The horse, the Kyrgyz horse and the 'Kyrgyz horse'

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Fig. 1. A man on his way to visit a friend in Kyil Tu. His horse is of a sort we encountered throughout our trip: small with a relatively large head, short neck and bushy mane. This man praised his horse for its strength and surefootedness in the mountains, rather than its comfort or speed.

In 1901, colonial officials writing in the Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan observed that the native ponies were ‘small and coarse’, and that ‘no pains were taken in their breeding’. In 1908 this criticism was confirmed and elaborated: ‘The young stallions are allowed to run wild with the mares and fillies, and no care whatever is taken in selecting suitable mature beasts for propagating the breed.’ Perceived carelessness in horse-breeding prompted a number of interventions by the British in India. In 1839, for example, an Arab stallion and eight mares were supplied in order to ‘improve’ the Manipuri breed. None of them survived more than a few years (Clarence Smith 2004). To the west, Soviet agricultural managers introduced Russian thoroughbreds and Arabians to increase the quality and size of ponies in Central Asian states via the All-Union Research Institute for Horse Breeding (VNIIK). The idea that small ponies in mountainous regions with poor pasture may be well adapted to local conditions did not fit with imperial and Soviet notions of improvement, bureaucratic solutions and systematic intervention in animals’ (and peoples’) lives.

Having considered the history and mythology of the horse in India, Doniger has commented that ‘horses offer a paradigm for us to use in our struggle to come to terms with the blotted copybook bequeathed to us by British Orientalism’ (1999: 945).

Today, post-colonial and post-Soviet investigations into horse breeds are still often expressed through tropes of national and ethnic identity, but also employ the language of biodiversity, endangerment and sustainability (Dmitriev and Ernst 1989). In certain contexts, a concern with ‘improvement’ has been displaced by a desire to limit ‘introgression’ in order to maintain breeds of horse that have been identified as genetically distinctive. For example, a recent article on the Iranian Caspian horse calls for ‘an objective breed classification based on genetic uniqueness’ as ‘the first step towards formulating breeding policies and prioritising the breeds for conservation in an effective and meaningful way’ (Amirinia et al. 2007: 1540). As Heatherington has argued in relation to the cloning of the wild mouflon in Sardinia, discourses such as these, concerned with ‘genetic rescue’, do not necessarily protect the interests of animal-keepers, and may have the contrary effect – of rendering local people and their practices ‘inauthentic’ (Heatherington 2008, McElwee 2007).

Breed standards and genetic typing are just two of the knowledge-making practices that enable individual breeders, the livestock industry, research communities, funding bodies, popular science media and state institutions, amongst others, to lay claim to animals and to support particular visions of life itself. Dog-breeding, for example, allowed the Victorian middle class to form an arena of animal and human display that was distinct from the upper-class obsession with cattle and horses (Ritvo 1987). Pure-bred dogs continue to embody important distinctions between wild and tame, indigenous and foreign, pure and polluted (Haraway 2003, 2007).

Sarah Franklin (2007) has documented how changing ideas about inheritance were reflected in understandings of the concept of ‘breed’ as it was applied to domestic livestock in 18th-century England. She has also argued that the remaking of Dolly the sheep’s genealogy, and the possibility of replication as a variety of (re)production, have profound implications for understanding human life (ibid.). In my own work in Newmarket and Kentucky I have shown how the demands of the international racing and betting industries, in articulation with changing technologies and regional modes of production, are inscribed on the bodies of the Thoroughbred.

1. Fieldwork took place as part of a project funded by the Isaac Newton Trust, directed by Dr Mim Bower at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at Cambridge University. The aim of the project is to explore the potential of combining ethnographic data with genetic data from living horse populations and the recent and archaeological past.


of thoroughbred horses and the people who take care of them (Cassidy 2002, 2007). Haraway has argued that it is in fact relationships between companion species, rather than the figure of the cyborg, that offer the most useful openings for the analysis of relationships between humans (2007). In each of these examples, animals occupy the borderlands between nature and culture and are thus ‘good to think’ (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89).

