# Nation, Religion, and Social Heat: Heritaging Uyghur Mäshräp in Kazakhstan

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**Ösäk Sadasi (Song of the Woodland)**[1]

*Yärkäntning baghida bulbul, sayraydu sähär tangda*
*Nakhsha eytip saz chelip, dostlar oynaymiz gulistanda*
*Chalsangchu rawabingni sataringni, Yärkäntning muqamigha,*
*Dostlar zoqlunup qalsun, dostlar, Yärkäntning sadasigha*
*Yärkänt yolida ösäk, ösäkni berip korsäk*
*Ösäktiki dostlarni dostlar qochaghlap turup söysäk*

The nightingale in Yärkänt's orchard sings at dawn
Let's sing and play our instruments, friends, and play in the flower garden
Play your rawab and satar for the muqam of Yärkänt
Let's entertain ourselves, friends, with the songs of Yärkänt
There's woodland beside the Yärkänt road, let's go and see
Friends, let's embrace each other in the woodland

Driving along the road leading west out of Zharkent on our way to a *mäshräp* gathering we pass an area of scrubby woodland. Our driver Nurmuhämmät bursts into song. This song, Ösäk Sadasi, he explains, is the anthem of the mäshräp. But this mäshräp isn't going to be much fun, he complains. He gestures towards his neck. This will be a dry gathering; no alcohol allowed.

The town of Zharkent (Yärkänt in the Uyghur pronunciation) lies in southeast Kazakhstan, near the Chinese border crossing and trading centre of Khorgas. The new highway – built with Chinese money under the Belt and Road Initiative – has by-passed Zharkent. It retains the feel of a Soviet-era Central Asian town with its single-storey houses with sloping corrugated iron roofs and thick whitewashed walls. A ramshackle but thriving bazaar runs along the street leading to the old Zharkent mosque. Now a heritage site, this nineteenth-century monument combines the distinctive Chinese-style curved tiled roof with a Central Asian dome and minaret. The mosque and bazaar attest to the complex histories of

movement and trade in this border region. The town was founded in 1882, on territory annexed by the Russian Empire after the defeat of the short-lived Taranchi Sultanate (Brophy 2016). Today, Zharkent's citizens include Kazakhs, Russians, Dungan (Chinese Muslims or Hui), and it is an important centre for Uyghurs, many of whom arrived from Xinjiang in the late 1950s, fleeing China's Great Leap Forward (Clark & Kamalov 2004).

The song Ösäk Sadasi, whose text was written in 1968 by the Uyghur intellectual Sadiqjan Yunusov, commemorates this historical moment: the arrival of a group of Uyghurs who crossed the border from the "Uyghur homeland" (wätän) in the early 1960s and camped in the woodlands (ösäk) outside Zharkent for weeks until the Soviet authorities were able to rehouse them. Today, the song is the formally appointed anthem (Russian: gym) of mäshräp gatherings in Kazakhstan, and also circulated in recordings by Uyghur artists on both sides of the border. Ösäk Sadasi conveys a powerful sense of place and identity which is particular to the local history of Zharkent, and also generalisable to the many overlapping migratory histories and identities of Uyghurs on both sides of the border. It captures the sense of freedom and hope of those migrants in the 1960s, and a romanticised vision of music-making and its central role in forging the bonds of friendship between men that – alongside parallel systems of association for women – underpin Uyghur communities in Kazakhstan.[2]

**Community, resilience, and affective ties**

This article considers questions around the creation and maintenance of intangible cultural heritage across borders, and the role of expressive culture – activities including music, dancing, joking and food – in processes of community building. Following Amit and Rapport (2012) we view community both as a distributive model of belonging and affect, and as a framework for interrogating substantive social relations and the challenges of social mobilisation. We are interested in the properties of forms of expressive culture that make them fundamental resources for making social connections. Ethnomusicologists have emphasised the ways in which music-making allows people to "intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating together in performance" (Turino 2008, 3), and the role of music-making in sustaining resilient communities based on thriving cultural eco-systems (Titon 2015). We argue for an approach to heritage which recognises the role of expressive culture in forging community ties. As Zolli and Healy (2012) note, resilient communities rely on informal networks, rooted in deep trust, to contend with and heal disruption. Efforts to impose resilience from above often fail, but when those efforts are embedded in the

relationships that mediate people's everyday lives, resilience can flourish. To illustrate these ideas, we focus on a form of men's community gathering among Uyghurs living in Kazakhstan. Mäshräp gatherings, as many Uyghur authors (eg Pawan, Dawut and Kurban 2017) have noted, serve as a vehicle for making and sustaining community, and they promote community identity and solidarity through various forms of reciprocity. The history of this mäshräp tradition, as it criss-crosses the border between China and Kazakhstan, reveals much about the ongoing challenges of community organisation for minority or marginalised peoples in this region.

The Uyghur homeland lies within the borders of the People's Republic of China, in the large desert and mountainous region of northwest China officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang). The language, along with Uzbek, belongs to the southeastern branch of the Turkic language family, and Uyghur culture is closely related to the neighbouring cultures of Central Asia. Some 11 million Uyghurs live in Xinjiang, and there are sizeable populations of Uyghurs living in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and also in Turkey, with more recently established communities in Europe, America and Australia. Uyghurs first moved westwards in numbers into southeast Kazakhstan in the late nineteenth century. During the twentieth century they moved back and forth across the shifting border, fleeing bouts of violence, famine and unrest on both sides of the border (Kamalov 2012). Uyghurs left Xinjiang in large numbers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and many settled in and around the border town of Zharkent. Today, approximately 300,000 Uyghurs live in Kazakhstan, primarily in Almaty province, concentrated in the border town of Zharkent, in small towns along the road from Almaty to Zharkent, and in Almaty's suburbs. Support for Uyghur language, education and culture was a key plank of Soviet nationalities policies, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uyghurs in Central Asia shifted from a position of relative equality within a multi-ethnic polity to that of minority within the new nation states. Kazakhstan has maintained the more prominent aspects of state support for Uyghur community organisation, education and culture, but support at local level has markedly decreased. For nearly a decade, Uyghur community leaders have been voicing a sense of crisis, and fears of the incremental loss of Uyghur language and culture in Kazakhstan.

In 2010, mäshräp gatherings were inscribed by China on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage in urgent need of safeguarding. China's submission to UNESCO emphasised the community-building capacity of mäshräp, drawing on the work of Uyghur scholars, and aligning well with UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage agenda (Abliz 2009;

Dawut & Muhpul 2011). However, the subsequent treatment of treatment of mäshräp in China spectacularly failed to align with the UNESCO mission. As Rachel Harris (2020b) has discussed, approaches to safeguarding mäshräp in Xinjiang initially involved the "top-down" approaches to heritage already well documented in China: staged re-creations and tourist performances led by local government organs, alongside ever tightening restrictions on grassroots association. Since 2016, China's radical policies of surveillance, mass internment, and coercive forms of "re-education" in Xinjiang, which many have suggested may amount to forms of cultural genocide (Smith Finley 2019; Zenz 2020), have rendered particularly hollow its commitment to UNESCO's heritage agenda. While grassroots association for Uyghurs is inconceivable under the current regime of surveillance and incarceration, staged performances of mäshräp continue to welcome tourists and whitewash government policies (Harris 2021).

Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are also subject to the extreme pressures emanating from Xinjiang: ties with families across the border have been severed, many have lost relatives to the internment camps – not only those who are resident in Xinjiang but also some citizens of Kazakhstan – and many livelihoods which depended on cross-border trade have been disrupted. Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are also subject to political pressures at home: speaking out about the genocide in Xinjiang carries considerable political risks, they are vulnerable to the accusations of extremism and terrorism which China has used to enable its campaigns against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and they are also wary of making any moves which might provoke a backlash from resurgent Kazakh nationalism.

It is against this troubled backdrop that Uyghur communities in Kazakhstan have initiated their own grassroots approach to revitalising mäshräp. This revival in Kazakhstan responds to the "heritagisation" (Salemink 2016) of mäshräp in Xinjiang, but here it has taken a very different form. Mäshräp in Kazakhstan are neither staged song-and-dance spectacles nor dry discussion forums; they are exciting, culturally rich, performative occasions involving "hot" forms of male sociality including singing, dancing and joking. These forms of sociality provide insights into locally negotiated forms of masculinity, and they also provide important spaces within which debates about identity, aesthetics, emotion, and ethical action are played out (Marsden 2007; Chau 2008). In this article, we highlight the ways in which Uyghur men perform and enjoy forms of expressive culture like singing, dancing and joking, which enable the mäshräp to "come to the boil." These mäshräp gatherings in Kazakhstan have sometimes been criticised by Uyghurs in other parts of the diaspora for "singing and dancing at a time of national tragedy." We argue that the work done

through these gatherings, far from ignoring the situation in Xinjiang, serves as a direct response to the crisis for Uyghur cultural identity, and a potential model for future grassroots revitalisation of Uyghur cultural heritage in the eventuality that the political climate within Xinjiang may change.

In an early intervention in the debates around heritage, cultural geographer David Harvey (2001) suggested taking "heritage" as a verb rather than a noun: "heritaging" thus suggests an act of manoeuvring (for particular ideological, political, or other purposes) something into a headline position in relation to a group's identity. Subsequent writers have explained processes of "heritagisation" as the means by which "objects and places [or cultural practices] are transformed from functional 'things' into objects of display and exhibition" (Harrison 2013:69). Anthropologist Regina Bendix (2009) notes that cultural heritage becomes an object inviting or requiring action from society; thus, heritagisation involves not only the canonisation of a cultural practice, but also its instrumentalisation. More recent discussions of heritagisation have emphasised that it typically comes at the price of local disconnection between people and practices; local people are effectively disenfranchised, while outsiders (heritage experts, culture brokers, local governments and tourist companies) appropriate the heritage for economic and political gain (Salemink 2016).

In this article, we emphasise that acts of heritaging are not the exclusive domain of elites. We ask what happens when "hot," living and dynamic forms of sociality like the mäshräp are heritaged by grassroots communities; when they are invested as symbols of nation, and harnessed in the service of community-building goals. The mäshräp revival in Kazakhstan responds to the pressures exerted from within the Uyghur homeland, and also to pressures within local communities in Kazakhstan. These relate primarily to the social disruption resulting from rural-urban migration, and the social tensions resulting from economic and political marginalisation, and the diffusion of new forms of Islam. Uyghur mäshräp in Kazakhstan are a key site for negotiating tensions between religiosity and the desire to have fun in ways that produce social heat. As such, they provide valuable insights into the question of how Muslims respond to globally circulating debates around piety and "correct" religious practice (Marsden & Retsikas 2013), and how these pressures are negotiated within the community.

Thus, mäshräp in Kazakhstan respond in many ways to transnational forces; they are themselves products of transnational cultural flows across the former Soviet-Chinese border, and they forge experiences of community which cut across borders. Forms of expressive culture like music-making, dancing and joking play crucial roles in meeting everyday needs

for intimacy, place, and belonging for migrant communities. Music-making in particular provides a powerful vehicle for the creation and transmission of shared memory (Shelemay 1998). Cultural forms bind together and give voice to the multiple places that constitute transnational living, and the act and experience of performance has the capacity to reconfigure the sociopolitical and economic terms of migration through aesthetic means, negating the boundaries and politics of official geographies (Chávez 2017). Over the past century, successive revivals of mäshräp have flowed across the border, engaging memories of migration and hopes for national survival within hot forms of male sociality.

**Mäshräp and the Thirty Sons (*ottuz oghul*) of the Ili valley**

Mäshräp gatherings can be found across Xinjiang, and in transnational Uyghur communities in Central Asia and elsewhere, but they vary considerably in their form and meanings, both historically and today. They parallel similar forms of gatherings maintained among other Central Asian peoples, such as the gap gatherings sustained by Uzbeks (Levin 1996) and the Chitrali ishtok (Marsden 2007). Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2008) has provided a rich historical account of mäshräp based on pre-1949 sources. She notes that the term indicates all sorts of communal occasions which lie outside the realm of mainstream life-cycle and religious celebrations, from male socialising to religious assemblies. The Uyghurs of the Ili valley, which traverses northwest Xinjiang and southeast Kazakhstan, have nurtured a distinctive form of mäshräp: regular all-male gatherings with a stable membership who are sometimes termed the Thirty Sons (*ottuz oghul*). They involved food, music, dancing and joking, and an informal court to enforce discipline among mäshräp members. The earliest descriptions of these Ili mäshräp can be found in the accounts of European and Russian travellers and researchers dating from the late nineteenth century (Bellér-Hann 2008; Chvyr' 2006).

The problems of naming we encounter in histories of these gatherings speak to the complexities of their cross-border existence. Although it draws on deep historical roots, the use of Uyghur (also sometimes transliterated as Uighur) as an ethnonym is a twentieth century phenomenon. In historical accounts, the same peoples occur as Sart (a general term for sedentary peoples in Central Asia), or Taranchi (referring specifically to Uyghurs of the Ili valley; see Kamalov 2016b). The Ili region is also variously termed Semirech'ie in Russian, Zhettisu in Kazakh, or Yettisu in Uyghur. The regional mäshräp tradition is often named after the city of Ghulja (also known as Yining in Chinese), now the provincial capital of the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture.

The territory of the Ili valley was briefly ruled by an independent Taranchi Sultanate, established following a rebellion against Qing rule in 1864. This Sultanate was conquered in 1871 by the Russian Empire, which controlled the region until 1881. Nikolai Pantusov (1907), who worked for the Russian administration during this period, recorded detailed observations of the customs of the Taranchis. According to his account, male gatherings were divided according to social class. Wealthy men might spend up to a hundred roubles for organising a mäshräp for thirty people, while the poorest could afford only five roubles. Music-making and dancing are prominent in his account. Mäshräp started with reading aloud from books, followed by music performed on dutar and satar lutes. When a musician played dutar, two other people stood up and danced sadri and sama. After that came a free exchange of gossip and joking, then members were served with a meal. Pantusov commented on the dances, noting that the sedri was a quick dance with quick motions of arms with the feet fixed on the ground, while sama was a dance with light motions of arms.

Pantusov's account of reading books aloud at the mäshräp has been discussed by various scholars. He mentions books including Tazkirat al-Avliya (Stories of the Saints) by Sufi writer Farid ad-din Attar (1119-1234), the Persian-language classic Shahname of Firdousi, and the writings of Central Asian Sufi sheikhs, Ahmed Yasawi and Sheikh Alla-Yar. Tursun Sultanov has suggested that the Ili mäshräp served an educational function, arguing that "collective listening to literary works brought the illiterate masses into the reading audience" (2005: 205). Jay Dautcher (2009) and Rian Thum (2014) emphasise the prominence of religious texts in early accounts of the Ili mäshräp. Popular texts included the fourteenth century Qisas al-anbuya (Stories of the Prophets) of Nasreddin Rabghuzi, and Nafakat al-Uns by Abdurahman Jami, written in 1461-1462, which includes over 600 biographies of well-known Sufi figures. Dautcher concludes that nineteenth-century mäshräp served to disseminate religious knowledge among the population. However, this religious component was not related to the mainstream Islamic canon, but to popular Sufi traditions.

