Mobile Institutions: Circulation and Negotiation in the Development Encounter

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In a tiny mountain village of Kyrgyzstan, high in the Pamir mountains, Bakyt, a slight, but energetic young man gathered 15 people in a small, rustic room—formerly a café at the edge of a tiny, mostly empty bazaar. The room was dark and chilly, in the middle of July, and it had a dirt floor and a miss-matched collection of beat up tables and chairs. Bakyt had invited these bazaar sellers and other passers-by to listen to a presentation on advocacy—that is, helping people help themselves.

Although Bakyt had been born in this village, he looked strikingly urban, with his pale skin, bare head, blue jeans, and bright white dress shirt. Members of his audience had faded hats and scarves and tanned, wind-worn faces. A native son who had made good, Bakyt was a city boy now. He lived in Bishkek, the capital city, on the other side of the republic. He had a well-paying job in an international NGO. He traveled not only all over the country but all over the world. He had a Master’s Degree from the University of Colorado. Bakyt believed many of the dire social, political, and economic problems that faced Kyrgyzstan could be solved by getting citizens to actively seek solutions to local problems, which in his understanding implied getting funding from international donor NGOs to fund local project. That was what his advocacy trainings were all about—showing people how to benefit from the money international donor NGOs were funneling toward grass-roots development projects in Kyrgyzstan
The first order of business at the meeting, then, was to explain what an NGO was. Bakyt taped several pieces of large white poster paper to one wall and drew three circles. One he labeled “government,” another “business,” and the third, “NGOs.” “As you all know, the government in our country doesn’t function, so they won’t help you,” he said, pen in the first circle. Moving to the next circle, he commented, “businesses are just out to make money, so they won’t help you.” That leaves the third circle, NGOs. NGOs solve the problems that businesses and government can’t. If you want this system to work for you, you have to let them know what you need. The way to do that is to write a grant proposal.”

Now Bakyt went through the steps of writing a grant proposal. On a clean sheet of poster paper he listed the elements in a proposal: the problem, the solution, the work plan, the budget. He asked his audience to name a few things they need. The answers included a banya (public bath), better telephone lines, a bridge, school repairs. On a new piece of paper, he went through each problem and showed how to write an itemized budget that could be included in the grant proposal. Bakyt’s audience dutifully took notes using pens and paper he had handed out at the beginning of the session. Bakyt ended by encouraging participants to make use of an information center he was opening soon in the village. The center would have books, pamphlets, and other resources to help villagers find information about donors and grant competitions. The center would even have a computer, and, Bakyt hoped, internet.

The village, Gulabat, lies in a long valley in the southern arm of Kyrgyzstan, a republic in Central Asia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. It is a nation of 5.5 million people, comprising numerous ethnic group (the largest being Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian), languages (the same),
and religions (Islam and Orthodox Christianity). Since independence, the republic has suffered increasing economic insecurity and political instability. Poverty hovers around 40 percent.

Under the leadership of Askar Akaev, the president at independence, Kyrgyzstan seemed headed toward democracy. Akaev aggressively courted international donors, agreeing to their free trade reforms and promising democratic changes. The latter proved to be empty, and Akaev increasingly consolidated his power as his regime became conspicuously corrupt and repressive. In March 2005, his regime was overthrown. His successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev, also courted the development sector, and he and his family benefited financially from an American military base near Bishkek. His repressive policies combined with widespread unrest over rising costs of living may have led to his ouster in April 2010. The current regime, led by the former opposition leader and diplomat Roza Otunbayeva, is so weak it was unable to prevent bloody ethnic conflict, which climaxed in June 2010, between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan (ICG 2010).

When I wrote my dissertation prospectus in 2003 (back when Akaev was in power), multi-sited ethnography had become a popular method of research. Anthropologists started talking about multi-sited ethnography in the 1990s, in response to the post-modern attack on anthropology of preceding years. In “Traveling Culture,” published in 1997, James Clifford challenges the assumption that culture and place are tightly linked, and urges anthropologists to incorporate the mobility of their informants into the design of their fieldwork (1997: 58). Field sites should be delimited not by geographical or political boundaries--boundaries that have little to do with people’s lives--but by our informant’s strategic movements, he argued. Anna Tsing did just this. In ethnographies of “out-of-the-way places” in Indonesia, she describes traveling with her
mobile informants as they moved from village to village. This method revealed how member of her community engaged in resistance and effected cultural production and transformation.

