Chapter 12

Grandparenting the Firstborn in Central Asia: Exploring the "*Nebere Aluu*" Practice

Elena Kim

Abstract

This chapter presents an exploratory study of specific experiences among Central Asian grandparents who adopt and raise their firstborn grandchild as their own youngest child. The practice, referred to as *'nebere aluu'*, is deemed an ethnonational tradition of the Kyrgyz and Kazakh people and appears to be widely accepted among men and women, young and old. Drawing on in-depth interviews with grandparents themselves, I describe this phenomenon as situated within and dynamically responding to the shifting social, economic and political context of contemporary Central Asia. Drastic transformations in the everyday lives, while destabilizing and disorienting, may have supplanted nebere aluu with unique significance. Contemporary expressions of *nebere aluu* point to it being a complex social system of intergenerational reciprocal care, continuity and responsibility that provides a meaningful space for reconciling conflicting ideas about family, marriage, love and child-rearing. This discursive space is open for debate and negotiations and raises important questions about power and gender politics inherent to it.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan; parenting; grandparents; firstborn grandchildren; tradition; intergenerational continuity

Introduction

A 2020 article in an independent Central Asian news website, entitled "The firstborn is for the grandma. Why in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan older relatives

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may impound a child from the young parents," focused on people whose parents were their biological grandparents. The author, Alina Dzhetigenova, introduced her topic astutely as:

> In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, there is a tradition when older parents seize their son's firstborn child. The baby's sex does not matter. They can kidnap the baby and forbid the mother to have any contact with it. This can happen on the first day of a baby's life or a few years after. And this is what happened to me. I was two months old, and my mom went to take her exam in college [in a nearby city], my father was a teacher there, too. My [paternal] grandma and auntie took care of me [while they were gone]. My parents returned in two weeks, but my grandma did not give me back.
>
> (Dzhetigenova, 2020)

She introduced more such stories and interleaved them with professional opinions from psychologists and an anthropologist. Dzhetigenova concluded that what happened to her was an act of "violence with repercussions" such as trauma, jealousy, anger, sadness, loneliness, guilt, shame, fear and feeling hurt.

Berdaly Ospan, a journalist and a well-known expert on ethnic Kazakh traditions, offered a drastically different perspective on "why the Kazakhs 'gift' their children to grandparents" (Ospan, 2018). In his 2018 article, Ospan considered the practice as both an expression of affinity to children and respect to elders – all foundational ethnocultural norms in the Kazakh society – and as an "ancient Kazakh tradition" per se. Ospan assured his readers that the practice continued to live on in the present time and enthusiastically laid out success stories of the living individuals, including Kazakh celebrities, to illustrate the benefit and wisdom of this phenomenon. Referring to a historical source, Ospan alluded to the cultural belief that elderly people must be entrusted to raise young children into upstanding members of society, knowledgeable of traditions and having humane and fair personalities.

This chapter offers an analysis of what Dzhetigenova and Ospan are discussing in their respective articles – parenting patterns in contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, wherein grandparents adopt their firstborn grandchild to raise as their own. A review of existing literature on traditional kinship relationship and customary family law in Central Asia has not revealed sufficiently satisfying and conclusive knowledge on these patterns (Ismailbekova, 2014, 2016; Murzaev, 2016; Musaeva, 2017; Nursaiyn, 2017; Tegizbekova, 2016; Ulanova, 2018). More recent media sources, like Dzhetigenova's and Ospan's, have been sending unequivocal messages about the practice and its effects on family members. Such scarcity of scholarly resources on this topic and its contradictory public narratives call for systematic research to inform its better understanding. This chapter is one of the early scholarly attempts (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022) to empirically explore the practice and provide a better understanding of its function and meaning to the diverse groups of people.

In what follows, I focus on grandparents' personal stories of what happened, their own interpretations of experiences, their understanding of Kyrgyz/Kazakh

family and their changing roles within them. I adopt an intergenerational lens in my analysis to argue that this practice expresses intricate and dynamic social and cultural connections among the old and young, a discursive space where diverse ideas about family, love and children come to contact and interact. These interactions occur within and in response to larger social, economic, political and cultural contexts – all shifting and in motion – which may complicate any attempt to fully understand the phenomenon.

In terms of methodology, I base my analytic findings on the empirical data collected in February to June 2022 in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Two months prior to the fieldwork, I hired a team of six research assistants, all graduate students from the American University of Central Asia, who helped me to conduct interviews. I trained the team on qualitative methods of research with a focus on in-depth interviewing and research ethics. Once the Institutional Review Board approval was received, we started recruiting interviewees utilizing purposive methods of sampling via social media channels, personal connections and networks. We recruited individual respondents as well as multiple family members where nebere aluu was being or had been practiced. A total of 29 individuals were interviewed. They included eight persons raised by their grandparents (referred to as *nebere*), three siblings of neberes, five biological mothers, five biological fathers, five grandmothers and four grandfathers. In the analytical part of this chapter, I assigned all participants pseudonyms to protect their identity.