The role of mäshräp in community organisation is also prominent in these historical accounts. An important aspect of mäshräp in the Ili valley was their hierarchical structure and shared rules (*qa'ida*). The head of the mäshräp was addressed as beg, or sometimes yigit beshi (leader of the boys). Other roles included the qazi (judge), and the pashshap (head of police). The name pashshap is derived from Persian: *padishahi sheb* or king of the night; a term used to describe a night watchman (Dautcher 2009). The köl beg was responsible for meals, and the dara beg took responsibility for the music. Other roles included the geznichi (treasurer), and saqchi (soldier). These roles reproduced the structural elements of power

which governed Taranchi society in the late nineteenth century. This can be seen from the account of German-Russian academic Vassiliy Radlov, who travelled to Ghulja in 1862. He wrote, "Although the power in the city [of Ghulja] belongs to the hakim and shaghi [Russian officials] nevertheless the Taranchis have their own management with their own officials, own establishments and special taxes. As I was informed, among officials of the city there were qazi and ishkal [court officers], pashshap [head of prisons], sädäri and ming beghi [police chief and commandant]" (Radlov 1989: 520). We know that the Qing imperial administration initially co-opted these power structures, and abolished them only after it reclaimed control of the Ili valley from the Russians under the St Petersburg Treaty of 1881. Although these power structures vanished from society by the twentieth century, they were reproduced and sustained in the context of the mäshräp.

**Mäshräp under the Russian Empire**

Another common theme in historical accounts, is the suspicion and intolerance they provoked in the colonial rulers of the region. A recent article by Uzbek historian Bakhtiyor Babajanov (2019) shows how gatherings called gap and mäshräp in Verny (Almaty) were viewed by the Tsarist security forces. The Russian administration sought to strengthen it colonial rule over Central Asia in the aftermath of the Andijan uprising of 1898.[3] The uprising had provoked fear of "Muslim fanaticism" among Russian officials, who imposed tougher controls and surveillance over local Muslim communities. A report submitted in December 1911 described a "Sart circle" (Rus. *sartovskiye kruzhki*) in Verny (Almaty) called gap or mäshräp which, it claimed, had anti-government aims. According to the agents' accounts, this circle was one of a group of Muslim associations of Tashkent, whose purpose was to "form similar Muslim circles in other cities of Semirech'ie province." When members of the mäshräp met in December 1911 in one of the members' homes, all nineteen were arrested. Police searched the homes of all the mäshräp members, and they found the resolution of the gathering, which mentioned membership fees collected "for unknown aims." As a result, the organising members of the mäshräp were arrested. A long investigation failed to reveal any political purposes of the mäshräp and the case was finally closed.

In the course of the investigation, the police collected much information on mäshräp. They found that gap [gatherings held by Uzbeks, or Sarts as they were then known] and mäshräp were widespread in Ferghana, Semirech'ie, and other parts of Turkestan. There were up to ten such gatherings in the city of Verny at that time. The security forces reported that mäshräp were usually organised on the basis of nationality, age, wealth, and sometimes

profession. “Thus, there were mäshräp for Taranchis, Sarts, old people, young wealthy people, smiths, merchants, and Kirghiz,[4] and they consisted of seventeen to twenty people” (Kamalov 2018: 639). The main task of the mäshräp, according to the police report, was organising leisure activities, “for which every member in turn, on Sunday as a non-trade day, invited others to his place, offered them lunch, invited musicians, and [all attendees] shared their professional interests.” Members of mäshräp collected money on a regular basis and sometimes for ad hoc situations. For the latter case no records were held, because the collected money was immediately passed over to the needy person. Investigation of one mäshräp revealed that its members had elected an aksakal (elder) from their group to serve as treasurer, and four people to check the financial reports. There was strict discipline in the mäshräp: “all members of the circle are under unconditional subjugation to the elected persons, and as elected people are rich and influential people, disobedience is reflected in trade affairs and leads to loss of credit” (Kamalov 2018: 639). The membership fee of this particular mäshräp was twenty kopecks, while fines varied from fifty kopecks to ten roubles. The security forces were very much concerned about what the collected money was spent on. Their first assumption was that the money was sent to Turkey, since the Russian authorities were concerned about secret relations between Central Asian Turkic peoples and reformists within the Ottoman Empire, and feared that the spread of pan-Turkic and Jadidist ideology would encourage the Kazakhs, Sarts and Taranchis to unite against Russian rule.

The attitude of the Tsarist authorities to mäshräp is remarkable for its similarities with the suspicion with which Chinese authorities viewed mäshräp in 1990s Ghulja, some eighty years later (Dautcher 2009), and it speaks more generally to the extraordinary difficulties encountered by marginalised or minority peoples in their attempt to socially organise. In contrast to the suspicions of the authorities, the Taranchi educator Nazarhoja Abdussemiatov gives an entirely benign account of male gatherings in his article, “Life of the Taranchi Turks” published in the Tatar magazine Shura in Orenburg in 1912. “Taranchi villages spend the winter time calmly. No activities; young people study. Old people get together in the sunshine, dispute, spend life with pleasure. Like other Turkestanis, they spend their evenings in mäshräp with music, songs, plays and entertainment” (Abdussemiatov 1991: 99).

**Mäshräp in the Soviet period**

The history of mäshräp under Soviet rule demonstrates the enduring social significance of these gatherings, and shows that attempts to instrumentalise the mäshräp are not a recent

phenomenon. The establishment of Soviet power in Semirech'ie in 1918 was accompanied by the demolition of many aspects of traditional society in accordance with communist ideology. Initially mäshräp were regarded as a useful vehicle for social organisation among the Uyghurs of Semirech'ie, and they remained intact during the early years of Soviet rule. The Bolsheviks saw the potential of mäshräp for "sowing the seeds of socialism among the Uyghur labouring masses" (Bakiev 1929). Mäshräp, with their powerful disciplinary structure, could be effective tools of mobilisation for various social groups, and they provided a forum for resolving important economic and political issues, and regulating social relations in a period of radical social change. Soviet documents dating from the late 1920s claimed that following the revolution the ideology of mäshräp had changed, and they were now organised in accordance with the new social groups which had emerged. Now not only proponents of the old society held mäshräp; progressives and non-Party youth, Soviet public workers, and even Communist Party and Komsomol members, all had their own mäshräp (Bakiev 1929).

In this way, mäshräp evolved into a structure which ran parallel to Party and Komsomol units, and in some places even started to compete with them in organisational effectiveness (Rezolyutsiya 1929). Many urgent issues were first discussed at mäshräp gatherings, and then were brought to Party and Komsomol meetings for approval. In the village of Qoram in Almaty province, for example, the selection of candidates to join Soviet power bodies was first discussed at mäshräp gatherings, and Party and Komsomol meetings subsequently approved the decisions. Mäshräp also contributed to public campaigns, such as the campaign to eradicate illiteracy. Some mäshräp introduced cultural and educational content into their gatherings, such as reading newspapers, or collecting funds for opening a new school.

