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# ENDANGERMENT REFRAMED

## Portrait of a Contested Migration

*Tobias Marschall*

### Abstract

Spectacular images of the Afghan Pamirs tend to convey an impression of extreme remoteness and to conflate endangerment in perceptions of Afghan Kyrgyz migrations. But how can endangerment sensibilities meet the aesthetics of strategic mobilizations without downplaying contestation? In mobilizing text and images, this essay intends to conciliate an aesthetic practice with analytical considerations.

**Keywords:** *migration, remoteness, endangerment, photography, storytelling*

### Introduction

On the edge of Central and South Asia, surrounded by Chinese, Pakistani, and Tajik international borders, formed by two plateaus higher than 4,200 meters above sea level and marked by even higher mountain ridges alongside, the Afghan Pamirs appear on the map as an extraordinarily difficult-to-reach borderland. Perhaps a lasting outcome of their colonial delineation, remoteness and endangerment inform perceptions despite a long history of exchanges and concomitant military and humanitarian interventions – including a 1982 migration to Turkey. The Afghan Pamirs resemble colonial “anomalies”, they are contemporary leftovers from the original designs of a buffer zone between Tsarist and British empires. The climatic and political pressures that people face throughout the year are extreme and by memory of earlier migration patterns, the place was not considered proper to year-round residence. Winters are marked with lows easily reaching  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  while high mountains failed to shield the region from war and the series of conflicts that have now raged in Afghanistan for more than forty years. Still, people have attended upland pastures to date – despite military occupation, opium addiction, occasional drought, and the collapse of international trade.

### Endangerment sensibilities

Central to a variety of projections, the image of “endangered” Kyrgyz nomads trapped by modernity’s vicissitudes on “the Roof of the World” (*Bam e Dunya* in Persian) is not only the stuff of local legend but also a powerful trope that moves beyond global magazines in which

spectacular images of their fragile but resilient existence in an extreme environment figure repeatedly (Anderson 2005; Callahan 2009; Finkel 2013; Leithead 2007). The threat of the group's imminent dissolution imaged by the looming prospect of a "last migration" informs endangerment sensibilities and subsequent salvage inclinations (Vidal and Dias 2016) in the academic literature (Callahan 2013; Dor and Naumann 1978; Kreutzmann 2003; Levi-Sanchez 2017; Shahrani 2002), in the words of Afghan Kyrgyz leaders, and in a contested "repatriation" program ratified by the Kyrgyz Republic in 2006 (Isabaeva 2018).

"Endangerment" not only hides a more complex reality, but it also constitutes a strategic resource conveyed through shared images. In this regard, J. T. Demos warns against "the risk of proclaiming truthful depictions of a 'reality' of authentic subjects living beneath a spectacle of stereotypes" (2013, 36). Moving away from a distinction between real or stereotypical representations, I suggest rather that my own images and research interests became progressively entangled with the images and concerns of the persons I met over time. Noting with Kirin Narayan that "stories are incipiently analytic, and in the sequence, analysis has a narrative form" (2012, 8), the sequence of this visual essay, as well as each photograph's accompanying caption and text, contest a strict distinction between analysis and narration, real and imaginary representation. This visual essay reveals how affective and moral investments inform the aesthetics of strategic mobilizations both during the ethnographic inquiry and in writing.

How to give a sense of the important pressures and uncertainties, affects and moral imperatives that run throughout Afghan Kyrgyz migrations while at the same time reflecting the aesthetics of their representation, including my own as a researcher? In mobilizing the different meanings of an understanding of images in movement and of movements set forth by images, or "images that move" (Spyer and Steedly 2013, 8; see also Demos 2013; Steyerl 2009), this visual essay points to the progressive entanglement of interests along ethnographic encounters. Portraits became particularly relevant in this regard, considering with Ariella Azoulay that they "are always the photograph of the encounter between who looked at someone and the way this someone wanted to present in the photograph, for the photographer or others who would eventually view the portrait" (2015, 219). Hence, I turn my attention to strategic ways of "mobilizing images and imaging mobilities" (Demos 2013, xv).