Ethnographic material gathered among horse-owners in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and India as part of a multidisciplinary project based at the McDonald Institute of Archaeological Research has revealed how ideas about national identity, authenticity and origin, expressed in terms of blood, soil and pedigree, also invoke notions of biodiversity and sustainability. These ideas are fluid and contested and reflect the particular situations of various stakeholders in the market for equine capital. For example, in Rajasthan one breeder of curly-eared Marwari horses insisted that they do not have any Arabian ‘blood’, while his cousin, also a breeder, was sceptical, and told me that the Marwari was ‘a mongrel race like every other horse in India’. In Georgia, some owners claimed that the Mengralian horse was far superior to larger Russian horses, others that the Mengralian was better suited to the region, but extinct, others still that the Mengralian was alive and well, but small, weak and ugly compared to Arabs or English thoroughbreds. This article draws on a three-and-a-half-week trip to Kyrgyzstan in 2007. It is therefore suggestive of future directions for research, rather than conclusive. It analyses a set of relationships that emerged from our project, and is not based solely upon the ideas and opinions we elicited in Kyrgyzstan. In practice, therefore, it is a study of a particular type of global assemblage that Ong and Collier have suggested should form the focus of anthropological investigation (2005).

**Fields and horses**

Kyrgyzstan is a small, landlocked country of about five million people lying between Kazakhstan, China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Having once formed mobile communities, the people of Kyrgyzstan, who are of many different ethnic backgrounds, have been forcibly encouraged to settle since 1924. During the Soviet era the livestock sector was of greater relative importance in Kyrgyzstan than in any other of the central Asian states, contributing one third of GDP and more than 40% of agricultural output. The end of Soviet markets and subsidies following independence in 1991 precipitated the loss of two thirds of sheep and one third of the cattle population by 1996 (Kerven 2003). According to the 2005 CIA factbook, 62% of the population are rural, although the rate of rural-urban migration, particularly to the capital Bishkek, is high. In 2004, unemployment was 18% and 40% of people were living below the poverty line. The independent states of central Asia continue to search for motifs around which they can strengthen national identity (Smith et al. 1998). In Kyrgyzstan these motifs include the yurt, music and literature (including the epic martial poem ‘Manas’), and horses – all of them symbols of mobility, and references to a contested, pre-Soviet nomadic past.

In 2007, I was a member of a small team travelling around gathering hair samples and talking to horse owners. We started our trip in Bishkek before travelling 350 km to Barsko’on, near Lake Issyk Kul in the northeast of Kyrgyzstan. We encountered our first horse in our host’s garden, a small grumpy mare with a foal at foot, tied to a tree next to a manger.

The houses in Barsko’on were typical of those we saw all over the Kyrgyzstan countryside and similar in layout, generally single-storey with outdoor squat toilets, indoor kitchens and bedrooms and a room for eating, watching television or talking where the family might display photographs, certificates and other paraphernalia. Each of them backed onto a small orchard or garden containing vegetables, fruit trees and animals, particularly dogs, chickens, cows and horses. Periodically, someone in the house would be called upon to untangle a tethered horse from a tree, herd a turkey into or out of the garden, or drop some kitchen scraps into a trough. Our hostess, Gulmira, was a teacher and her husband worked in the local mine.

After four days in Barsko’on, we left on a road trip, visiting Ichki Jurgez, Karakol, Kadjyci, Bokinbaeva, Narin, Kysl Tu, Chong Kemin and Tegirmenti. During our journey we stayed in all kinds of accommodation – bed-and-breakfasts, apartments and village houses – and were driven around in a clapped-out old car by our driver, Jumagol, who we had met through Gulmira. We had arranged to meet and interview horse trainers, experts in horse games, farmers, musicians, shepherds and a vet. We also stopped anyone we saw along the road with a horse, asked a series of questions and took a hair sample. Despite these ambush tactics, people were remarkably generous with their time and their information. Only one person refused to allow us to sample his horse, and told us that we would have to buy it first.