Thus, mäshräp encompassed a wide range of activities, not all of them aligned with government agendas. One report raised concerns that some gatherings pursued ideas which were distant from communist ideals. The influence of mäshräp worried the Bolsheviks. In 1929 when political struggle between different factions within the Party intensified, the issue of mäshräp came to the fore, and a report on mäshräp was submitted to a meeting of activists (Bakiev 1929; Rezolyutsiya 1929). It contained a detailed analysis of mäshräp in the Uyghur community of Semirech'ie during the pre-revolution period and in the first decade of Soviet rule.

The report notes that before the revolution, mäshräp were organised in towns and villages after the harvest, and continued throughout the winter during the break from agricultural labour. Men gathered once a week at the home of one of the mäshräp members.

Three distinct age and status groups organised separate gatherings: old people, young married people, and unmarried young people. In cities, mäshräp were based on professional groups, including smiths, shoemakers, bakers, and butchers. The expense of organising a mäshräp averaged twenty roubles, which was a substantial sum for poorer people. Food generally included tea, polo (lamb and rice dish), noodles, and salad. Mäshräp members followed strict discipline. Methods of punishment for those who violated the rules included spitting on the forehead, a blow with a stick on the shoulder (tushkan tapti), or a beating with the mir-ghizab's rod (which consisted of six slats of wood bound together). Sometimes a violator was put against the wall, and water was thrown over him.

The report concluded that "mäshräp were religious parties, which later turned into national parties" (Bakiev 1929). They included reactionary patriarchal and religious elements as well as "good" traditions, and they included both useful and harmful groups. Therefore, it recommended, mäshräp could only be permitted if measures were introduced to "liquidate their reactionary elements and introduce Soviet principles" into their activities (Rezolyutsiya 1929). Following Bakiev's report, the Agitation and Propaganda Department declared mäshräp relics of the past, harmful to class struggle and to the Communist Party.

During the next three decades, these gatherings were either eradicated or pushed underground by policies oriented toward Russification and "internationalism." There is little evidence of mäshräp being practised in the post-war period in Soviet Kazakhstan. New impetus for mäshräp arrived with the migration of a significant number of Uyghurs from Xinjiang in the 1950s and 1960s. This migration resulted in the emergence of a new segment among the Soviet Uyghurs called Kitayliq (Chinese) or Ghuljiliq (Ghulja) Uyghurs. As Kamalov (2005) has noted, this migration injected new life into Uyghur communities in the Soviet Central Asian republics. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these newcomer groups in Almaty and Zharkent continued to practise mäshräp according to the rules and the structure they had followed in 1950s Ghulja. They remain vivid in the memories of older Uyghur men, who recall music-making or comic punishments carried out at their mäshräps of their youth, or recount with pride the leading role they held in the mäshräp organisation, and the respect in which such roles were held within the community. These practices were largely maintained informally and semi-underground. A major public revival began only in the 1990s, due to the restoration of links between the Central Asian Uyghurs and their ethnic kin in Xinjiang.

**The 1990s mäshräp revival**

Over the border in the 1990s, a form of gathering known simply as *olturush* was popular among men in the city of Ghulja. Jay Dautcher (2009) attended and documented these gatherings, and writes vividly of their emotional intensity and the richness of the expressive culture they involved, including music, dancing, profound emotional exchanges, and displays of verbal skill and wit. Drinking strong alcohol played a central role in the olturush; consumption was regulated by a designated saqiy (wine pourer), and was often heavy and coercive. Similar to mäshräp, the olturush laid emphasis on rules (qa'idä). They were organised among men of similar age, and they reinforced bonds of friendship, creating networks which were essential for business. Olturush were the main path to establishing and maintaining social status in the local community. They were also the most important events in the daily lives of members, who spent large amounts of time planning, attending, and discussing them.

But in the 1990s, new trends were filtering into society as Uyghurs in Xinjiang began to access and engage with the new forms of piety and religious reformism which were sweeping the globe (Harris 2020b). Young men in Ghulja began to develop a new form of mäshräp, in opposition to the olturush, which was intended to promote Islamic ideals of propriety. The new mäshräp encouraged daily prayer and fasting; members studied reformist religious literature, they rigorously opposed alcohol and drug-taking, and were active in fund-raising for the poor or for drugs clinics. They organised community events, notably football tournaments, in an attempt to draw local youth away from drinking and drugs. This mäshräp revival drew on older forms of mäshräp as they were practised in Ghulja in the 1940s and 1950s (Harris 2020a). They adopted titled roles for the mäshräp leader (yigit beshi), the law enforcer (pashshap) who administered punishments, and the köl beshi who was in charge of the food. Mäshräp groups termed themselves the Thirty Sons (ottuz oghul), and they gathered regularly to promote their social and religious agenda.

The movement gathered momentum throughout the 1990s, and began to take over from the olturush as the dominant form of association for men in Ghulja. It was as much because of their social activism as it was for their religiosity that the mäshräp movement began to alarm the local authorities in Ghulja. When the movement attempted to assert its authority over the wider society in Ghulja in 1995 by announcing a ban on selling alcohol across the city, the authorities responded by banning the mäshräp movement and arresting some of its leaders on charges of separatism and religious extremism. These developments played a crucial role in the lead up to the tragic events of 5 February 1997, when a peaceful protest against the ban was met with police violence, leading to numerous deaths. It was

followed by a major police crackdown in Ghulja which involved mass arrests and executions (Amnesty 1999). After this time, the only permitted mäshräp in Ghulja took the form of government-organised song-and-dance spectacles (Harris 2020a), but the mäshräp movement took on new life across the border.

After the long period of separation, perestroika saw an improvement in Sino-Soviet relations, and the border was re-opened. This restored the links between Uyghur families living on different sides of the border who had been cut off for several decades. Intensification of cross-border cultural and economic contacts was of great importance for Uyghurs living on both sides of the border. At the same time, the Soviet Republics were given greater freedom to develop their distinctive national history and culture, and a resurgence of interest in national identity among Uyghurs in Kazakhstan developed in response to that movement. They pressed for Uyghur language classes in schools, and began to publish their own newspapers and journals, and establish cultural centres (mädäniyät märkizi), first in Almaty city then across counties and towns with significant Uyghur populations, with the goal of preserving Uyghur culture and language. Uyghur academic Rahmetjan Yusupov recalled his first encounter with mäshräp, in 1991:

> I went to a party near the airport and listened to a young guy from Ghulja talking about mäshräp. He was saying what a good thing they were and how we should set up mäshräp like they had in Ghulja. At that time, I had no idea what they were. He said, mäshräp is not just a place for having fun, it's for preserving our culture, helping our community.

Sean Roberts (1998) attended and documented mäshräp gatherings in 1990s Almaty. They were led by young men engaged in cross-border trade who had been involved in the Ghulja mäshräp before 1995, or had returned from studying Islam in Pakistan and the Middle East. Like Dautcher, he notes that they were motivated by the belief that promoting a Muslim lifestyle could counter-balance the influence of drugs and alcohol within the Uyghur community. In 1997 the new mäshräps circulated Uyghur neighbourhoods in Almaty, promoting the importance of leading a Muslim lifestyle and "cleansing the nation" of negative influences. Structurally, they included punishments for violating Islamic law (mainly by drinking), lectures on Islam and its importance to the Uyghur nation, as well as food, joking and music. In Kazakhstan, as in China, the authorities regarded these mäshräp with suspicion. The Kazakh press suggested that they had links with Wahhabi groups in

Ferghana, and that they were fuelling a tendency towards anti-Chinese jihad. Roberts found no evidence to support these claims, suggesting that, to the contrary, they promoted a nationalist form of Islam. However this revival was again a temporary phenomenon. Under pressure from China, the Kazakhstan authorities expelled most of the Uyghur traders, and the 1990s mäshräp revival movement lost momentum.