### **A "postcard ethnic group"**

The exceptional attention directed to a relatively small group of about twelve hundred people and their relative success in securing humanitarian support motivated anthropologist Ted Callahan to label Afghan Kyrgyz as "a postcard ethnic group" (2013, 18). Indeed, an important number of films, magazine articles and ethnographic publications (Breitenbach 1979; De Grancy and Kostka 1978; Dor 1975, 1982, 1987; Dor and Naumann 1978; Michaud and Michaud 1972; Paley and Paley 2012; Petocz 1978; Shahrani 1976; Shor and Shor 1950; Shor 1955) partly shaped the nature of prompts and expectations directed towards my camera and person as a researcher. The label aptly catches the aesthetic appeal and leverage of an "exotic" imaginary featuring "remote" and "endangered" societies in colorful, eye-attracting attires (Lutz and Collins 1993). But it also participates of a misleading distinction

in genre where the styles, tones and colors of ethnicity are solely addressed analytically at the expense of the mobilization of their aesthetic dimensions that feature otherwise in rather spectacular publications.

In conceiving with Ariella Azoulay that photographs are the product of an encounter between the photographer, subjects, and the publics created through the circulation of the images (2010), my photographs mediate a relation whose significance and meaning cannot be exhausted nor determined once and for all. In difficult parts of our journeys, my travel companions insistently asked me to “photograph our plights, show them to the world” (*bizdin kiinchilik tart, düinögö körsötüü* in Kyrgyz). Following prompts to draw public attention, I published images and interviews in regional news outlets (Marschall 2019, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). These publications widely moved, breaking view records on the media websites and affecting the “repatriation” program to Kyrgyzstan (as journalists and the program director maintained). Meanwhile, the subjects of my photographic portraits as well as research interviewees remained wary of state interference and the effects of the circulation of their images as they sought support within the ethnic terms stipulated by the government program. While repeatedly speaking out for humanitarian support and a “repatriation” to Kyrgyzstan as “endangered” Kyrgyz subjects, Mullah Abdylhak, the eminent speaker who featured in my interviews, eloquently explained to me, “if we were living elsewhere like in China or in the United States, governments (*ökmöt* in Kyrgyz) would already have made a museum out of us.”

### Contested perspectives

In walking the Afghan Pamirs for about eleven months in separate journeys from 2015 to 2019, I felt comforted in my ethnographic endeavor by the surprise to see my photographs hanging inside the homes of the subjects of my photographic portraits along with other time-keepers. With the migration of a dozen families to Kyrgyzstan in 2017, we started exchanging photographs online via mainstream social media (Facebook and Instagram). Portraits of certain leaders were reframed and posted in popular threads, extending online common practices of hanging framed portraits on house walls. The computer I gave to Afghan Kyrgyz “returnees” (*kairylmandar*) in Kyrgyzstan to support their online participation and pursue our exchanges was adorned with colorful stickers. I continue to run these social media accounts and to post captioned images in a documentary fashion (alternating portraits, details, interactions, and contexts). They convey often-unexpected exchanges between me, as a photographer, the subjects of the photographs, and the publics that are created through the circulation of these images.

The migrant images that we produced, as photographer/researcher, portrait subjects, and interviewees, were interpreted, appropriated, and endorsed in different, often contradictory, ways. From a Kyrgyz governmental perspective, landscapes indisputably spoke for an endangered nomadic life in a harsh environment while portraits of wealthy leaders (*bai* in Kyrgyz) stood as exemplars of a backward feudal societal organization remote from the modernization policies that ethnic Kyrgyz experienced in proximate countries (China, Kyrgyzstan,



and Tajikistan). Public reactions moved between indifference, pledges for humanitarian support, and contestation. In a print shop in the center of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital city, clients exclaimed at the sight of the photographs that I intended to bring back to the Afghan Pamirs. Moved by the images, their comments centered on the humanitarian imperative to support Afghan Kyrgyz in particular, invoking strong kinship, ethnic, and religious ties. The shop owner intervened, "I will tell you the true story, those people were *bai*, they left with the wealth of our ancestors when the Bolsheviks arrived, they do not deserve any support."