In this intellectual climate, my advisors insisted I avoid proposing anything resembling the stereotypical village ethnography, which they considered to be neither interesting nor competitive. I dutifully designed and implemented a multi-sited project studying the development sector in Kyrgyzstan, which receives among the highest amount of development aid (per capita) in the fSU.

During two years of fieldwork, from 2003 until 2005, I was based both in Bishkek and a provincial capital called Jalalabat, but traveled much more widely, across six of the seven oblasts (provinces), and even into rural areas, such as Gulabat. Moving in this way allowed me to gain a unique perspective on the development projects I was interested in, from their busy headquarters in Bishkek, where the sector’s international workforce vied for grants and developed projects, to provincial capitals and villages where these projects were implemented and materials distributed. By moving along these paths, it was possible to watch the stereotypical trajectory of the well-funded and promising development project lose its sparkle and persuasive power as it was carried out into the field. It was also possible to see more complex trajectories: how particularly charismatic and industrious local and village workers could make untranslatable projects work. In fact, I know Bakyt as one such development professional. Overwhelmingly, this mobile fieldwork revealed the importance of a truth anthropologists have long known: context is everything. My fieldwork in Gulabat, combined with experiences in Bishkek and elsewhere, allow me to offer a critique of Bakyt’s project, from its inception in Bishkek, to its
implementation in that rustic room in the Gulabat bazaar. In this short paper, I focus on one stage: reception.

In order to demonstrate, I return to Gulabat. After Bakyt’s presentation, he left to talk to other bazaar vendors, and I stayed in the room to talk to some of the participants. Although Bakyt had introduced me as a foreign researcher, they immediately started in on a series of questions: “How do we apply?” “Do we apply to you or Bakyt?” I finally realized that they thought Bakyt and I worked together at a foreign organization and that we were there to hand out grants on behalf of our NGO—even if nothing in Bakyt’s presentation came even close to suggesting so. I explained that I had nothing to do with his NGO, and that the NGO itself was not a donor but a grant recipient, and Bakyt, too, had received a grant to come and teach them how to do what he knew how to do—get grants from elsewhere. My awareness that his work was hindered by preexisting misunderstandings was reinforced when I returned to Bakyt’s house. He had not yet returned, and his mother was quick to approach me with the eager question, “Did Bakyt give them money?” she asked. In other words, people in the village, even those who knew Bakyt well, had little understanding of his work or the larger development sector, understanding that only he, a rich man from the city, occasionally visited the village in order to distribute foreign money there. And in some respects, this is exactly what he did, just not on this visit.

But the conversation I had with participants was useful not only for what it revealed about the misunderstanding of Bakyt’s role, but also for what it suggested about realities in the village. During the Soviet era, I learned, the village received considerable subsidies from the state, as the village consumes more than it produces. Food came to the village, and it was cheap. “But now
there is no social help [sotsiyal'nui pomoshi],” said one resident. “We only can grow potatoes, and potatoes grow well sometimes and not well other times. And we don’t have a lot of animals.” Gulabat’s problems were not the type that could be solved by a resource center, advocacy trainings, or a few NGO grants. In simple terms, the village’s problem was lack of money, and not for want of economic savvy. The villagers I met could tell me exactly what a household in their village spent on a year’s supply of flour and coal and could quote the cost of living for one individual for one month. Their faces and hands said it all: they were hard workers, who worked to survive. Another way to look at it is to say the problems facing Gulabat are structural. Gülabat is a remote village at a high elevation whose inhabitants were basically practicing subsistence farming and herding, and whose government has neither the will nor the ability to invest in the type of infrastructure that could change conditions here. In such an environment, it was unclear to me how the kind of changes of attitude or behavior, promoted by development professionals like Bakyt, could help them. This disconnect was something my multi-sited ethnographic work helped me understand. I understood what Bakyt was trying to do, why it was persuasive in his milieu, why it was attractive to the villagers, and why it wouldn’t ever be more than a prophylactic for Gulabat or other villages like it. I also understood why an intelligent young man like Bakyt, for whom such realities were no doubt obvious, did not care, but determinedly continued these strenuous and challenging visits.