In the interest of space and the analytic focus, this chapter presents an analysis pertaining to the data obtained from grandparents only. I understand that these case studies approach does not provide a "complete" picture or an unbiased account of nebere aluu. Yet, they reveal much about the possible meanings to the lives of my respondents and offer a snapshot of the grandparent/parent/grandchild dynamic.

Understanding "nebere aluu"

There appears to be a peculiar void in terminology for the phenomenon in question. Published sources refer to no specific term or a standardized signifier, neither does the colloquial and media discourse, in either Kyrgyz or Kazakh language. Participants themselves, too, used no precise vocabulary or any customary term when talking about nebere aluu. Even so, they could richly describe their own relation to it and the significant change it brought into their experiences. This peculiar absence may attest to the phenomenon not only being a reified practice as a "thing that people just do" but also to the level of complexity that could not be captured with a shortcut term. For the pragmatic purpose of clarity, I turn to Ospan who adapted the name of a different practice called *bala beru* (translated from Kazakh language as *give a child*) to coin the term *nemere alu* in the Kazakh language, which translates as *take a grandchild* (2018). Following him, Kenzhebaeva and I (2022) translated it into the Kyrgyz language as *nebere aluu*. I will use this term in this chapter.

Nebere Aluu as a Practice

Nebere aluu is one approach to child-rearing in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where family types include nuclear arrangements, multiple generations living under one roof, elderly parents joining their adult children's families, single-parent families, childless couples, adopted children living with their relatives, grandparents temporarily taking care of their grandchildren while their parents are outside working as labor migrants, etc. Nebere aluu stands out from all of them because the claims of the ownership of parental rights and duties are fluid and leave questions open as to the power, the function and the symbolic meanings of the practice.

My own preliminary analysis of nebere aluu case studies suggest variability in the nature of the practice contingent upon whether the grandchild was born into a daughter's as opposed to a son's family. While this variability may need more robust evidence, in this chapter, my main focus is on rural families in which paternal grandparents choose to assume custodial responsibility over their son's firstborn. Within these cases, individual practices vary; however, common descriptions that I found in my material are as follows: When married, a couple resides patrilocally, in the house of the husband's parents. The young wife (referred to as *kelin*, i.e. daughter-in-law) participates in domestic chores and takes care of her in-laws whose expectations are strong for having a grandchild within the first year of marriage. Conversations about nebere aluu sometimes start immediately after the wedding day and even before any pregnancy has occurred. When the baby is born, paternal grandmother (*kaineneh*) becomes a primary caretaker of the newborn. Kaineneh spends most of her time with the baby, allowing *kelin* to breastfeed it. Kelin is supposed to withdraw from nurturing the baby and grew more distant in her role as a parent, similar to that of an older sister. In many situations, *kaineneh* insists on being called *apa* (mother, in the Kyrgyz language). The biological mother is to be called *dzheneh* (a wife of an older brother). In some cases, nebere aluu becomes materialized through the formal adoption process.

In some cases when a young couple lives in a separate household, paternal grandparents communicate their wish to adopt their grandchild. They instruct their daughter-in-law to shorten the breastfeeding period to ensure that the baby can thrive without it. The infant, sometimes as young as a few days old, is brought to the grandparents' home to live as their youngest child – *kenzheh* (translated as the "youngest child"). The infant's parents will have a restricted access to the baby. While not overtly prohibited, communications among the child and their parents are treated with caution and, sometimes, jealousy.

The grandchild resides with the grandparents until adulthood. Grandparents place specific importance on their ability to marry their *kenzheh* – the moment their parenting duty is considered complete. However, such a closure may be interrupted because kenzheh may be sent to their biological parents at a younger age. This happens if the grandparents find themselves in a situation of crisis, such as the premature death of the grandmother, her poor health, natural disasters, or

any circumstances which put the safety and well-being of the child in danger, including the child's own health.

Following nebere aluu, the young couple is expected to comply with the wishes of the elderly parents and move on with their lives, gradually becoming economically independent. Incompliance necessarily evokes social disapproval and exclusion. From the kelin's perspective, resisting the desires of Kaineneh may lead to a familial conflict, disruption in the kinship relationships and cause divorce. Young women's own mothers would encourage their daughters to do as the in-laws wish (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022). Doing otherwise would necessarily stigmatize the young woman as a *bad kelin*, and a *bad wife* – a curse in any place where much depends on a woman's reputation.

In terms of numerical prevalence, it is not clear precisely what percentage of Kyrgyz and Kazakh grandparents practice nebere aluu. There have been yet no quantitative studies to assess its statistical incidence and to systematize associated demographic data. The pattern, however, is well known and quite visible. I heard frequents stories, met numerous people who were involved in it, or who were related to those who took part in nebere aluu, or knew others who did. All of my research assistants had at least a few friends or relatives who were raised through this practice. One assistant herself or himself was a nebere aluu child. They told us that this was "how children were raised in their village" and that they "did not even think this was anything irregular." All this leads me to claim that nebere aluu is a fairly common arrangement.