Seen from the Afghan Pamirs' perspective, migration and humanitarian support were not perceived in alignment with the expected improvements proclaimed, although both the Afghan and Kyrgyz governments see this differently (Isabaeva 2018, 4). Many herders complained that wealthy leaders appropriated provisions and the costly migration opportunities. Sultan, an important *bai*, was opposed to seeing only the wealthiest leave for Kyrgyzstan. "What will we earn then?" he asked, "look at Rakhman Kul Khan's son (whose father initiated the 1982 migration to Turkey). Now in Bishkek, he is expected since years to be nominated as professor, instead, he is only teaching. Once in Kyrgyzstan, they will not see Kyrgyz, only Afghans, Afghans!"

If indeed analysis and storytelling are mutually constitutive in writing ethnography, the entanglement of affective and moral investments with the aesthetics of strategic mobilizations does not necessarily imply congruence, but also drives contestation. In mobilizing images, this essay shows how analysis and narration, research and aesthetic dispositions can meet and constitute each other.

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**Tobias Marschall**  currently pursues a PhD in anthropology at the Graduate Institute Geneva (IHEID). His thesis considers the image of remoteness along Afghan Kyrgyz migration routes in north-eastern Afghanistan. Between 2015

and 2019, he grounded his visual ethnography in walking along the paths of the Afghan Pamirs, in attending migrants' Central Asian nodes and in participating in their online extension.

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#### Winter in the Little Pamir

A Pamir is a wide and open valley ideal for grazing. Seen from above with topographic perspective, the Pamirian Knot denotes the Massif at the north-western end of the Himalaya.

#### Errand Lines

Walking upland, our yak opened the way, carving paths in the fresh snow cracking under our feet. Every hundred steps into deep snow, we stopped to empty our boots. Each evening we dried our socks and pants in the smoke of the open fire. With morning, we packed again for another day of unknown progression.



#### Paced Solitude

After a day spent in the pastures, snow melted,  
hiding behind stones, hanging on sheep's hair.  
Small provisions stuffed in a plastic bag, a radio,

dogs and occasional meetings along the way pace  
a herder's time of constant watch.



