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Anna Odland Portisch

A Magpie's Tale Ethnographic and Historical Perspectives on the Kazakh of Western Mongolia.

New York: Berghahn, 2023

ISBN 978-1-80073-796-9 (HB), 267 pp.

In order to write her Ph.D. about Kazakh embroidery handicraft and knowledge, Anna Odland Portisch went to live among the Kazakhs of Western Mongolia, in Bayan-Ölgii province, from the mid-2000s onwards. This book is centred on her main host family in the field, that of her female friend Aynagul. The author states from the very beginning that although 'based on anthropological fieldwork', this book 'does not aim to engage with theoretical debates within anthropology'. It aims at reaching 'a wide readership' by combining the lively narrative of the intercultural encounter of the ethnographer and her hosts with historical contextualising of the personal stories that 'form the core of this book' (p. 3). The style of writing is fragmentary, sensitive and intimate, never judgemental but always engaged and informed. The structure interweaves personal stories, both from the ethnographer and her hosts, and the bigger history of Kazakh migratory moves across Central and Inner Asia. The book is divided into seven sections, each subdivided into very short chapters, of a few pages each, which creates fluidity and pleasure in reading.

The three first sections describe the author's 'naïve' arrival and progressive settlement in Bayan-Ölgii. The first narrates her discovery of the Kazakh-speaking province of Western Mongolia and her encounter (somehow by chance) with her host family. In a very vivid, engaging manner, the author depicts how she is progressively led to settle in the small, remote village of Soghakh (Ulaankhus district), having to deal with drunk drivers, suspicious looks, insomnia and daily chores. The second section links family life more tightly with the recent history of Mongolia, especially the toll of the post-socialist era in the 1990s: how the host family tackled the end of a State-supported economy by developing private businesses (*kampan*, p. 69), how they moved their house to a different place (literally rebuilding it with the very same bricks, windows and materials, p. 53), how some members moved to Kazakhstan in search for a better life (p. 50); but also how they rely on family solidarity, locally described as 'thick as cream' (p. 72). It also tells the tragic story of that young man, dead after being bitten by a rabid dog, mostly because of the remoteness of health services and inefficiency of transportation (p. 75). The third section includes personal whereabouts (p. 87), incursion into the migratory history of Kazakh people and lively portraits of people encountered in Bayan-Ölgii, both Kazakhs from the host family and colourful foreigners passing by,

such as the French bikers Celina and Antoine. Beyond the anecdotes, this section insists on deconstructing the vision of Kazakh as a people of ‘traditional’ ‘nomadic’ culture, ‘stuck in time’; it highlights both their history and connectiveness to the globalised world as part of their contemporary identities.

The two central sections, ‘Into the Past’ and ‘New Futures’, are dedicated to long-term history of the Kazakh. They chronicle the ebb and flow of steppe empires and confederations in Central Asia and Mongolia (thirteenth–seventeenth centuries), forced or strategic migrations to flee from Russian colonisation in today’s Kazakhstan (from the eighteenth century until World War One), and other migrations from Chinese Xinjiang to Western Mongolia in order to escape authoritarian cultural assimilation and discriminatory policies against Muslim populations (early twentieth century). They describe how several migratory waves of Kazakh people would finally settle in and model today’s Western Mongolia, how they were caught up in the turmoil of the Russian Revolution and in the politics of independent, socialist Mongolia, how land was allocated to Kazakh people there in 1930, later becoming a whole province with special rights (e.g. Kazakh-speaking education) in 1940. Bayan-Ölgii (which translates ‘Rich Cradle’ in Mongolian) was therefore built up as a new homeland to those Kazakh families.

Drawing on personal threads that had appeared in the previous sections, the last two sections give the overall dynamics of the book. Through stories from the field, section 6 ‘Broken Ties’ addresses hard, emotional subjects, such as solitude and loneliness of the ethnographer and their need to take a break from the traditional ‘immersive’ field, or topics such as alcoholism, depression, suicide or death among the family members. It directly addresses one of the recurring themes of the book, the condition of women: sexual harassment, violence from the family-in-law, forced marriages and strong-willed brides-to-be who bravely resist local pressures. By contrast, the very last section ‘New Worlds, Old Ties’, is written like a kind of fairytale, lighter in tone, narrating the cultural, economic, familial challenges encountered by a loving, international couple (US groom, Kazakh bride) until their happy wedding.