**Institutionalising Mäshräp in Kazakhstan**

After the collapse of the USSR, the Uyghur communities of the Central Asian Republics, who had shared a Soviet identity, now found themselves separated by new state borders. The ethnic policies of the new nation-state impelled the formation of a new Kazakhstani identity for Uyghurs, and significantly they allowed for the institutionalisation of community social structures like the mäshräp. Special councils of Uyghur community leaders (yigit beshi) and mäshräp leaders were set up within the Ethno-Cultural Centre of Uyghurs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which became an associated member of the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan. A new mäshräp revival, beginning in 2009, grew from within this organisation, enabling the movement to claim a high level of political legitimacy and protection. This Kazakhstan-based revival drew direct inspiration from the heritaging moves then underway within Xinjiang.

The Almaty-based businessman, Burhan Tajidinov, was elected head of the mäshräp leaders. In interview in 2019, he described the beginnings of this new movement:

> We went from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, talking with people, saying we should be working together, then people started to say should we form a Thirty Sons (ottuz oghul). We have eight neighbourhoods (mähällä) in our city, and we've played mäshräp in each of them. After we've organised it in this district, the next time it's your turn to organise the mäshräp.

These new mäshräp were flagged strongly as "traditional" gatherings, which followed, according to Uyghur custom, the established structure and included all the proper elements. Mäshräp became a regular theme in periodicals in Almaty, and in the Uyghur language newspaper, Uyghur Avazi. Uyghur writer Masimjan Zulpikarov (2010) published a book-length description of mäshräp, based on his personal experience of mäshräp in Ghulja as an officer in the army of the East Turkestan Republic in the 1940s. It is no coincidence that this upsurge in interest came at the same time that Uyghur scholars in Xinjiang were producing a

stream of films and studies of mäshräp (Abliz 2009; Dawut and Muhpul 2011) in preparation for China's submission of mäshräp to UNESCO. Uyghurs on both sides of the border were enthusiastically "heritaging" mäshräp, and the materials they produced flowed across the border.

The language around the mäshräp revival in Kazakhstan was strongly focused on custom (*örp-adät*) and tradition: doing things as our grandfathers (*ata-bowilirimiz*) did, in order to preserve Uyghur culture, and save the Uyghur nation. The movement was impelled by fears among Kazakhstan Uyghurs of the incremental loss of Uyghur language, culture and identity in the post-Soviet era. The movement was paralleled by, and worked together with, a women's movement centred on chay gatherings, which focused on the same goals of education, cultural revival, and social mobilisation.

"The first thing we do is to learn our own customs, our rules and traditions, and our mother tongue," explained Burhan Tajidinov:

> We need to know our mother tongue. If someone has studied Uyghur, he turns out a Uyghur. He perceives his nation differently. If he studies another language, he might look like a Uyghur on the outside, but inside he's completely different. Someone who plays mäshräp knows his own history, arts, and customs. If he doesn't know his roots, it's a problem for the nation.

The new mäshräp were also intended to play an educational role, improving the "quality" of their members. Rehimjan, leader of the Zharkent mäshräp, commented:

> If you meet ten people on the street, and one of them attends a mäshräp, his way of acting will be very different from the others; he stands up for the community, he stands against inappropriate behaviour … Mäshräp teach customs, rules, and life experience. The difference between those who've seen mäshräp and those who haven't is like mountains and gardens.

New mäshräp were organised in other parts of Almaty province densely populated by Uyghurs. In the small town of Gheyret, Bekhitshat—a building site foreman—explained how the young men of the town had been encouraged to set up their own youth mäshräp in 2013:

> Our elders told us there was too much drinking and smoking in the neighbourhood, and not enough respecting each other. We needed to save our culture, and we should form a Youth Committee… We appointed a committee of young people responsible for sport, local issues, culture and entertainment. The committee attended mäshräp from other regions, then we got together all the young people from our neighbourhood (mähällä) and starting playing mäshräp, in order to save our customs and showcase our culture.

In order to disseminate models for mäshräp in Kazakhstan, Tajidinov initiated a competition of mäshräp groups in 2017. A CD of the competition was produced and disseminated,[5] followed by publication of a book which drew on materials published in Xinjiang to describe the traditional structure and features of mäshräp (Sabitov 2018). In 2015, the Uyghur organisation Inayat, led by Turghun Rozakhunov, initiated a project to study the social institution of the Ottuz Oghul (thirty sons) from historical and contemporary perspectives (Kamalov et al 2018). Their aim was to create a model of ottuz oghul gatherings, based on historical research but adjusted to the particular conditions of contemporary Kazakhstan. Interestingly, this group preferred to term the gatherings "Ottuz Oghul" instead of "mäshräp" since they regarded the latter term as being too strongly associated with entertainment, while ottuz oghul accentuated the social role of the gatherings (Hezim 1992). They argued that ottuz oghul male gatherings should become an effective mechanism of self-governance, a tool for mobilisation, and a way for people to resolve social issues.

This emphasis was prominent in the way they were promoted, both within the community and to the wider world. Bekhitshat from Gheyret was keen to highlight the social achievements of their youth mäshräp. "Six years ago, we repaired our local sports ground, and now we organise a football tournament every year," he says, echoing the link between mäshräp and football tournaments first developed in 1990s Ghulja. Rehimjan, leader of the Zharkent mäshräp, was emphatic:

> There would be no meaning in the mäshräp if it didn't get involved with helping the poor and such issues. The purpose of the mäshräp is to share the problems of our town. If you are a member, you have to offer financial support …. For many years we've been helping people who are struggling. … You can see how strong our mäshräp is. We supported building the Uyghur cultural centre, we take part in tree planting and other community events; whenever they need us, we go. Without the support of the mäshräp

these jobs would never get done. Our members go on the front line to keep things clean and peaceful in our home town.

**Performing community, creating social heat**

The agenda, then, is clear: this was a self-conscious adoption of heritage rhetoric, which drew on narratives developed by Uyghurs in Xinjiang, but was rooted in the socio-economic realities of Kazakhstan. This was a grassroots instrumentalisation of heritage by a minority community, undertaken without the support or intervention of any government or international organisations. How, then, in the moment of performance, might these social gatherings achieve the grand and weighty goals assigned to them: language and cultural revival; moral education and national awareness; social cohesion and mobilisation? To answer these questions, we need to alight from Nurmuhämmät's car and enter the Yärkänt mäshräp.

We arrive in an outdoor restaurant area which lies just outside the town. The space is shaded by great trees, and protected from the wind on one side by a large concrete wall. Some sixty, mainly middle-aged men are milling around, smoking cigarettes, chatting, and finalising arrangements. They wear the embroidered doppa hats which have become emblematic of Uyghur national identity. There is a distinct air of prosperity and authority around this gathering, and this is all-male space; even the cooking is undertaken by men. The tables are laid out in a long line, and younger men are running to and fro, laying out an array of snacks and soft drinks. In the small cooking area, hidden behind the concrete wall, the soup is already being prepared under the direction of the köl beg, a striking individual dressed in white and protected by a violently orange floral apron. The pashshap beg, law enforcer of the mäshräp, holds a wooden rod (gültayaq) around 50 cm long, with a turned end and three slats which make a loud crack when the pashshap slaps it against his hand, as he does frequently to call the group to order. He now calls everyone to the table with a loud cry. "Waqit toshti! Mäshräp bashlandiiii!" (Time's up! The mäshräp is beginning!)

