

# Sacred Sites as People's Power in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan.



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# Country Profile

Population: 6.038 million  
(80 nationalities and ethnic groups)

Area: 199, 900 sq km.

Major religion: Islam

Geography : Landlocked; entirely mountainous, dominated by the Tien Shan range (Celestial Mountains); many tall peaks, glaciers, and high altitude lakes, rivers, forests, and valleys.



# Basic Definitions

- The Sacred Geography encompasses a network of sacred (*yyik*) and spiritual (*kasiettu*) territories visited by pilgrims. Such territories include sites of land and water, constructions and objects that possess qualities of holiness in the consciousness of local people.
- Sacred sites pilgrimage is a spiritual practice comprised of the intention (*tilek*) and a wide range of rituals (*yrym-jyrym*).

# Historical Background

- Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz Republic has seen a restoration of the ideas and practices common in the pre-Soviet period
- Opening up, constructing and worshipping SS have become one of the most active and visible forms of returning to what people in Kyrgyzstan considered to be truly “theirs”, traditional and national.
- After 1991 pilgrimage to SS became one of the most relevant social actions in Kyrgyzstan.

# Beginning

- In 2004: the available literature shed little to no light on the current state of that tradition, but we were boldly planning to study the sacred sites phenomenon in the country. The circumstances have been favorable as we implemented our plans over the last decade.
- The study that had begun as an academic one quickly evolved to become an applied and participatory one.

# A visible, tangible and well- documented fact

- 2005: “the entire territory of Kyrgyzstan is a sacral land”. Perceived those statements as a metaphor and an expression of folk beliefs and nationalism.
- In 2014, Aigine completed long-term study that resulted into mapping and publishing the sacred geography of Kyrgyzstan.
- Completed the inventory and juxtaposed that with the physical map of the country
- Kyrgyzstan is indeed permeated by a network of sacred sites. And the folk metaphor has become a visible, tangible and well-documented fact.





# Accumulators of knowledge and practices

- The larger territory we covered, the clearer it became that the SS – through the changing generations of pilgrims – were becoming the accumulators of ideas, knowledge and practices.
- The layers of information and knowledge preserved in the depths of collective memory: the history, governance institutions, healing, oral tradition, animal husbandry, peace-building, family, gender and many other aspects of human life.
- All of this knowledge is mostly expressed as oral histories, rituals and various multiple practices.





# Why did this happen?

- The very number of sacred sites identified in 2004-2014 suggests that over the 27 years since independence the tradition of SS worshipping has been restored.
- It has transformed from a marginal, closed tradition to an open social action. The massive restoration of SS had begun earlier than the massive construction of mosques and revitalization of many other traditional phenomena. The sacred geography was restored in a relatively short period of time. What are the reasons and factors that enabled this?

# “The timelessness”

## “The tough 90s”

- During the transition period, when the previous social system is collapsing, while the formation of a new one is not completed yet, the majority of people find themselves in the situation of tough uncertainty.
- Restoration of the sacred geography is, first of all, of social nature, and then ethnic, spiritual or religious.

# Why did the Kyrgyz-speaking people begin to restore and visit the SG?

- The Kyrgyz did not yet discover the ways of external migration – their main efforts were focused on the territory gained by Kyrgyzstan and therefore became “Kyrgyz”.
- The creation or discovery of the sacred geography was the reaction and response of local communities to the fact the Soviet system seized to exist.
- In the situation of disintegrating public relations, nature and ancestors became the main source of support for the indigenous ethnic group of the newly independent country.

# Who is behind?

- During the early years of independence, the Kyrgyz practitioners, who used to keep vigil at night hiding behind the bushes and trees of SS, took it to the open and, appealing to the ancient traditions of the ancestors, started developing the physical space of the country.
- It is only people— literally, the common folk – behind the creation of sacred geography. There have been no “agents of influence” (external influence), nor any state support.
- The entire sacred geography is under the protection and care of local people and communities.

# Nation-Building

- The sacred geography took visible shapes and forms already in the early years of independence, because the phenomenon of sacred sites got into the very core of nation-building in Kyrgyzstan.
- The interests of the individual and the state overlapped at sacred sites. That overlap happened in the domain called state territory.



# Transformation and Circulation of Capital

- In early independence (1991) sacred sites based as ethnic mobilization became the method of grassroots or folk's policy of developing and structuring the state territory.
- The processes that were happening “on the top”, where the first political technocrats worked on the creation of the state ideology of Kyrgyzstan, influenced the policy at the grassroots level.
- It was far from being a one-way influence – it was an equal and mutual influence both ways: top-down and bottom-up.
- Events of 1995 and 2000 – the biggest events aimed at the building the new Kyrgyz statehood – we can say that SS have been involved in that building.

# Manas-Ordo





МУЗЕЙ

МУЗЕЙГЕ КИРҮҮ  
ВХОД В МУЗЕЙ  
ENTRANCE TO THE  
MUSEUM





## *Biz el menen*

- This is an example of how the values of people, the symbolic capital, were converted into political capital. SS started actually participating in the formation of the “policy of the past”. Through such acts, the political power signaled and demonstrated that it “was with the people” (*biz el menen*).

# Safety Power Mechanism

- The traditional belief in the sacral connection of the person and site continues to live among Kyrgyz: the more the person and community take care of the SS the more well-being and success the sites grant to people.
- The formula “*arbak yraazy bolmouncha, jashoo onolboit*” (life won’t be unsuccessful unless the spirit of the ancestor is content).
- The traditional belief in the man-site-higher power connection is the main motivation mechanism of the restoration and preservation of the SG.
- The site in this chain is almost always a natural place making the chain as follows: man-nature-higher power.

АК ИЙИЛЕТ, БИРОК СМИБАВУ





# *Ak Iliet, Birok Synbait*

- The traditional philosophy of the Kyrgyz people that works for the entire sacred space.
- *Ak* means white, light, kind, pure and just.
- *Aktyk* and *Akyikat*– transparency and justice.
- An unstoppable, on-going search for justice in regard to various objects at sacred sites.

# Concluding Points

- SG is the social space with the key principles of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.
- This space is accessible and open to any person observing the rules of SS visitation.
- The sacred geography as the totality of sacred sites with equal and public use performs the search for justice in the society itself.
- It also gives birth to social anxiety and concern when there is no interconnectedness and mutual responsibility between people's and political powers.

# Wisdom of SS

- The traditional wisdom remains: *Betege ketet* – *bel kalat, bekter ketet* – *el kalat* (Feather-grass will fade – the earth will remain, the rulers will fade – the people will remain).

# Thank you

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