

In many cases, where a simple focused narrative would do, they distract attention by the treadmill of repetitious classifications and taxonomies.

MIKHAIL SUSLOV
University of Copenhagen

The Force of Custom: Law and the Ordering of Everyday Life in Kyrgyzstan. By Judith Beyer. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. xxvi, 244 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Photographs. Maps. \$28.95, Paper. doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.74

The Force of Custom: Law and the Ordering of Everyday Life in Kyrgyzstan by Judith Beyer is a convincing ethnographic monograph on the persistence of social practices that contribute to a resilient community. Beyer situates her narrative in a remote part of the Central Asian steppes known as Talas province in northwestern Kyrgyzstan. She argues determinedly that the road map for navigating successful legal pluralism in this country is a daily understanding and interpretation of the Kyrgyz' everyday practice known as *salt*. What might be considered as something similar to a Zen *Koan*, Beyer writes that *salt* can only "maintain its relevance as it remains flexible. To capture and codify its rules and principles at a given moment in time would destroy the possibility of negotiation in future situations" (10). So how does such a process really work?

When it comes to deciphering codes of the everyday variety, anthropologists employ a magnifying glass that illustratively captures distinct cues and offers a nuanced explanation of how such codes are linked together. In this light, Beyer exemplifies the best of anthropology by painstakingly demonstrating *salt* through a series of detailed ethnographic engagements with leaders from the two villages of Aral and Engels, places that Beyer suggests have escaped post-socialism dilemmas, perhaps because of their daily adherence to *salt*. Following her ethnographic instincts, Beyer sets out to define the concentric circles of *salt* in these Kyrgyz villages. First, she insists that *salt* is a daily practice—a coded belief system—that brings people together and aligns them. In the process of invoking *salt*, they recognize its code that bring order and meaning to the other sometimes contradicting legal systems that shape their daily lives, including *shariat* and national laws. Second, Beyer conveys that *salt* is not another name for customary law; "*salt* was too deeply embedded in practice to be codified, and too strongly embodied in people to be institutionalized" (35). Nevertheless, Beyer is somewhat entangled by "customary law" in trying to describe *salt*. She diligently refocuses her readers' attention to demonstrating a diverse set of everyday social engagements in these two small villages, and how in each instance, *salt* operates—from sorting through a divorce to changing funerary practices—and how different actors such as politicians, religious leaders, and businessmen utilize *salt*.

While Beyer carefully illustrates the multiple examples of how leaders from two small villages demonstrate *salt*, I continually contemplated her efforts from the applied policy worlds that I work in everyday, that of development and peacebuilding, and our favored term of "resilience." In so doing, how would a moniker such as "resilience" enable Beyer to redefine *salt* by studying its impact instead of its interactive process? In other words, in moving away from the definition of *salt* under the rubric of customary law, which denotes rules and orders, and instead shifting it to that of an attitudinal or psychological state of being—flexibility, adaptability and persistence—would Beyer gain additional analytical tools to more completely make the invisible

visible? I bring this up because Beyer's work reminds me of a similar dilemma I faced twenty-five years ago during my PhD field work in Kyrgyzstan. Struggling with a set of contradictory notions that revealed themselves in Kyrgyz idioms and daily practices, I ended up calling the Kyrgyz' unique psychological predisposition, "collaborative conservatism"—a state of mind that enables a group to solve problems together while adapting to extreme circumstances. The Kyrgyz are formerly a semi-nomadic group who were constantly needing to ready themselves for change while maintaining knowledge secured from the past. One of my informants described this mental outlook as similar to their craft called *chi*—the art of wrapping colorful thread around highly flexible grass reeds. Together the colorful threads form a motif and the reeds became strengthened by the thread wrapped around a reed, and yet so flexible, so adaptive that it allows a group to respond in a more agile manner while maintaining their form and function.

In summary, what is most important about Beyer's vivid narrative on *salt* is her commitment to revealing a code of moral behavior among the Kyrgyz that both delights and confounds the observer. *Salt* resists definition, but is amplified by the social adherence to the practice, and therefore creates its own form of social cohesion. Beyer's writing makes her book an effortless read, and therefore such a monograph should be on the syllabi of every university's intro to anthropology course.

KATHLEEN KUEHNAST
U.S. Institute of Peace