Figure 1: Seated at the table at the Yärkänt mäshräp

Seating is hierarchical; distinguished guests sit in the middle of the table, facing the entertainment, their backs protected by an enormous carpet which has been hung from the tree branches. The mäshräp beg, leader of the mäshräp, sits at the top end of the table. His

opening speech emphasises friendship (dostluq) and comradeship (qerindashliq). “May the mäshräp come to the boil,” he says (mäshräp qaynap kätsun). Over the next three hours, in four precisely timed sections, the mäshräp members will work hard to create an atmosphere of boiling fun and conviviality within carefully negotiated boundaries of morality and identity.[6]

The first section is for music and dance. It begins with Chäbayat Muqam, one of the most popular of the Twelve Muqam, the complex and beautiful musical repertoire that was enshrined in the twentieth century as the Uyghur national canon but also retains its important role in informal music-making (Harris 2009). This rendition is far removed from the polished style of Xinjiang’s national orchestras. Eight men sit before the tables, playing tämbur long-necked lute, supported by the two-stringed dutar, violin, and dap frame drum. They are led by the town’s most respected musicians, the Yärkänt Bulbuliri (Nightingales of Yärkänt).

Figure 2. The Yärkänt Bulbuliri playing Chäbayat Muqam

The performance begins with a solo unmetered muqäddimä, and then the frame drums lead into the dastan section, sung by the whole group. There is extraordinary power in the combined voices of these men. The Ili singing style is sometimes dubbed “wolf song” by Uyghurs from other parts of the region for its swooping melodies and forceful open-throated vocals. The Yärkänt Bulbuliri throw their heads back and sing out, mouths open wide, revealing an impressive array of gold teeth, the cords of their neck straining; they do almost seem to howl. Another man lets loose with a shout of appreciation, a drawn-out cry which hovers over the melody of the song. The song gives way to the instrumental märghul section, played with energy and drive. Some of the men get up from the table and lead into the dance.

They dance in pairs, each circling around their partner, the body held erect, arms outstretched. Holding a smiling countenance, they circle their hands and arms, sometimes shrugging their shoulders to the rhythm, sometimes crouching and circling low. The dance is a mixture of physical pride and comic effect. Sometimes, to draw attention to himself, a man gives a sharp clap of the hands. A clap may also serve as an invitation—not easily refused—to another man to join the dance. They dance together for a while, then one falls out, and the remaining man invites someone else. Participation in the dance is passed along lines of friendship; it enacts and performs social networks. Experiences of music and dance like this, as many ethnomusicologists have noted, are powerful motivators in identity formation. They form a public presentation of the emotions and human qualities that make a group unique.

Through moving and sounding together in synchrony, social intimacy is experienced directly—body to body—and thus in the moment is felt to be true and real (Turino 2008; Titon 2015). The comments of Rehimjan, the mäshräp beg, reflect these ideas:

> In history, the Uyghurs cannot live without song and dance. Songs and instrumental music give us spirit, they help us remember our history and believe in our future. Music has an important place in the mäshräp.

The music comes to an end, the dancers sit down, and the soup is served. Within the mäshräp, communal eating is also a site of key cultural importance. Signature national dishes are consumed, and table manners assume a central role in the expression and transmission of national identity. Rehimjan emphasises the importance of hierarchy and tradition in communal eating:

> We teach the right-hand rule (ong qol qa'idisi), and how to sit around the table. If four people are sharing a dish, the elders must start, and then the youngsters. You never take food with your left hand. You must take the food which is in front of you, don't take food from in front of other people. The centre of the dish is holy (bäräkät); you can't take food from there. You have to eat cleanly and beautifully. You have to give tea and receive tea with the right hand. You can't start anything from the left hand.

And now it is time for the joking. The pashshap beg, still brandishing his rod, starts off with a lengthy and lewd story about a Uyghur woman forced to share a hotel room with an Uzbek musician, a sunay (shawm) player. She decides whether or not to scream if he approaches her, but he just wants to play his sunay. The mäshräp is strictly sexually segregated, yet joking about women and sex is an important part of the entertainment. As the story reaches its punchline, the men howl with laughter. Their howling laughter is closely related stylistically to the wolf-like vocal production of the singers, and it is a well-known distinguishing feature of Ili men's gatherings: lips drawn back, gold teeth exposed, necks straining, they laugh: "Aaaagh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha." The pashshap's story is followed by a series of rapid-fire responses from the seated mäshräp members. Each new contribution triggers a fresh round of howling laughter. It may be lewd, but this swift series of exchanges is also an impressive demonstration of linguistic and cultural competence.

Writing on the olturush drinking parties of 1990s Ghulja, Jay Dautcher also highlights the stylised laughter of the joke-telling sessions, which was "distinguished by its explosive initialization, which gave it the sound of an abrupt, ejaculatory squawk" (Dautcher 2009: 151). It was never used in front of women. This distinctive collective laugh is often the subject of jokes, which compare the sound to the braying of a herd of goats. Dautcher speculates that the sound expresses a kind of male sexual energy. These performances of masculinity, displays of cultural competence and verbal prowess reveal much about communal identity. Anthropological work on Muslim communities has emphasised the ways in which masculinity is always contingent, constantly refigured by modernising transformations, political pressure, and conflict (Marsden 2007). Individual men's prowess is established in the course of these rapid comic exchanges at the mäshräp, and communal bonds are forged in the collective sound of braying, howling laughter, which become a key trope in the expression of national identity.

It is time for a break, and the men rise from the table to chat and smoke. After the regulation ten minutes, the pashshap beg calls them back to table, slapping the wooden slats of his rod against his hand to make a sharp crack. "Waqit toshti! Ikkinchi bolum bashlandiiii!" (Time's up! Part two is beginning!) Coordinated and introduced by the dara beg (musical organiser), the mäshräp members rise in turn to contribute musical performances. They begin with the Yärkänt Bulbuliri who give a powerful rendition of Ösäk Sadasi, the anthem of the Yärkänt mäshräp,whose lyrics are given at the opening of this article, which reverberates with the memories of the recent migration of the Yärkänt Uyghurs, and also with earlier waves of Uyghur migration. In this section, musical expressions of identity and longing alternate with moments of fun. Nurmuhämmät and his friend provide a comic musical turn. Sitting close together and skilfully coordinating their movements, each man contributes one hand to playing on a single dutar. They sing in the Ili style, a song which commemorates the tragic failure of the short-lived East Turkestan Republic (1944-1949) based in Ghulja (Brophy 2016). It is a story of loss, but the performers sing as if they are about to collapse into laughter at any moment. They are followed by Ärkin, who performs a fabulously mournful song, accompanying himself on the accordion, on the theme of the musapir: the wanderer or exile, abandoned in a foreign land and separated from home and family:

*Asmaningda män bir aydim, yärgä chushup män bir lay boldum*
*Öz yurtumda män äziz idim, yaqa yurtta män har boldum.*

*Anamni körgänlär barmu? Atamni körgänlär barmu?*
*Äy ana, jenim ana, ach ishigingni musapir bir balang käldi*

I was a moon in the sky, I fell to earth and became a piece of dirt
In my homeland I was prized, in another land I am despised.
Has anyone seen my mother? Has anyone seen my father?
Ah dear mother, open the door, your wanderer son has come.

