felt motifs links to content and further emphasize the relationship between people and their environment as outlined above. The majority of motifs comprise animal forms, either of herded or hunted animals, especially on Turkic felt. These include goat horns, antlers, crow’s feet, bone motifs and birds’ wings. On Mongolian felts, aspects of nature and parts of the body, including clouds, ripples and so on are prevalent. A core motif on both Turkic and Mongolian felt is the ram’s horn, found on all Turkic felts in multiple and varying combinations, and usually on the corners of Mongolian *shirdegs*.

The ram’s horn pattern and other bone motifs reflect their incorporation into many aspects of life, sacred and mundane, for pastoralists in this region. Among Turkic and Mongol people, sheep bones and ram’s horns are used in multiple ways. Sheep’s shoulder blades are used in divination. Sheep’s knucklebones are given to children for luck and used in games of chance played by adults and children alike, and in Mongolia may also be conceived as a form of divination, according to whether the person wishes to highlight the knucklebones’ religious (sacred) or everyday (mundane) qualities.<sup>3</sup> Sheep’s forearms are suspended above house entrances to protect sons, ram’s horns are positioned on tent exteriors for prosperity, or sewn on as felt amulets, and so on. At celebratory meals, specific cuts of sheep, known as *ustukans*, each with their own name, are distributed in parallel to the way that people are seated in the tent, so as to convey the specific social relationships at the table on the occasion (Bunn 2000, 2008, 2010b). The very term bone, *sö’ök*, is also used for ‘relative’, as Kazakh and Mongol (although not Kyrgyz) refer to different branches of their nation as the black and white bone.

When I asked one informant in Ysyk-Köl region why the ram’s horn in a transformative horn/heart pattern, called *jürök*, was so important, she said, that the horn was the man, and that the heart into which it transformed was the woman holding him up. Much more explicitly when eating a cut of sheep at a celebratory meal one day, I noted that the sheep’s backbone evoked one particular Kyrgyz pattern called *kyial oyum* (dream pattern), and that it had the ram’s horn within it. The reply was: ‘Yes it is *kyial oyum*, and the ram’s horn is in the backbone, everything comes from the backbone.’ In a rather fractal way, the ram’s horn appears to emerge from the nodes of the vertebrae in similar way to how composite felt patterns combine ram’s horns with other motifs. It is also the case that sheep’s backbones were always left in kurgan tombs of early nomads, although this was arguably to feed the dead (Gryaznov 1969, Rudenko 1970) (see Figure 4).

I would argue that this use of bone in many aspects of social life, and in composite, intertwining felt patterning reflects the interpenetration and interconnectedness that is perceived to exist between people, animals and the environment in this region, so that features of the land may be called after parts of the body, people are given cuts of meat according to how they are socially related (and positioned in the tent in the same way).



Figure 4. *Kyial oyum* (dream pattern) revealing the unfolding bone forms in Kyrgyz pattern motifs

### Time and space going forward

The old Kara Kyrgyz, through the patterns (*oy*) send their aims and ideas (*oyum*) from the past to the future. (Field notes)

I have set out the above discussion largely in relation to the production of felt rather than its consumption, and indeed, this is one factor that makes Central Asian felts so interesting, because until recently, production has been for domestic use, or for gifts. Felts were rarely made for sale by pastoralists, but only for wedding gifts and for relatives and family. It was shameful to sell a felt, as I found out when I collected several for the British Museum.<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that they are not sold today. Felts can now be bought at any department store, at the bazaar, and from small regional felt workshops. Settled peoples such the Uyghur have long sold them. But certainly, until recently, it was not looked upon favourably by pastoral nomads to sell a felt one had been given, or had made for one's wedding, for money.

That being said, production methods in felt workshops have varied widely through time in this region, from small-scale Uyghur bazaar felt, and the huge state felt workshops in Kubilai Khan's era, to craft felt produced for Soviet Intourist shops, Soviet and post-Soviet artists such as Umetov or Saule Baipanov producing felt art, and recent felt fashion houses making silk-felt scarves and felt couture. New developments have also made an attempt to standardize design for catalogues and to re-introduce natural dyes to appeal to Western tastes. It remains to be seen, given the sometimes dramatic upheavals of the past, whether contemporary factors will have a significant impact on the process of felt production.

In this paper, I have explored the relationship between continuity and change among pastoralists in Central Asia through the lens of felt making. But I have also shown how an understanding of the dynamic life-processes of pastoralism can illuminate the production, techniques and aesthetics of felt making from a more 'nomadic point of view'. These include epic poetry and migration through land. I have argued that an understanding of the temporal quality of felt pattern production can be seen in the improvisatory process of epic poetry, so that pattern elements or motifs, like epic themes, act as matrices for the generation of newly created pieces of work. This enables them to incorporate history, memories and resonant social and environmental imagery into their felts, creating work that has an apparent timelessness, but yet which is dynamic.

I have also argued that the aesthetics of such felts can also be understood in relation to local pastoral practices in the mountain or steppe environment. These practices include both the mundane and the sacred, embracing daily journeys along with the sacred landscape, and animals as food with animals as souls, reflecting an approach of balance to human-environment relations – the resonance of which is expressed through felt design.

Thus, we can appreciate that Central Asian felt textiles, their improvisatory production by groups of women, their stable yet dynamic motifs, and their evocation of past and contemporary

imagery through motif-drawing, form a living, moving medium which roots Kyrgyz pastoralists in their history, their social relationships and their environment. At the same time the notion of balance that exists in relation between herders and their lived and sacred environment is articulated in the positive and negative qualities of felt composition and also in the patterns that reveal the interconnectedness between people and all aspects of their environment. This understanding of movement and the relationship with the environment continues to be evoked through contemporary work, albeit in ever-changing ways.

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### Notes

1. Land quite definitely belonged to specific groups and families, and everyone could recount whose land and pasture was whose. At the same time, *ee*, spirit masters, owned specific sites, 'holy' places or *mazars*. On the one hand, these places belong to the 'master' of the site, not to any one local group, but on the other, to own or conquer land where a site is based most certainly gives a ruling group legitimacy, as the Kazakh conquest of Turkestan with the Yasawi shrine showed during the expansion of the Kazakh khanate.
2. Parallels to both these patterning systems can be seen in Wagner's (1997) work on 'figure-ground reversal' among the Barok in New Island.
3. Many thanks to Katherine Swancutt for this information.
4. This is also true of hand-made hats or other 'best' handmade clothing such as coats (*deel*), in Mongolia. I am very grateful to Katherine Swancutt for this information.

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