Placing Nebere Aluu in Existing Literate on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRG)

A review of some historical sources about traditional family structures in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan suggests that its contemporary form can be traced back to the pre-Soviet history when a nomadic lifestyle demanded communal approaches to child-rearing (Murzaev, 2016; Musaeva, 2017; Tegizbekova, 2016). Accordingly, families were organized into extended patriarchal families comprised of three or four generations, including great-grandparents, grandparents, children and grandchildren. Such a family was often described as *family minor*. A collective of several families minor comprised a *family major*. They shared household economy and labor and raised all children communally under grandparents' supervision. In these nomadic communities,

> . . .a child did not belong to a father or a mother, but to the entire community in which the child lived. It was, consequently, the community that was responsible for the child's upbringing. Those who fed and educated a child were considered their parents. The child could call many women and men *mother* and *father*.
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> (Musaeva, 2017, p. 2)

Children signified success and prosperity and were treasured by everybody in the family. It was not atypical for families to willingly give away a young offspring as a sign of friendship, respect, but also as an expression of compassion and sympathy to those in the family major or minor who could not or could no longer have their own children. This customary law was called *asyrap aluu* (Tegizbekova, 2016, p. 129). Tegizbekova made no indication of the nebere aluu practice but mentioned that the customary law (*adat*) regulated "the right of the child to be connected with grandparents" and that it included "obligations of grandparents to provide for grandchildren" (p. 131). She remarked an apparently frequent practice when a "Kyrgyz [man] fostered a grandson or a son of a daughter (dzhuen)" (p. 132). Similarly, Nursaiyn (2017), in discussing traditional child-rearing in Kazakh families, argued that paternal grandparents played the most influential role in child-rearing. In fact, the firstborn children were believed to be ones of paternal grandparents. Adopted in such a way, they became the favorites of the grandparents. Musaeva (2017) made a straightforward argument that some ethnic traditional customs had returned into contemporary lives of many Kyrgyz and Kazakh people and that "grandparents' fostering their first grandchild" were among the revived traditions along with *soiko saluu* (engagement custom with earrings), assignment of sworn parents (*okul ata* and *okul apa*), etc.

Apart from historical analysis, more media sources on nebere aluu focused their discussion on how this experience may induce psychological distress for the adopted children. Taking the standpoint of the child, the authors emphasized the traumatization from separation with the parents, confusion, adaptation distress, poor socialization, etc. (Dzhetigenova, 2020; Ulanova, 2018). Nebere aluu has also been discussed from the perspectives of the young women whose in-laws adopted their firstborn children (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022). This analysis considered nebere aluu as one expression of systemic gender-based oppression against young women that reduced them to the materiality of their bodies and reproductive systems. Listening to the women's experiences, the authors analyzed it as an instrument that provided a sense of continuity and cohesion for the grandparents but at the expense of young women's confusion and traumatization.

Internationally, the last few decades saw a growing research interest in and fascinating scholarship about the phenomenon of grandparents raising grandchildren (GRG). The concept of "grandfamilies" has allowed for systematic examinations of grandparents-headed households (Cross et al., 2010). Scholars have explored 'emergency grandparenting' for situations such as teen pregnancy, pursuing higher education, incarceration (Lewis et al., 2018), labor migration (Ismailbekova, 2014), poverty and alcoholism (Fuller-Thomson, 2005). It has been established that cultural norms on grandparenting vary with regards to reasons for raising their grandchildren (Ikels, 1998).

This chapter presents a study that is distinctive from the existing research on GRG. Here, the focus on nebere aluu moves beyond providing culturally based understanding of grandparent/grandchildren relationships and family roles in Central Asia. The intent is to pry away from any normative understanding of family structure and functions. Those are typically prescribed by social theories

originating from the collective Global North, but also from the local literature. I do not see nebere aluu as an expression of irregularity, pathology, or disorganization. In agreement with a phenomenological approach to social inquiry, I believe the practice makes sense to the people who are involved in it and my goal is to learn and describe it. This chapter invites us to attend to the voices of the grandparents, who have something to say about what the practice means for them. From their account, I insist on the argument that nebere aluu is an intergenerational social practice with significance and meaning for all those involved, which provides space for reconciling diverse ideas about family, marriage, love and child-rearing. I argue that this space has been open for debate and change in response to shifts in economic, political and social conditions in the Central Asian region and beyond.