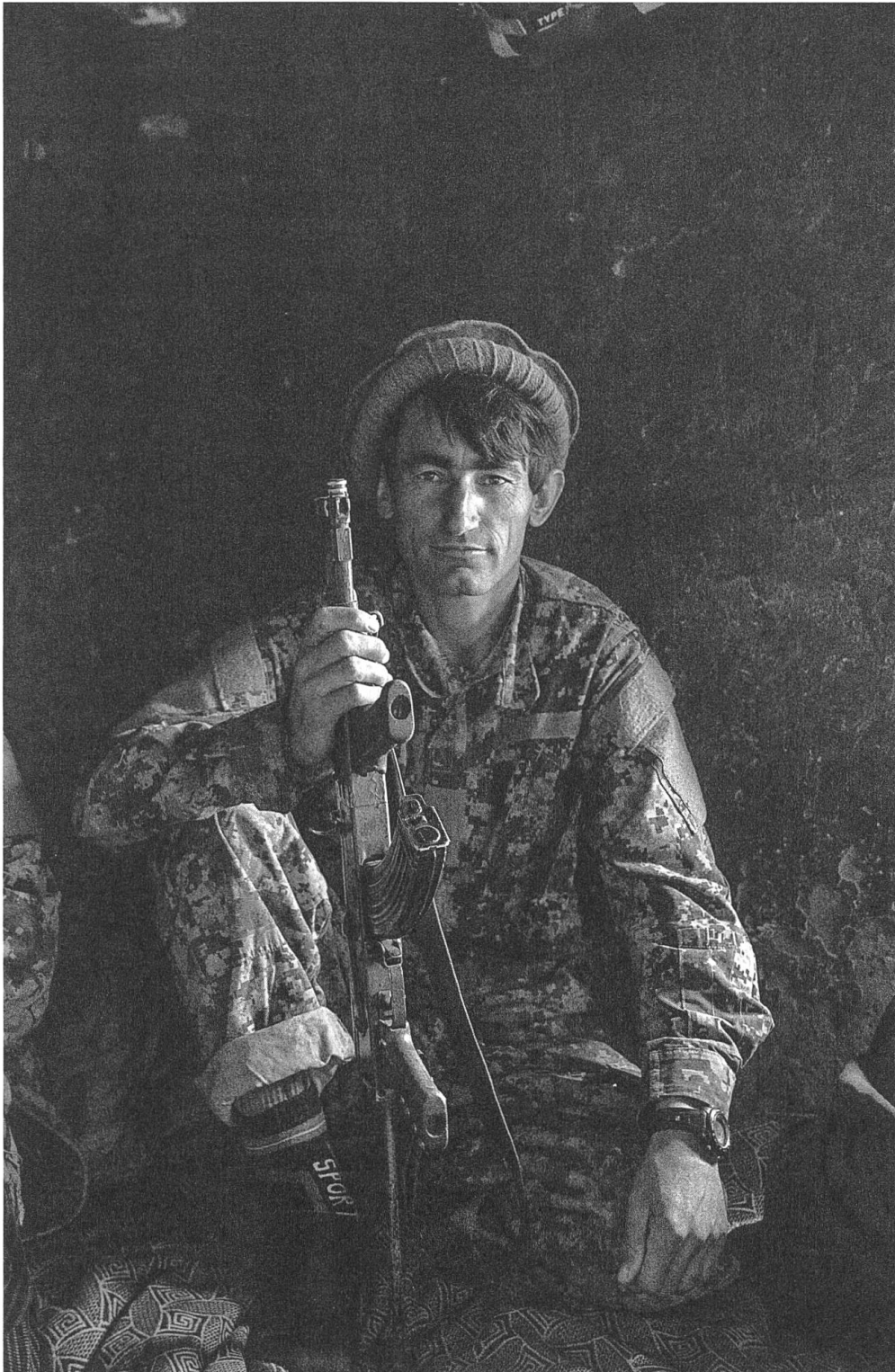


Addiction

A small rope bathes in melted yak grease. Hands adjust the melting resin over the lamp. The substance is rapidly inhaled, held, and quickly released. We chat over the decreasing price and growing spread of the “black drug” (*kara dawa* in Kyrgyz) in the Afghan Pamirs

Heat

Pieces of yak dung piled upon each other in rows – a fire done “the Kyrgyz way” (*Kyrgyzcha*) in a Wakhi camp. Feet rest in the yurt after a day spent in the dry and cold pastures. Smoke stacks inside while bodies cough and sweat, warmed and hydrated with countless cups of tea.