The exile has long been a powerful image in literature and art, a homeless wanderer cut off from the source of cultural authenticity, condemned to endless repetition of half-remembered practices (Baily and Collyer 2006), and the Uyghur song repertoire is particularly rich in references to the musapir. For Uyghurs in Kazakhstan this song references the cutting of cross-border family ties during the Sino-Soviet détente, as well as deeper historical memories and tales of exile and loss. The song has extra resonance in the current political crisis, where Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are again cut off from families in the homeland by the "walls of steel" raised around Xinjiang by Xi Jinping at the start of the "re-education" campaign, ostensibly to cut off the flow of "extremist ideology" into the region, but also serving to hide China's radical policies of cultural erasure from the outside world. Unable to publicly voice their concerns about the situation, Uyghurs in Kazakhstan whisper personal stories of disappeared relatives; songs like these give voice to powerful emotional undercurrents.

Ethnomusicologist Kay Shelemay (1998; 2006) has written on the interaction of individual and collective memories that take place during musical performance, and the ways in which memories are fashioned into the texts, tunes and performance practice of a musical repertoire. Memories are intertwined with affect, emotion and nostalgia; they mediate historical events and are then further transformed to articulate new values and ideas. Expressive culture and embodied behaviour play key roles in the transmission of cultural memory and identity, and the relationships between embodied performance (or repertoire as she terms it), and the transmission of knowledge. Diana Taylor argues that acts like dance and singing are typically thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge but they play key roles in the transmission of collective memory. Their expression and transmission require presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," by being a part of the transmission (Taylor 2003). These songs of exile, performed and experienced together, resonate in the mäshräp with the strand of nostalgia and longing

which lies close to the heart in experiences of Uyghur identity, a theme which is revived and repointed in response to successive crises of loss and alienation.

But the song and the emotions it provokes are given little time to resonate. The proper performance of Uyghur masculinity does not permit extended displays of melancholy. As soon as the accordion comes to rest, the joking starts again. Dishes of rice and lamb polo are now being served and the cook, who has been labouring away in the kitchen, comes to stand beside the table to collect his dues of praise and to join in the joking. As each individual contributes to the rapid exchange of jokes, he concludes his contribution with a howl of laughter, almost doubling over with the effort, and all the men join him in a collective roar. Things are getting filthier by the minute and the mäshräp's atmosphere is now properly boiling.

**The importance of rules**

> Without rules there is no discipline. That's why we've stuck tight to the rules since the start. Otherwise there'd always be misunderstandings and problems. We try to do things properly… It's not allowed to be late, for example. If you turn up late you're not showing respect to the Thirty Sons. (Burhan)

> Just as Kazakhstan has its constitution, just like Islam has sharia law, our mäshräp has rules too. We are strict: alcohol is not allowed; spreading rumours, inappropriate jokes, defaming anyone, invading privacy, such talk is not allowed. (Rehimjan)

Time is up, and the third section is beginning. The chairs are rearranged into two lines, and the men sit facing each other across a narrow space in which a carpet is placed. This is the space of the court (dawa dastur). Again, the pashshap beg leads the proceedings. He makes a loud crack with his rod, calling the men to order. Now another role-holder comes to the fore: this is the qazi (judge), who has recorded in his notebook all the "crimes" or misdemeanours committed by mäshräp members during, or leading up to the gathering. The court is conducted with a seriousness and attention to etiquette befitting the legal process. The qazi reads out each charge, and individual mäshräp members rise to support or oppose it. Before speaking they must raise their hand, and address the qazi, "Begim bashliq, ruhsät bering …" (My lord, with your permission …). The discussion can become lively and humorous as members advance their arguments for and against the prosecution. This is a play of collective

decision-making, and an exercise in public speaking and argument whose educational value and capacity for moral strengthening are often invoked in heritage discourses. Once the decision is agreed and the accused is found guilty, discussion of an appropriate punishment begins.

Mäshräp groups are creative with their punishments, which typically involve a strong element of ritual humiliation of the guilty party. While historical reports often mention actual beatings with the pashshap's rod or a water-soaked towel, popular punishments in contemporary mäshräp in Kazakhstan more commonly involve performing a dance to reciting a Uyghur language poem. If he is unable to fulfil these demands to the satisfaction of the other members, the unfortunate man may be required to crawl around the carpet pretending to be a donkey. Bekhitshat, of the youth mäshräp from Gheyret, reports:

> We used to use the gültayaq [pashshap's rod] a lot. Then we thought up our own punishments. If we always use the same, it's not much fun. So we added some new ones like making them do an air dance [dancing without music], or covering their face with soot, or counting stars. Counting stars is when we get a jacket and make the sleeve into a telescope; we put it over his face and make him count the stars through it, then we close off the end to make it dark, and we say "It's cloudy." Then we pour water down the sleeve, and he says, "Hey what's going on," and we say, "It's raining!"

Another traditional and creatively comical punishment transmitted in Kazakhstan is called the "Interrogation" (so'al-soraq). It involves a pantomime performed by four members of the mäshräp. Two men sit on the carpet behind the guilty party, one of them holds his arms behind him, while the other pokes his own arms underneath, and clasps his hands around the guilty man's stomach. Another man asks a series of questions: "What did you eat in Bishkek? Did you eat manta (dumplings)? How did you eat manta? Was it like this?" And his tormentor slaps an imaginary manta against his mouth, rather hard. The inquisition continues: "Did you eat watermelon? Did you go swimming? …" each question accompanied by appropriate arm movements, until the guilty party is thoroughly humiliated, and the mäshräp members are once more howling with laughter.

The mäshräp is a space where tensions within Uyghur society are enacted in multiple ways, and the court in particular provides a space where they may be collectively addressed and negotiated. Nurmuhämmät has been caught smoking at table during the Yärkänt mäshräp. Other members have complained, but he is unrepentant. "I'm bored," he says, "You

won't let us drink; at least let me smoke a cigarette." In the court a fierce discussion ensues. They discuss the rules. The ban on smoking at table is clearly not a health measure since everyone smokes hard during the breaks; it is a question of etiquette and respect. They discuss Nurmuhämmät's guilt. One member makes the case for the prosecution: "We don't have permission to do that at the mäshräp" (ruhsät yoq). He broke the rules." Another argues that he should be let off because of his excellent contributions to the mäshräp in other ways; "He sang a great song." The members are still cracking jokes, but there is tension in the air. One of the distinguished guests is called on to adjudicate; Nurmuhämmät will have to respect his decision. The guest upholds the rules, Nurmuhämmät performs a short, grudging "air dance" and a truce is achieved.

**Religion, nation, and having fun**

Nurmuhämmät resists the rules because he is an advocate for social heat. It is clear from the discussion that the real problem is not smoking at table; at stake here is the reason why he made this gesture of protest: the ban on alcohol at the mäshräp. Nurmuhämmät advocates for the kinds of fun and social bonds that are created through collective drinking according to the rules of other kinds of Uyghur male gatherings where cups of strong alcohol are offered and consumed in a series of reciprocal gift exchanges.[7] Dautcher (2009) notes that drinking was central to a "beautiful gathering" (chirayliq olturush) in 1990s Ghulja. Officiated by the saqiy, alcohol should be offered with the heart (köngul), and accepting the proffered cup was a matter of respect (hörmät), a gift to the group. The act of raising one's cup is always social and relational; it reaffirms and deepens existing relationships and builds new ones (Chau 2008). And yet, as described above, social drinking was also seen as a serious problem in Uyghur society in the 1990s, a problem which the 1990s Ghulja mäshräp movement attempted to address through the promotion of new forms of piety.