Nebere Aluu Through the Lens of Good Grandmother *Identity: The* Patriarchal Bargain *and Beyond*

One way of explaining nebere aluu from the perspective of grandmothers can revolve around older women's constructing their social status and authority within their community that has typically been framed with Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) paradigmatic framework of *patriarchal bargain*. It posits that in patriarchal societies, such as Kyrgyz and Kazakh, elderly women gain benefit, power and status by conforming to and supporting oppressive patriarchal practices against younger women. Following her, Ismailbekova (2016) revealed that women construct their authority as they age and smoothly proceed through life-cycle stages, events and family roles. In this process, giving birth to a male child and raising him up till his marriage secures a higher social status for them. A grandchild entrusted to a senior woman by exactly her son symbolizes public recognition and attestation to her accumulated empowerment. Nebere aluu, framed through patriarchal bargain, could be seen as one way for older women to compensate for earlier discrimination and to exert power over the younger women by expropriating the latter's babies. Nebere aluu can, thus, help mark a positive transition in the relationships between an older mother and a son wherein "both have their roles and statuses emphasized and enhanced" (Kenzhebaeva & Kim, 2022, p. 107). For the adult son, nebere aluu helps to shape and maintain his identity as a "good grateful son" – one of the building blocks of Kyrgyz masculinity (Kim & Karioris, 2020).

Using Kandiyoti's theory to explain nebere aluu, however, can be constraining because it would reduce it to older women's inhumanity toward younger women in quest for power within the patriarchal regime. Such an analytic choice would invariably lead to, explicitly and implicitly, their portrayal as malicious villains who knowingly aggress against the most vulnerable. It would neglect to acknowledge a number of significant features of nebere aluu and the multiple meanings it supplied for the elder women. Further, I explain these significant features starting with a relevant context within which they are embedded.

Positioning Nebere Aluu Within the Social Norms of Compulsory Matrimony and Progeny

In Kyrgyzstan, as in many other places in the world, marriage is a dominant social expectation to all members of society with serious costs to those who choose to transgress it (Kim & Karioris, 2020). Marriage is considered natural, mandatory and the only way in which the emotional, psychological, social, economic, and physical well-being of an adult person can be ensured. In rural areas especially, men who do not marry are considered socially deviant, incomplete as men and suspicious to the rest of the community. Upon marriage, men gain in reputation, respect and symbolic status of an adult person. They enjoy better economic and political opportunities entrusted to them in their new status. Unmarried women experience intense social pressure to be married and may suffer multiple forms of discrimination in the local society. In highly valued and frequent social gatherings, they could be publicly ridiculed, humiliated and reminded about how low their status is. For example, at a festive table they would be seated together with children or asked to do the hardest tasks in the kitchen. They may be isolated both from younger single women as an undesirable example of a "spinster" and, at the same time, from young married women whose company they are yet to deserve. Compulsory matrimony appears to be pervasive, yet, it is rarely discussed in contemporary scholarly networks as a separate issue worth its own research. Noor Borbieva's (2012) research is one exception as she touches upon the overwhelming value of matrimony as an explanation for bride kidnapping practices in Kyrgyzs Republic and I draw upon her scholarship here.

Pressures of compulsory matrimony is not exclusive to the young individuals themselves. It generalizes to their parents who want to see their children married as a guarantee for a happy life. Elsewhere (Kim & Karioris, 2020), we have described the feeling of inadequacy among older parents whose adult children were single. Marrying children raises the status of the parents who "by marrying their children publicly fulfill one of the most sacred responsibilities of a Kyrgyz adult" (Borbieva, 2012, p. 154). Parental interference, often through arranged marriage, is expected when necessary.

Early marriage is even more desirable for both young women and men. In the conditions of a strong taboo on premarital sex, a long courtship is discouraged because it may lead to malicious rumors (Borbieva, 2012). Courtship is also not seen as correlating necessarily with the marriage success. Parents are motivated to graduate their children into adulthood and are often in a rush. Importantly, childbearing, so foundational to the idea of a family, is maximized with a younger bride.

After the wedding, a new pressure arrives for the young couple – producing offspring. Indeed, as in Borbieva (2012), having children takes precedence over professional and social accomplishments. They are "the most reliable and enduring sources of happiness and satisfaction for a human being" (p. 156). Fecundity is one of the three pillars of a success in the dominant discourse of marriage along with friendliness (*yntymak*) and prosperity (*bereke*) (Borbieva, 2012). Romantic love is not considered essential for a marriage. Instead, if men

provide for the family and women deliver babies and take care of the household, the marriage will be regarded thriving and stable. In Borbieva's own interview with a Kyrgyz woman, she was told "[. . .] you have to understand that in Kyrgyz culture, children are the most important thing. That's the reason for marriage" (p. 156). Yet, practical realities may be at odds with the economic demands related to having children. Conforming to the norm of fecundity is associated with costs that may be incommensurable with the young couple's capacity and resources.