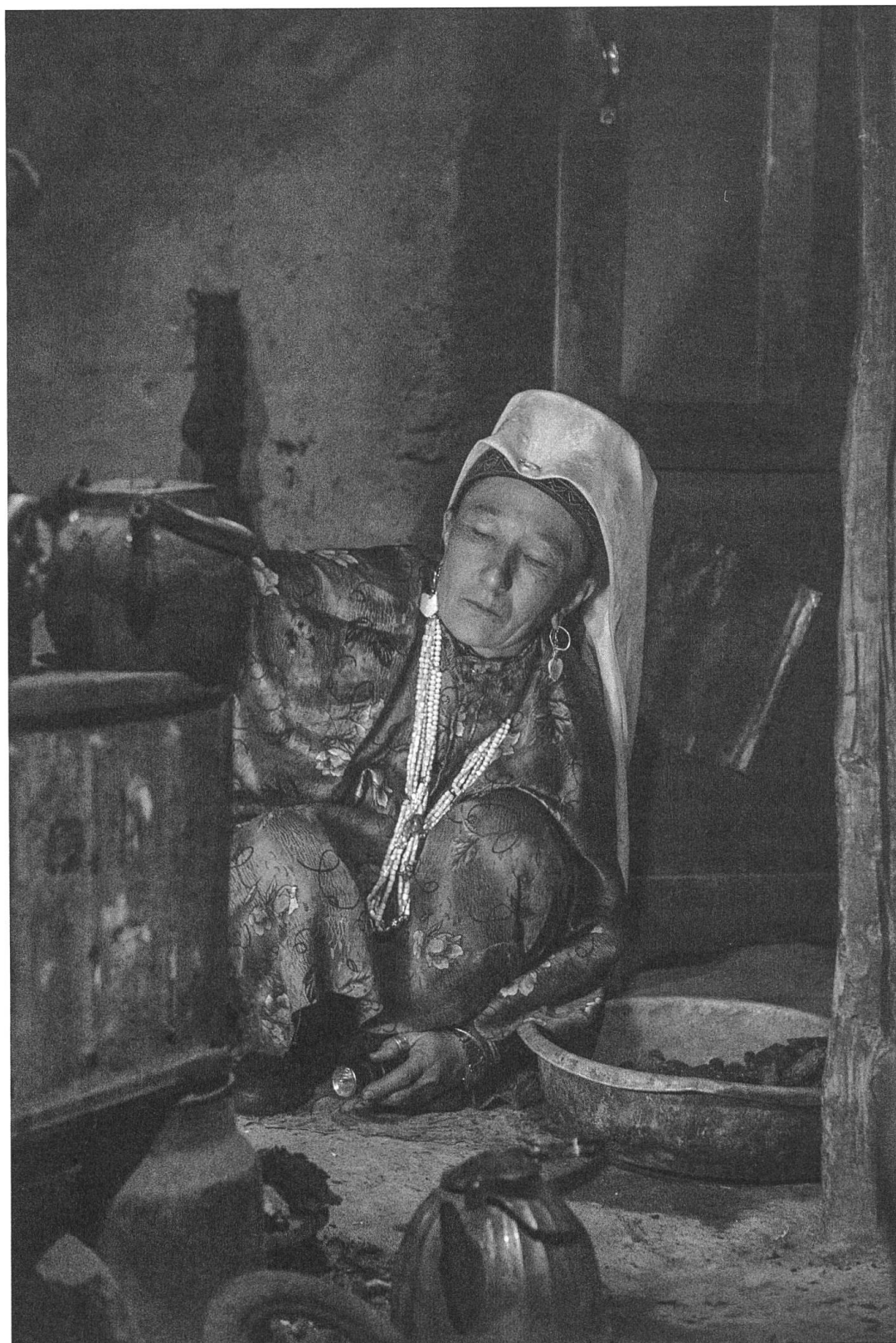


Young Commandant\*

\*Here I choose to highlight the military status of the subject of my portrait, rather than his name. Every subject of my portrait photographs has agreed to their publication and with their identification. This also applies to the persons named in the accompanying text. Regarding ethical concerns

more broadly, I am careful not to shoot or publish images that could potentially harm the subjects. The relation we share, which I intend to keep in the long run, prevails over other interests. I return images and publications whenever possible, and online when afforded, too.





# Labor

The early morning sound of Buturna's stove pike rattling against the oven grabbed us from the dreams we would share with each other while sipping tea. Keeping the room warm during