In reflecting on this experience now, I discover that these tiny snippets of knowledge, acquired during my brief visits through my friendship with Bakyt, and which seemed revelatory at the time, create more questions than they answer. After two visits to Gulabat (a total of no more than 7-8 days), I can tell you precious little about its social, political, and economic life. I know that
most people keep animals—sheep and yak. I know that the valley is almost entirely ethnic Kyrgyz, even though it was administered by Tajikistan until the early 2000s. I know that the village has a mosque and that many people, especially elders, are observant Muslims. I know that school teachers are considered elites, many of them having been educated in (Stalinabad) Dushanbe, at the end of the valley, during the Soviet era. Today, however, the elites of the village study in Osh.

I do not know enough about Gulabat to understand the process by which people like Bakyt move away and become alienated to the point of being misunderstood. Nor can I say whether the problems Gulabat faced were represented accurately by the villagers. Was the problem simply negligence by the state? Was it ecological, linked to the deterioration of the livestock and overgrazing? Or was it some more sinister unwillingness of the state to help the region with infrastructure? Just down the valley, stood Peak Lenin, one of the easiest 7000+ peaks in the world, an international draw. Why did the village not benefit from this obvious opportunity? What was the role of other international players, such as the Chinese, who were everywhere in the valley, hiring village men as day laborers as they prospected for gas and oil. What about remittances? How did these affect life in the village? And what good was money anyway, when there was so little infrastructure with which any consumables could be brought there? What expectations and desires do they have, and what sources of information feed them?

My fieldwork offers important insights about neoimperialism and the development encounter in the former Soviet Union, but whether or not the method is sound is something of which I am not yet convinced. While deterritorialization is important as a theoretical perspective, many scholars
argue that its assumption that there exists a rupture between place and culture is premature. Harri Englund argues that to dismiss boundaries and localities as no longer relevant is to ignore what people do and how they understand the world. Among the anthropologists who were working in Central Asia while I was there, and who I had contact with, about half were working mobilely, as I was, and half were situated in discreet places. Near Jalalabat, anthropologist Julie McBrien was working in a small village called Bazar Korgon. Her work does not assume an a priori link between culture and place, and yet it is usefully contextualized in the history and geography of the village. Having lived in the village and returned several times over a span of six or seven years, she can offer a sense of people and place that is missing from the work of the equally rich and insightful work of Madeleine Reeves, who studied border regimes in the Ferghana Valley, and who, like me, was constantly on the move.

Traveling between the center and the periphery revealed the disconnect between the ideals of development professionals working within a thankless and cutthroat development sector, and the ignorance and passivity of the village people they hoped to help. It revealed the trajectory of the newest development approaches. As Bakyt’s work illustrates, the goal of development assistance has shifted from an emphasis on solving problems to addressing the cultural, economic, and political factors that keep people from solving problems themselves. But while a small amount of ethnographic research in the development sector goes a long way, thanks to the extent of documentation available no farther than your computer, the same is not true of Gulabat.

One of the enduring lessons for me when I reflect on these encounters is the extent to which culture is still place-bound. Bakyt’s almost compulsive efforts targeting his natal village reveals
both the continuing pull of village culture and the distinctive shape of development culture in Bishkek, where everyone is trying to get a share of what’s available, and funnel it to his family or region. From development professionals to migrant workers, everyone I met bore the imprint of one or multiple places, moreso than the imprint of movement. People moved in order to find stability and permanence. Migrant workers traveled in order to collect money with which to build houses, or to establish more stable lives elsewhere. This is not to say it is not useful to travel with informants, design multi-sited projects, or attend to the way mobility imprints people and their cultures, but it is also to say that something is lost as we experiment with alternatives to the ethnographic knowledge that traditionally was our contribution and which for important philosophical reasons, we have become uncomfortable providing. The implications of not offering this knowledge is that our analyses must be even more creative, rigorous, and revealing, but this is something I am not always sure they can be without the literal grounding of our experiences and interpretations in place-bound culture. What does this mean for anthropologists? Possibly that we have to work even harder, to ground ourselves in multiple places, even as we continue to move between them.