**Fig. 2.** A young boy appears relaxed as he sits on his two-year-old horse and waits for his race to begin. The leather strap across the horse’s chest will keep the saddle from slipping backwards as they climb the steep terrain on the course. A crupper - a strap that attaches to the back of the saddle and wraps around the tail - stops the saddle from slipping forwards as the horse goes downhill. Underneath the saddle is a thick felt pad which distributes weight and prevents rubbing.
fit the breed standard, and far less common than horses died. He hoped very much Fig. 3 (above). Donkeys are or watching the events. Adults rarely interfered. Fig. 4 (below). Family portrait. This older man was concerned about what would happen to his horse once he died. He hoped very much that his son would take care of it. He felt that it was an excellent example of a Kyrgyz horse, though it does not fit the breed standard, and he made me photograph its hooves.

As part of the preparation for our trip we met Jacqueline Ripart, director of Kyrgyz ATE Foundation, ‘NGO for the rehabilitation of the Kyrgyz horse and the revival of the equestrian traditions of the nomads’ (http://www.atchabys.com/index.htm) in Paris. Ripart had already gathered hair samples for the project from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Her commitment to the preservation of the Kyrgyz horse was evident. As well as organizing a third annual racing festival, she was planning a trek of 30 horses from Kyrgyzstan to the Prix de L’Arc de Triomphe, in order to prove ‘how the horses are hardened, strong in their bones and legs’. She had sought funding for this trek from the Aga Khan, who is well known for the large stud of thoroughbred horses he keeps in France.

I asked Jacqueline how I might recognize a Kyrgyz horse, and she replied that she had found a good description in the St Petersburg archives, and that from this, and from four years studying the horse, she had created a two-page morphological and behavioural breed standard which had since been approved by the Ministry of Agriculture. She had then started a register on the basis of her trips around Kyrgyzstan. She was anxious that the true Kyrgyz horse was being lost, as ‘since Soviet times, they don’t take care. They don’t know which stallion babies come from,’ she said. Her concern replicates the message of the ATE website which introduces ‘the Kyrgyz horse, a genetic and cultural inheritance to saveguard (sic) and describes a symbiotic relationship between the Kyrgyz ‘nomads’ and their horses, a relationship which takes shape in a challenging physical environment. It also warns: ‘This horse is today in process of extinction. With him also the traditions disappear which were associated for him’ (http://www.atchabys.com/index.htm).

The festival of racing organized by Ripart took place near to the village of Barsko’ on and lasted for three days. On the first day the road was clogged with young men riding ponies. The sense of excitement was palpable, even from inside our battered Lada Riva. On this cold morning, a large group of men and boys on ponies, perhaps a hundred or more, had gathered together in a striking setting – a high plateau between two ridges where the games would take place. The festival programme consisted of horse races and games, recitals of music and poetry and demonstrations of archery, falconry and hunting dogs. The horseback wrestling drew a large crowd of people cheering their champions, but the centrepiece was the endurance races, of which there were three: the ‘kunan’ for horses aged between two and three, over ten and a half kilometres; the ‘bhusyhy’ for horses aged between three and four over 15 kilometres, and, most importantly, the ‘bash bauque’ for horses aged five or more, over almost 36 kilometres. Other activities were organized around these races, the starts and finishes of which were marked by continual loud blows on huge musical horns. When the horns sounded people stopped what they were doing and paid attention to which horse would return first from the mountains, sweating and exhausted.

The ‘real’ Kyrgyz horse

In the course of the festival it emerged that the horses competing in the endurance races were not the fastest horses from each village, entered by their owners, but those selected by Ripart and her assistant on the basis of the breed standard. Through Gulshan, our interpreter, I asked a man riding a horse whether it was a Kyrgyz horse. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Why not?’ I asked. ‘Because Jacqueline Ripart measured it and told me that it wasn’t,’ he replied. Some people repeated this story, others were less sure. One responded: ‘I’ve been told by Jacqueline Ripart that it isn’t, but we are in Kyrgyzstan and it is a horse, so… yes, it is a Kyrgyz horse.’