Findings

Recently married and with a newborn, young couples are forced to experience a challenging bind. On the one hand, the pressure is strong for them to conform to the cultural convention of an earlier marriage and an expedited childbirth. On the other hand, there is a wider social and economic context, in which these expectations must be fulfilled. The focus on marriage deemphasizes the economic and material realities in which contemporary youth must productively live. Unemployment, poverty, economic instability and threatened sources of livelihoods constitute the climate in which young people are challenged to build their economic capacity. Social encouragement for marriage and children does not come with a financial support system. Instead, having a small baby puts certain limits on how well they can start building their economic and educational opportunities. In this pursuit, however, the practical wisdom of nebere aluu becomes apparent. The young couple's parents, having attained a certain level of economic security while still being physically healthy and energetic, are motivated to spend years supporting their adult children by overtaking the responsibility for rearing their first child.

Grandparenting as an Extension of Parenting

Analyzing nebere aluu suggests that participants continue parenting their adult children past their wedding and their having their own children. Parenting conflates with grandparenting, one is an inherent part of the other. The former necessarily and invariably implicates the latter. Nebere aluu is, then, one important and logical parenting stage, which, considering the practical effect of nebere aluu in the new challenging economic regime, enables their adult children to be more successful in the conditions of precarious employment, poverty and uncertainty. Being a good loving parent means being a good loving grandparent.

This desire to support their adult children was a recurrent theme across all interviews. Participants emphasized their passionate desire to help the young couple. I use an excerpt from an interview with Meerim (she and all subsequent participants are referred to by pseudonyms) a 70-year-old mother of three, who adopted her son's firstborn son (Akber) when he was three months. At the time of the interview, Akber, already a teenager, resided with Meerim, her husband (Akber's grandfather) and their two other adult children. Akber's biological parents lived in Russia with their younger children. Meerim retold us that "after

the collapse of (Soviet) Union, many people left their homes to go abroad for work, to earn money, become independent. They left their child with me and went abroad." She emphasized that her raising Akber relieved her son and his wife of many worries:

> . . .they did not worry about their son. They did not have to worry about which school he attended, how well he did in school. They were not worried about what clothes he wore, what he ate, because they trusted us.

Meerim shared that her own firstborn son grew up with her in-laws because she needed time to finish her university and was busy with her job. She was a third-year college student with a full-time job of a schoolteacher then. Her son was seven days old, when her in-laws told her "You go and study! Complete your degree! Give the baby to us. We will help you raise him." Meerim agreed, and her "kaineheh came to [anonymised name of city] and took [her] son away on an airplane."

Similarly, Asel adopted and raised her first granddaughter, Nadia, because she "wanted to help, wanted to participate." Asel enthusiastically took care of Nadia, which, in her view, facilitated Nadia's participation in the labor market:

> I was working as a schoolteacher. Nadia's mom was also a schoolteacher. I let her work. To take care of Nadia, I changed my work schedule. I worked in the mornings and Nadia's mom worked in the afternoons, so we took turns. I wanted my kelin to keep her job because she wanted to.

Asel repeated that taking care of Nadia was "[her] own decision, out of [her] own free will and free wish" and that "nobody forced [her] to do it." For her, this arrangement was mutually beneficial for her and her kelin because it allowed "Nadia's mom to have her job and [Asel] could spend more time with [her] grandchild." As a grandmother, she said she "did everything and had time for everything." Asel emphasized that raising Nadia was "not difficult" and that she "enjoyed it," and that Nadia and her became "the closest persons."

The motivation to support and help the newly married couple as they transition to adult life came hand in hand with experience of gratification and satisfaction of nurturing the baby. Other interviewees echoed Asel in expressing their utter enjoyment while parenting their kenzheh and took pleasure in their close relationships. In fact, they acquired a sense of purpose in life associated with the feeling of being needed and self-fulfillment. Nebere aluu was a source of happiness to them. Asel explained,

> It was all one happy moment. Nadia was a very kind girl. She loved her grandma a lot. She always slept next to me. [. . .] Till this day she always runs up to me for a hug whenever she sees me. She still loves me and still has warm feelings towards me.

Upon meeting her newborn grandson Aktilek, Akmaral, then 42 years old, was overwhelmed with love and joy. She immediately fell in love with him and treated him as hers right away:

> The moment he [Aktilek] was born... right then, I felt that he was my blood... someone very close to me... even closer than Marsel (her son). I felt as if I myself have just given birth to him. I did not want to give him back to (kelin). It was as if I gave birth to him. I brought him home from the birthing home and took care of him. I did not want to be away from him even for a minute. I did not want to even let him be breastfed. Before him, I had not known that your first grandson was sweeter than even your son! So, I did not let anyone around him, I did everything myself. When she stopped breastfeeding him, he became fully mine. He slept with me; he woke up with me. Whenever I went, I took him with me. My eyes were always on him, I did not let anybody around.