Recent studies by anthropologists of Islam in China and Central Asia have paid considerable attention to the tensions between newly circulating forms of piety and established twentieth century forms of sociality (McBrien 2017; Mostowlansky 2017; Harris, Ha & Jaschok 2020). In the contemporary mäshräp movement in Kazakhstan, these tensions were always present. Rehimjan, leader of the Yärkänt mäshräp, had himself returned from the hajj a few weeks before this gathering. He was an advocate for inclusivity:

> People who believe in Islam and obey the rules of sharia make good mäshräp organisers and members. If we don't have people like that in the mäshräp then it

> becomes a meaningless party. There's a difference between mäshräp and weddings. The mäshräp starts after the pashshap beg gives a prayer. Then our hajis and religious guys (qari) pray, wishing peace for us, then the mäshräp begins.

If the new mäshräp, as part of the Kazakhstani Uyghur nation-building project, seek to bridge the divide between the more secularised and the more pious wings of Uyghur society, then members must follow the rules. The mäshräp must maintain propriety so that pious mäshräp members can feel comfortable attending the gathering, and especially they must avoid alcohol. There is a particular need to reach out to those who embrace their faith but also care about national identity, as growing numbers of young people within the Uyghur community now embrace forms of religious belief which reject the nationalist agenda. Uyghur historian Zulfiya Karimova commented:

> A lot of young people now, around 70% in the Dostluq neighbourhood in Almaty, have begun to get into Salafi-style or Wahhabi-style religion, and they criticise our traditional religion. They're influenced by the Tablighi Jama'at. They go around saying people should follow the ähli sunna (ahl as-Sunnah; the global Muslim community). They wouldn't attend mäshräp. They don't recognise ethnicity, so they would oppose mäshräp.

Mäshräp leaders must carefully negotiate these conflicting demands if they wish to mobilise a broad social coalition cutting across these divides in Uyghur society (Kamalov 2016a). We can observe these negotiations in the course of the gatherings.

The fourth section of the mäshräp is devoted to speeches. A pious member of the mäshräp stands to make a speech, though it is clear he has not been invited to do so. "If you want to play mäshräp you should do it properly," he says, "Otherwise you're just holding a party. Do you know what prayers you should offer at a funeral? Do you know how to wash the body of the deceased? Here we are, all in our forties and fifties, and there are so many things we don't know ..." Nurmuhämmät is bursting with impatience. The thought is unspoken but clear: here they go again, these religious guys, ruining our mood. Rehimjan responds carefully and with authority. "I pay attention to all these issues," he says. "In the mäshräp we say, don't shut the door too tight. It's not easy to join the mäshräp, but it's easy to leave." This is a call for balance and inclusivity. He praises the mäshräp members. "Look at all the things we've done," he says, "We observe our faith (ibadät); more and more of us

are praying, and fasting. Look at all the charitable work (saqawät) we've done." They conclude the mäshräp with a prayer: "Great Allah, grant our people peace." (Ulugh Allah, hälqimizgä amanliq bering). The message is clear: nation and religion together, at the heart of the mäshräp.

**Conclusion**

We can learn much about contemporary approaches to heritage by emphasising the specific histories from which they arise, and the political contexts which they address. The Uyghur mäshräp in China and in Kazakhstan provides a particularly interesting case study in the question of how heritage flows across borders. The history of this social institution shows how it shifts, adapts and is constantly re-invented across borders, responsive to changing social and political contexts in different locales. These histories also demonstrate how the Uyghurs, as a marginalised people living on the edges of empires, struggle to sustain their culture under different regimes. We see repeatedly the suspicions of the mäshräp raised by various governments and state security agents at different times. Over the course of a century of written records, agents of Imperial Russia, the Soviet Republics, and the People's Republic of China have all interpreted these attempts at grassroots social organisation as inherent threats to state power.

In the contemporary period, we see how cultural revival and acts of heritaging move across borders, shared and reshaped by transnational communities in different locales, and how local communities can adopt and repurpose heritage discourses for their own purposes. In contemporary Kazakhstan, Uyghurs have found the space to insert their projects of cultural revival into governmental structures and ally themselves with state projects of social cohesion and economic development. Although these spaces are not completely secure, here—in contrast to China's staging of Uyghur mäshräp which serves only to mask its policies of cultural erasure—we see the possibility of harnessing forms of living heritage to support projects of cultural revival and social mobilisation.

Although it is tempting to highlight the contrasts between the current situation of mäshräp in China and in Kazakhstan, acts of heritaging cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between top-down and grassroots approaches, elite actors and folk protagonists. As Jung-a Chang (2017: 113) argues, often "both parties share the romantic modernist premise that the essence of national spirit lies in national culture, which should be rescued and protected." This nationalist impulse, and the desire to canonise and instrumentalise mäshräp is manifest in Uyghur approaches on both sides of the border, but there are radical

differences in the ways that mäshräp have been realised in these different political contexts. Mäshräp in Kazakhstan provide a model for grassroots revitalisation of Uyghur heritage initiatives, and suggest the possibilities for practical community-based responses to the crisis of cultural erasure still underway in Xinjiang. They demonstrate how grassroots heritage initiatives can provide space for the negotiation of deep-seated social tensions. They provide forms of community discipline and models of behaviour, and they create spaces where people of different religious and ideological persuasions can come together to negotiate the communal boundaries of acceptable behaviour, acting locally to balance and harmonise the conflicting demands of nation, religion, and having fun.

In the community-based forms of heritaging that we find in the Kazakhstan mäshräps, we also see the importance of the embodied and affective qualities of heritage, in the music-making, dancing and joking needed to bring the mäshräp to the boil. The workings and the effects of expressive and affective practices, and ways of having fun, might sit uneasily with standard narratives of nation and heritage but they are crucial to the work done within the community; they provide the social glue, they express and transmit collective memories, they create social heat, and they demand linguistic and cultural competence. It is within these performative spaces that the community appears to itself, and community is negotiated and performed.

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[1] A version of this song was performed by the prominent Uyghur singer Sanubar Tursun as part of a song suite titled Ishchan Yigit (Hard-working Lad), and is widely available on *Sanubar Tursun: Arzu* (Felmay Records 2013).

[2] The British Academy funded research project from which this article arises also attends to the important sphere of women’s chay gatherings, their contemporary revival, and their social roles within Uyghur communities in Kazakhstan. Blog posts and short films of chay and mäshräp, including many of the scenes described in this article, can be found on the project website: (http://www.mäshräp.uk/

[3] The article is based on analysis of the correspondence of the Russian officials kept in Central State Archive of Uzbekistan under the title "Investigation of the reliability of persons who in the city of Verny organised Muslim circles called gap and mäshräp with special rules, and collected money for unknown goals."

[4] The term Kirghiz at that time also encompassed people later formally recognised as Kazakh.

[5] '*Almuta meshrivi' uyush-turghan mäshräplär ara musabiqä.* 1-2 bolumlär. DVD. 2017.

[6] Short clips and a full-length edited film of the mäshräp discussed here can be viewed on the project website at this link: http://www.meshrep.uk/the-yerkent-meshrep/

[7] Kamalov (2019) notes that alcohol is banned in 'traditional' male gatherings in Kazakhstan, while at olturush gatherings they are allowed in a limited form.