We sampled 101 horses, and questioned all of their owners. We also conducted more in-depth interviews with 15 people. When we asked about the particular qualities of the Kyrgyz horse almost everyone we spoke to referred to endurance and suitability for use in the mountains. Some went on to focus on phenotypical qualities, including being short, with a big head and short body, a full mane, upright pasterns and a neck that swings from right to left rather than up and down (‘better for the mountains’). People referred to different qualities for stallions, geldings and mares. A stallion must be big and jealous – to protect the mares from predators on the jailoo (high pasture). Geldings should be short, with a big head and short body, a full mane, upright pasterns and a neck that swings from right to left rather than up and down (‘better for the mountains’). People referred to different qualities for stallions, geldings and mares. A stallion must be big and jealous – to protect the mares from predators on the jailoo (high pasture). Geldings should be calm and hard-working, as they are used for all of the jobs around the homestead. Good mares are those that produce a lot of milk, to make koumys (a drink of fermented mare’s milk consumed during the spring and summer), and many foals. Only one 78-year-old man we spoke to, Alikmud Oholbekov, could remember anyone measuring a horse using a piece of twine, and the piece of twine he described was a different length from that used by Ripart.

The classification that Ripart and her colleagues are establishing in Kyrgyzstan uses the conventional understanding and paraphernalia of breed management, and contrasts markedly with the ways in which Kyrgyz people describe their horses. Like the 18th-century agriculturalist Robert Bakewell, breed enthusiasts like Ripart value individuals and objectify and measure phenotypic qualities. The Kyrgyz people we spoke to recognize function, and
growth in terms of number in the herd. One of the retired
shepherds we interviewed, Jakshylyk Orgoch, described
wealth solely in terms of numbers of horses, continually
expressing the differences between pre- and post-Soviet
eras in terms of size and distribution of herds. He described
how, during the pre-Soviet era, his great-grandfather and
all of his brothers owned a large herd, each of a different
colour: white, brown, bay, dun, light grey, black and
chestnut. At this time, if a man owned more than ten mares
and one stallion he was considered rich.

As Lévi-Strauss (1966) has observed, the way in which
horses are named cannot be highly revealing of their place
in society. Thoroughbred horses, for example, were once
named after their owners: hence the Byerley (or Byerly)
Turk, the Darley Arabian and so on. However, once they
became individuals in their own right, they warranted
names of their own: Eclipse, Hambletonian and Diomed,
for example. Contemporary racehorse names often reflect
the importance attributed to the ‘ sire’, or male parent: for
example, Storm Cat’s offspring include Cat Thief and
Tactical Cat (Cassidy 2002).

When we first met our interpreter Gulshan, she apolo-
gically explained that she did not know anything about
horses. However, as we travelled to Barsko’ on I asked her
if she could ride and she said ‘Of course!’, as though it was
a ridiculous question. In the village where she had grown
up her family had always owned at least one horse. When
I asked her if she could remember any of their names she
laughed at me. ‘No names!’ she laughed. ‘Only brown horse,
white horse, whatever. To use for work and then to eat.’
The form we used to collect hair samples requested the
name of the horse. This often caused hesitation. The
horse had no name, it was the brown one with a slit cut
in its ear to distinguish it from the neighbour’s brown one.
Of the 101 horses we sampled, names were given for 83
and of these, at least 61 were descriptive of age or colour.
For example. Some of the racehorses we sampled at the
festival and when we travelled to Korgundo’rblac, Tamir
Kanat, Chong Kemin and Narin were named. One was
called Beemer, another Mercedes, for example. In one vil-
lage we were invited to name a racehorse. I wanted to call
it ‘brown one’, but I was overruled. From our very limited
data, it is not possible to know whether the two systems of
named and unnamed horses that we identified have always
coexisted, or whether these are just two possibilities among
many others. What is clear is that the creation of a breed
register or stud book would necessitate the dominance of
one system over the other.
The system of recording of names and matings also
reflects a particular way of organizing livestock produc-
tion that was not prevalent in Kyrgyzstan. We asked Gilmar,
our hostess in Barsko’ on, how she bred from her mare,
and her answers were confirmed by those we spoke to subse-
cutently. She told us simply that, ‘the mare goes up into the
jailoo (high pasture in the mountains) in May and comes
back down again in September, pregnant’. There are no
fences and no management on the jailoo, herds of young
stallions (called bachelors in English horse parlance) mix
with family groups. Selection is not a possibility.
We asked everyone we spoke to whether they would
ever charge a fee to someone who needed to use their stal-
lion to cover a mare. This proved difficult to imagine. My
attempts to describe breeding in hand caused amusement
and a little embarrassment. However, once I had explained
the concept, most people agreed – absolutely not. It would
be unacceptable to ask for money from a neighbour to borrow
your horse,’ Jakshylyk Orgoch told us. Even when selection
was used this did not require the payment of a fee, as the
racehorse trainers in Tegirimt told us: ‘For a racehorse
we choose a good stallion and don’t let any others near.