Meerim, too, shared that her "feelings for [her] grandson are stronger" and that "He brings [her] joy." Reflecting on her own jubilation, Meerim empathized with her own in-laws,

> I do not regret that I gave my son to my in-laws. He brought so much joy to them. I am happy that they were busy taking care of the child. I am thankful that they raised my son and I think I was right that I never fought with them over the child.

Interviewees' emotional accounts did not imply that the process was unchallenging for them, though they did give more precedence to the positivity of their experience. They accepted the practicality of parenting their kenzheh with full responsibility and commitment. Their poignant stories were also riddled with ideas of love and dedication.

Interviewees perceived themselves as primarily responsible for ensuring that their kenzhehs' needs are satisfied, feelings protected, well taken care of and loved. They expressed their affection, love and devotion through enthusiastic nurturing. They emphasized the role of education and invested resources to ensure that the child did well in school and attended any required extracurricular activities. They exerted extraordinary effect and personal sacrifice to performing the role of a parent to their grandchildren. Akmaral told one such story:

> I gave him good upbringing. I took care of him daily and nightly, even when he was sick. When he had fever, I took him to a hospital, and we stayed there together. I did not let him be away from me, even when he had this fever. I did not trust them [the parents], they did not take good care of him. He had fever. The fever did not go down. He was so little, he did not even walk yet. I did not sleep for three nights, I carried him in my arms. I did not

> sleep and rocked him in my arms. The doctors and other patients said, "no, he is your son, not a grandson. You are just shy. The doctors were surprised to know that it was my grandson, they did not believe me.

Nebere aluu placed women like Akmaral in the high-intensity roles that directed their energy, wisdom, resources and experience toward those members of the family and society most in need. Asel, Akmaral and Meerim reached a fairly secure economic status, owned their own homes and had savings and assets, thus, were well positioned to be the main providers for their grandchild. In the standoff between the cultural convention and economic demands, their participation in nebere aluu served to smoothen and ease young couples' transition to adulthood. They acted in the interest of family and self-sacrificed. They also found meaning, enjoyment and new emotions in their roles. All this suggests that nebere aluu is more than a tradition, a practical arrangement, or merely an adaptive response to uncertainty and hardship. It is a practice permeated with multiple and significant meanings. The narratives of love, support and devotion are supplemented with those of symbolic status associated with their roles in affirmation of ethnic identity and keeping knowledge about their culture. I discuss those in the next section.

Social Status, Ethnic Identity and Passing Cultural Knowledge

In the context discussed here, cultural expectations hold it that grandparents will play a major role in the upbringing of their grandchildren, passing down cultural knowledge and maintaining cultural and ethnic identity and values. Participants in this study provided instructions and guidance that taught their grandchildren appropriate behaviors, including how to be Kyrgyz or Kazakh. Asel shared her approach to raising her grandchild:

> We teach our children to be kind and humble and thoughtful. We treat kindly everyone in our family. You must act like a human, act like a family member. We love guests. We take care of our guests. Kazakhs must be open, compassionate, and accepting. We never leave anyone behind. That's our way of living.

Participants shared what they knew with their kenzheh in creative and caring ways. For example, they would often mention that they did not part with their grandchild even for a minute and took them "everywhere they went to." This expression can be linked to what Murzaev (2016) called the "traditional socialization practices of the Kyrgyz people" (p. 1395), a specific expectation that grandparents socialized their grandchildren through continuously introducing them to the intricate social fabric of their local culture. Hosting and attending social gatherings (big and small), paying and receiving visits and even dropping by are essential parts of the local cultural life. Older people are expected to give

blessings to hosts and guests and their presence connotes respectability of the event. At any such celebrations, visits, trips, particularly those commemorating life-cycle milestones, it is the local convention that young grandchildren accompany their grandparents. The value of this tradition is to endow children with life experiences that shape their culturally appropriate behavior, enrich their spiritual nurturing and social skills and enhance their ethnic identity through direct observation and participation. Certainly, public appearance in the company of a young grandchild is a tribute to this socialization tradition, which exerts additional benefits such as recognition and respect from others.

Participants in this study were aware of their commonly expected respectable and honored roles of wisdom bearers and keepers of tradition. They used, variously, the narrative of ethnic traditions to explain to their kenzheh about nebere aluu. Meerim explained to Akber that his living with her was a tradition necessitated by the practical realities of nomadic animal breeding lifestyle:

> From ancient time, the Kyrgyz had a tradition of giving the first grandchild to grandparents, while the young ones worked, increased the animal stock and took care of the household. Children were the responsibility of the grandparents.

Asel put it straightforwardly that nebere aluu was a primordial ethnic identity marker, signifying symbolic difference from other groups living in Central Asia:

> You know, life is a circle. We take care of older and younger generations. That's our tradition, our way of living. We are not [ethnic] Russians to just only care about ourselves and live only our own lives. We are Kazakhs, it's in our traditions. We don't put our parents into retirement homes. That's not right for us. We take care not only of our children, but also of other people's children. Even during wars, we adopted orphans and refugees as our own.