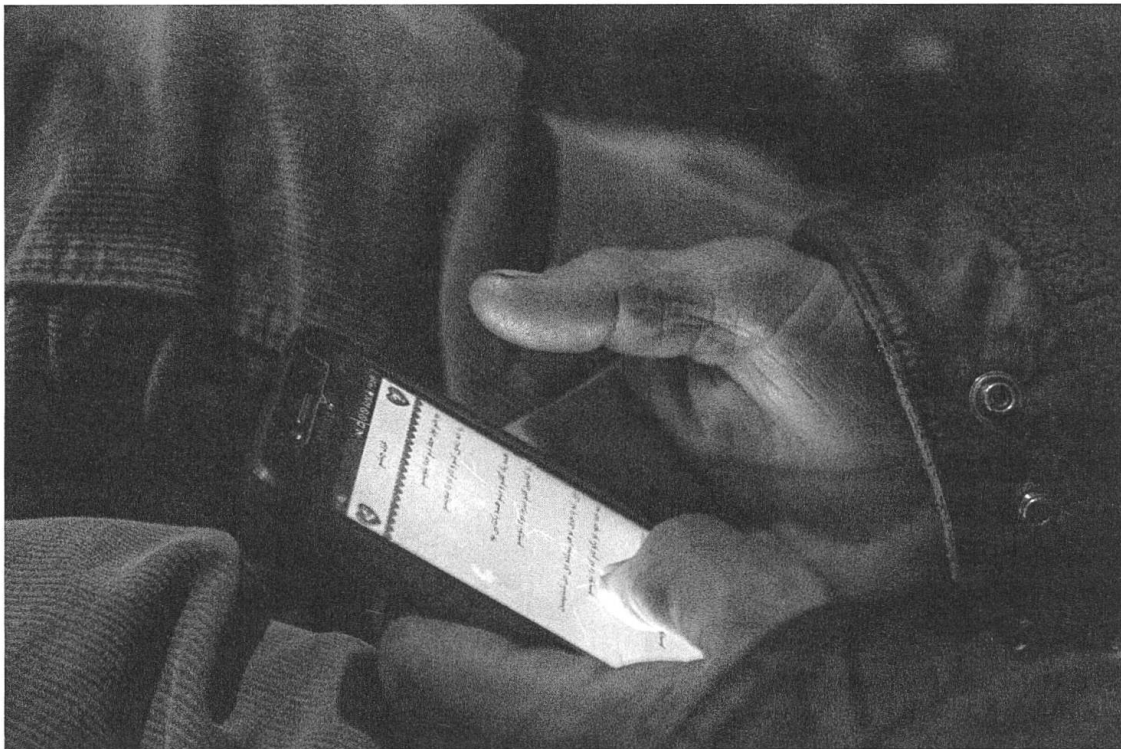
–20° C weather involves small but steady acts of care. The routine was settled and timed by the activities of women inside.



Absence

Holiday break in the Afghan Pamirs after two years in Kyrgyzstan – an evening watching Turkish soaps

and the news on TV; Faisali embraces his neighbor Syrajiddin.



#### Permanence

"Those plastic things are not made in Afghanistan, but it's the only place it's really used ubiquitously. I can always tell it's Afghanistan when I see them in a photo," commented an Afghan friend on Instagram.

#### Love Verses

Late evening rest, reading poetry. A calm break after long walks battling by the cold wind outside allows for versing into more intimate thoughts. Along the way, poems, proverbs, and quotes punctuate our stretched strides in our attempts to share perceptions, reinventing their old meanings.





### Aspiration

Reaching Tajik antenna at the border some forty kilometers away, Ismail saved texts and images on his smartphone and carried them on horseback to the camp. He shared family news and images from

distant relatives who left for Kyrgyzstan a year ago. Later, he returned to the border to send farewell messages and hopeful dreams – only partly hiding in the messages his own aspiration to join them.



### *Bai*

Common individual and family souvenirs, portraits of wealthy leaders (*bai*) feature on house walls, wooden beams, and felt carpets. I was surprised to find portraits taped to the mirror of the motorbikes brought upland via yak.

### Flight of time

Upon my return a year later in 2019, I was comforted by the surprise of seeing my portraits dating back from 2016 hanging among the house's timekeepers: a calendar, a clock, photographs, a talisman, a mirror, and a rug hung over the cracks in the wall.



#### Frames

Hajji Rushan shows me a portrait of him and his brother that he otherwise kept hidden between two mattresses. In a playful way, he asks me to cut his and his friend's heads when photographing the portrait. "We looked better then than now," he laughed.

#### Red is uplifting

Returning in 2018 among Afghan Kyrgyz *returnees* (kairylmandar) in Kyrgyzstan, I was amused to see the orange laptop that I handed to them a year before covered with colorful stickers. Faisylhak affixed new stickers of pink and red roses, multi-colored butterflies, daisies, and tulips. The stickers match in tone and form the vivid aesthetics of rugs and mattresses that sit in their homes. He later explained to me that "red is uplifting."