People are seeing how we do this and bringing their horses
to us, but we don’t take any money, they are relatives and
people we know.’ Only one small group of young men at
the festival entertained the idea. Yes, they said, they could
charge for using their stallion – he was a racehorse, and a
Kyrgyz horse at that, why shouldn’t they ask for money?

Conclusion
Arguments about biodiversity and species extinction sug-
gest that particular kinds of animals should be preserved
for the good of everyone. On the other hand, individuals
and groups strive to identify their region or themselves with
these animals, in order to benefit from the flow of resources
they attract (for interesting examples see Murphy’s 1995
article on the Nez Perce horse and McElwee 2007). Activities
such as these mobilize categorical distinctions including
‘type’ and ‘breed’ which have contested social,
biological and genetic referents.

In the case I have described, the possibility of creating
value arises not only from genetic technology, which can
in practice undermine ideas about purity and isolation, but
also out of a cultural logic of possession and individualism
enacted in the kinship of the horses themselves. Of various
horses however, we were told, ‘I don’t know its father – why
should it matter? It’s a good strong horse.’ The logic of
breedwealth, as described by Sarah Franklin (1997, 2007),
creates an opportunity for the creation of wealth, based
not just on the properties of the particular horse, but on
the notion of value created by selective breeding itself.

For some people in Kyrgyzstan, including the racehorse
trainers we spoke with, this may offer a source of income,
but it may also have unforeseen consequences for those
who value horses differently. Genetic sampling under-
taken by Ripart reproduced this regime of value (Ripart
and her assistant sampled what they felt were good exam-

ples of Kyrgyz horses), though it is unlikely that the
results will comply with this vision (Bower and Cassidy
forthcoming).

Ripart recently explained to journalists: ‘We have
to fight to keep diversity and the richness of the world.

Kyrgyzstan is an ancestral horse culture. This is a very
type of horse. There are only about five million Kyrgyz
people, very few, but they have a rich horse culture.
This is preserving not only the horse, but also a universal
patrimony’ (Trilling with Dalbaeva 2008).

These rather different concerns – for the horse, for a
way of life and for the ideal of diversity – are not easily
combined. Ripart’s aims to save the Kyrgyz horse as both
‘genetic’ and a ‘cultural’ resource may be contradic-
tory. The preservation of horses conceived of as a limited
stock of endangered ‘genetic’ resources appeals to some
powerful constituencies, but it also conflicts with existing
‘cultural’ practices that seek to multiply the population,
without regard to morphology, let alone genetic make-up.

In order to generate support, Ripart must offer a con-

sistent and attractive vision of the pre-Soviet past, resolving
inconsistencies and modifying practices that conflict with
Euro-American ideas of animal welfare, for example. A
photograph of a horse on the Kyrgyz ATE website is not
a good illustration of her idea of a Kyrgyz horse (which
small with a relatively big head) but fits closely with the
ideal of equine beauty held by Euro-Americans. The bash
haigue has been shortened from 50 to 36 kilometres and
the minimum age of rider has been set at 18 in accordance
with the international rules of endurance racing, despite
the fact that owners prefer to have lightweight boys ride
their horses. Ripart’s activities reflect the contrasting
demands of different systems that coexist in Kyrgyzstan.

The articulation of these systems enables us to explore
the ambiguous terrain of livestock technologies, international
and local networks and post-Soviet nation building.

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15