Participants expressed disappointment and concern when they saw that youth were no longer learning from their elders due to the spread of information technologies and access to alternative sources of knowledge. Considering this finding, one could propose an argument of nebere aluu's symbolic function of rectifying the perceived and reckoned loss of the traditional lifestyle and values. When the ethnonational generational order was no longer seen continuous with their own adult children, its reestablishment becomes possible within the nebere aluu – a uniquely facilitated connection with a grandchild.

Ismailbekova (2016) noted that "being a good grandmother" was foundational for women to acquire higher social status and respect, but left largely open the implications of such an identity in terms of specific behaviors. My data illustrate that they understand their roles in contributing to the well-being of their extended family, their adult children and young grandchildren and consider their role as an important source of support and caregiving. They nurture their grandchild, raise them as their own and pass their wisdom and cultural knowledge to them in love

and joy. They act as vital cultural resources and fear that their cultural legacy may otherwise disappear. All that facilitates intergenerational continuity and vitality of cultural knowledge, which would be obstructed otherwise, in the contemporary environment of rural outmigration, labor migration abroad, declining rural infrastructure and, in general, an increased level of disconnection among the old and young.

Dealing With Disruptions and Change

Nebere aluu must be seen as open to adjustment and change in response to external influences, such as deepening rural poverty, declining social protection services, decreasing quality of secondary school system and in higher education and failing infrastructure, etc. These changes are varied and unique, and I focus on two specific ones. One deals with expectation of reciprocating care. The second one addresses forced reassignment of custody.

In Kenzhebaeva and Kim (2022), we have put forward an argument about nebere aluu as reassuring stable financial flow and social support from the income-earning adult children to their parents. We added that nebere aluu guaranteed maintaining social connections and interactions among adults and their parents. There, the idea of reciprocity between the grandparents and the grandchild revolved around the circular economy of providing care for the young by the elderly and for the elderly by the young adults. This would appear to be an economically rational coping mechanism in the situation of negligible social protection services and provisions from the state to its senior citizens. But again, we created this account from the standpoint of the young kelins, not the grandparents themselves. As per this study, grandparents' voices provided a more subtle and nuanced perspective in which their self-sacrifice took precedence over expectations of transactional material benefits from their young and younger relatives. They emphasized that the love and joy they experienced was satisfactory and sufficient for them. They underlined reciprocated affection from and bonding with their grandchildren as abundant and exuberant. None of the participants reported being financially dependent upon their kenzheh. Certainly, the issue of economic and social class among nebere aluu practicing families remains an open question to be pursued in the future.

The effects of gender on particularities of nebere aluu are an important aspect of this practice. Participants who raised their male grandchildren assumed that they would continue living together indefinitely. They imagined, dreamed and planned for raising them into adulthood and marrying them off. They highlighted the fact that they treated the young boys as their youngest sons, who, according to local conventions, were supposed to stay in the parental house to live and grow their own family. The youngest son was the one bestowed the main responsibility of taking care for the elderly parents. "I have always had this big dream about how I raise and marry Aktilek," said Akmaral. Meerim exclaimed, "my grandson is my son and he will stay with me forever. This is what I endlessly ask the mighty God for." My data on granddaughters within nebere aluu revealed no

comparable expectation of joint residence, but hopes were expressed for uninterrupted bonding, continued emotional connection and expressed mutual care between the child and the grandparents.

Adverse external circumstances bring discontinuity to participants' representation of their future prospects. Limited educational opportunities in rural and provincial areas bring worries to the families concerned with the future of their young children, once the latter grow out of early childhood into adolescence. A decision might be made, motivated by concerns over the child's life opportunities, to shift the custody to the biological parents themselves. With the understanding that the biological parents have attained some level of financial stability and possess better resources to prepare their child for the rapidly changing world, grandparents grant their permission. The necessity to do so comes as a disruption to the participants' goals and desires.

When Aktilek was 10 years old, Akmaral's kelin insisted that he would be "returned to her." Akmaral reluctantly agreed, but her heart was broken. She felt hopeless, hurt and disappointed:

> I always said that I would treat him as my youngest [child], that I will marry him [off] and that he will stay to live with me [with his wife and children]. I... I... I had this big dream that I will raise him and marry him [off]. I was good at taking care of him, I raised him. [...] I loved him so much.

She felt that her parenting of Aktilek was abruptly aborted, and he was taken away prematurely. She felt being treated unfairly and ungratefully:

> I fully provided for him. I bought him everything. They did not have time for him. Wherever I was, in Bishek or Tashkent, the first thing I did was buying him clothes. [...] I took care of him. I raised him myself.