A Kazakh tale, from which the book title originates, tells how the magpie came to be variegated – black and white. The moral refers to the human being as mixture of good and evil. Such is the anthropologist’s journey in the field, which Portisch depicts in a very honest manner, as made of friendship and discovery as much as of doubts and morally troubled reactions when facing material or emotional obstacles. Secondly, the intimate, family context and situated point of view allow the author to convey a very nuanced vision of the Kazakh of Western Mongolia: it highlights their joys and struggles, their violence and misery, their humanity in the variegated sense, in response to that of the anthropologist. In a time when anthropologists (re)explore alternative,

if not creative, writings, that is what the fragmentary, intimate writing chosen by the author can do: show life as it is, variegated, beyond preconceived categories. But the author suggests more: ‘A magpie, a thief. That is what I am. Mixing shiny and dead fragments to furnish a nest’ (p. 250). In the end, the magpie metaphor accurately describes both the author’s writing choices and the anthropological approach in general.

This kind of writing requires efforts in binding the particular and the general, not necessarily explicitly or theoretically, but through writing choices and literary composition. Some chapters contain very beautiful, convincing case descriptions that closely articulate the family’s daily life and what it means to be Kazakh in contemporary Mongolia. To quote but a few examples, the depiction of the ‘flour crisis’ (p. 68) during the 1990s and the way the family responded to it; the discovery of the ‘young uncle’s real kin status, which leads to shed light on traditions of adoption and family-in-law (p. 211); the kidnapping of a young girl by a group of young men... The author succeeds in giving the reader a strong sense of aspects such as the hard life and treatment of women, the strong sense of familial solidarity and moral regulation, the social evils of depression and alcoholism, the sense of remoteness (from the capital, from one’s kin...), or migration as a strong feature of Kazakh people, to this day with Kazakhstan-Mongolia mobilities.

However, in some cases the link between the personal stories and the bigger context is not so well knitted. This is especially visible in sections 4 and 5 (see above). One can definitely relate to the story of Khairat (grandfather of the mother of the author’s host family) and his brothers as a more personal aspect of the bigger history. But the intimate, familial dimension of their migrations is evoked only in passing. These sections are mostly a summary of English-written historical essays. Whereas this may prove useful for students or a wider audience, it lacks more personal insight. Strangely enough, the recent mobilities of the *oralmandar*, a word referring to ‘Returning Kazakhs’ from neighbouring countries who were invited join post-socialist Kazakhstan, is dealt with in a scattered manner (e.g. pp. 91, 113, 220...) which may induce some confusion over this huge, contemporary issue.

Other chapters in these sections, although potentially interesting per se, show no obvious link to broader history, as if they had arbitrarily been inserted here rather than somewhere else: a night encounter with stray dogs, the fasting custom of Ramadan, a suicide attempt... Many such anecdotes could have led the author to shed light on relevant topics, contributing to a better understanding of contemporary life of the Kazakh in Mongolia: what does it mean to be torn between two ‘homelands’, one with history and origins (*Land der Vorväter*, Kazakhstan) and one with family networks and social habits (*Geburtsort*, Mongolia, Alff 2012)? How are the mobilities lived through,

emotionally, socially and materially (Lacaze 2014)? What kind of Islam do Kazakh practice in an age of global religious radicalisation that also reaches Central and Inner Asia (Poujol 2017)? How representative of contemporary mobility and female empowerment is the book's final international wedding between a Mongolian-speaking humanitarian worker from the US and an English-speaking Kazakh woman who ends up moving abroad to her husband's place? One feels the lack of an intermediary scale between the very personal situations and the very broadly documented historical perspectives, directly relevant to an anthropological approach, that would tell us more about the representativeness of the examples, and possibly other local points of view. That would by no mean diminish the beautiful writing, but enrich it.

Also, one may wonder about the (scientific) status of the book. It is published by a renowned academic publisher (Berghahn Books), in a collection called *Lifeworlds: Knowledges, Politics, History*, which induces some academic or at least argumentative expectations. The author demonstrates, in this book as well as in other publications, her accurate knowledge of the Kazakh context, and her sense of scientific writing. She quotes the literature extensively, but somehow uses the (massively historical, much more than anthropological) bibliography to provide contextual information rather than comparison and debate. The very personal point of view she adopts often leads to long series of questions and hypotheses, most of them interesting and relevant. However, these are not resolved in the text, as if it were not up to an anthropologist to look for answers in the field. Imaginary prospects are of course useful, but they have limitations.

Finally, I am a personal admirer of Ann Odland Portisch's ethnographic description and anthropological analysis of the craft of felt embroidery, the knowledge, aesthetic perception and their transmission among Kazakh women of Western Mongolia (Portisch 2011). This is a topic both very promising and mostly unheard of. As such, I had expected to read more about this: it could have been a very stimulating entry point into today's Kazakh daily lives, feelings, perceptions and adaptabilities. Hopefully the author will put her excellent narrative and descriptive skills at the service of anthropological research in publications yet to come.

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