Akmaral felt unappreciated and canceled, especially when she learned that Aktilek was being forced to address her kelin as *apa*, i.e. mother in the Kyrgyz language. She recalled indignantly:

> Aktilek knew about his parents, but he always called me 'apa', not his mother. From the moment he started talking, he called me 'apa'. He did not call her anything. He still calls me 'apa'. They forced him to and he started calling her 'mama'. Aktilek started calling her 'mama' in Russian. He just can't call me grandma [because I am the mother to him].

Aktilek, indeed, grew up, received a good education, got married and lived a life of a young professional in a city. Akmaral felt satisfied with the kind of care he rendered her:

> If I tell him anything, he listens to me. If I ask him for something, he brings it to me. When he worked abroad, he called me on the telephone. I feel that he is close to me. I know it. It is evident.

After his wedding, Aktilek told Akmaral that he "wanted to take her to his house to live with him and to take care of [her]." Akmaral politely declined his offer, even though Aktilek "did not agree to it. He kept calling [her] to join him." She cherished the invitation, but nonetheless intercepted the young man's attempts to convince her to come with him:

> I stopped him. [I told him that] I am used to living in my own house. [I told him], if I live with you, I will not be as happy as I am at my own home.

Akmaral came to terms with Aktilek's separation from her, but the idea of her joining him and his family elsewhere was an unacceptable stretch for her. The young family was supposed to be living with her in her home, not the other way around.

Separation in nebere aluu can be painful and traumatizing. Participants dread it and exert maximum efforts to retain the bond with their grandchildren. Those with better resources made efforts to minimize the possibility of losing their custody over the child. Meerim, whose grandson was a teenager at the time of the interview, was determined to never let this happen. She and her husband had become Akber's legal guardians. "I had his documents changed and had my name written into his birth certificate as his mother and my husband's name as his father. According to all the documents, he is our youngest son," Meerim told us. She formalized her parenthood rights, securing thereby her role and presence in Akber's adult life. This was how she chose to address the questions she kept asking herself, "Will he stay with us? Will he love us? Or will he go live with his mother and father"? Securing her legal rights over the child brought her solace and confidence.

Still more, the formal adoption process allowed Meerim increase her assurance about Akber's future economic opportunities – "it bothered me to think about what would happen when my grandson grows up," she said. She made sure that the resources she had were enough to ensure he would not experience any need for change:

> When I die, my house, all my animals – everything will be his. Nobody will have any [inheritance] rights but him. I raised this grandson; he is my closest person. As long as I live, I will never return him to my son.

Certainly, Meerim saw Akber as the only heir to their family entitled to inherit all the property she owned. Her wish was respected by her adult children. Meerim notes, that "our children are now far away, but our grandson is with us, and he will always help us. He brings me joy." Her assumption was, too, that Akber will

grow up in her house, bring his wife to her and spend his life taking care of Meerim and her husband, just as the youngest sons are expected to.

Conclusions

Any attempt to better understand nebere aluu requires a careful analysis of how different ideas about the notions of family, children and kinship interact with each other in the context of dynamic social changes, economic instability and political volatility. These ideas vibrantly engage with each other and with the wider environment, in which people make sense of their experiences and put their lives together. Nebere aluu, being one approach to intergenerational child-rearing in the region, cannot be reduced to one specific standardized description, yet some of its characteristics appear to be rather stable across data. Grandparents who enact the practice participate in a complex social system serving diverse utilitarian and symbolic functions. The meanings attributed to the practice are multiple and complex. From the standpoint of the grandparents, nebere aluu provides them a space in which they support their young adult children who may find themselves struggling in the bind between the social expectations of earlier marriage and having children when they might not be economically well-prepared for independence and a growing family. The grandparents invest their time, energy and resources to this high-intensity labor with dedication and enthusiasm, thoroughly enjoying and appreciating their experience. They take pleasure in creating and maintaining close alliances and emotional bonds with their grandchildren and receive a sense of attainment and goal in their lives. They often self-sacrifice and exert extreme efforts to be good parents to their youngest family members. All this work ultimately helps rural communities support those who are in the most need. Additionally, the everyday practice of nebere aluu allows for grandparents to continuously engage in passing down cultural knowledge, and ethnonational traditions and values to their grandchildren. Building off the commonly shared respect toward these educational roles, they anticipate and achieve a higher social status and public recognition. All actors participating in the enactment of the practice interact with each other through generations. They uphold social relationships and important continuities persisting in the grandparents' roles as vital resource within their families and communities. Nebere aluu operates as it does today because it allows the old and the young to reconcile the contradictions between different ideas about family and love, between the social norms and economic realities, expectations and aspirations, challenges and solutions. It can also be a space that is open for debate and change in response to shifts and transformations in wider economic, political and social conditions. Nebere aluu is constructed socially by all involved, the older and younger, men and women in a dynamic interplay of relationships. Yet, it would be naïve to conclude that all are equal partners in this construction. Power relations characterize nebere aluu with grandparents clearly having more control over the discourse about it. Future research needs to focus on illuminating these hierarchies, sources of tension and ways they are addressed.

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