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Re-interpreting cultural values: Tajikistani students abroad

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Abstract

This article looks at the mobility of Tajikistani students and how they negotiate their place in an increasing globalised world, where national boundaries are becoming more navigable. It explores how structural and cultural factors intersect and influence young people’s choices as they re-shape their connections to their homeland, and re-negotiate cultural meanings in the new geographical and cultural contexts they find themselves in. This inquiry uses the concept of translocality which frames the negotiation of cultural meanings in a distant geographical and (host) cultural space by acknowledging the place of the ‘local connection’ within international mobility. It does this by examining students’ perceptions of two cultural concepts: nomus or “keeping the family name high in the community” and kase shudan or “being the shaper of one’s own destiny.” Drawing on Stephen and Storey’s conceptualisation of culture (and the local notions of agency) the article explores how continuity and contestation are juxtaposed and brought to bear on the new meaning-making by the students, against the national and international agendas that define student mobility choices. Using qualitative methodology, the researchers engaged with Tajikistani research participants in England and Japan, and looked at what those decisions about mobility mean for the individual students, locating them in a translocal (as opposed to a transnational) space. The article finds that contrary to the usual expectations of immigrants adhering more closely to cultural values (for fear of diluting them) in a new setting, while the local cultures keep evolving, these students re-interpreted traditional values to take account of their new settings and their exposure to new cultures and spaces and sought to expand meanings rather than constrain them in traditional moulds.

Introduction

Central Asia has a long and well-documented history of knowledge seeking and knowledge exchange¹ and current student mobility within and beyond the region continues to underscore this practice. In recent history, arguably the most sweeping structural factor that influenced all the peoples of Central Asia was the collapse of the Soviet Union which radically altered the political and economic order that had sustained communities for about 70 years and profoundly affected communities’ lives. With the emergence of newly independent states, state control over travel and economic activity, amongst other areas of community activities was somewhat relaxed.

Simultaneously, state support for education, health, housing, employment was withdrawn instantaneously. The impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union is well documented elsewhere.2

**Widening opportunities: Student mobility, student agency and cultural considerations**

Since Tajikistan became independent (1991) Western and Eastern countries, prompted by geopolitical considerations3 lost no time in courting the new republic which itself was also eager to explore relationships with an expanded world. Over time, national interests have shifted and continued to be re-aligned with a stronger emphasis on regional connections. Here it is enough to note the newly independent countries of Central Asia sought to find their place in an altered international arena, forge new alliances and re-shape older ones.4

These shifts in alliances have been instrumental in the choices available to young5 Tajikistani students seeking to improve their educational and economic prospects as they re-define their place in an increasingly globalised world, where national boundaries are becoming more navigable. The impact on the student community was two-fold: the ability or otherwise of pursuing further education now became a matter of personal decision and there was a wider range of countries they could go to. The exercise of student agency, the research found, resided in students’ mobility choices6 which were influenced by a variety of factors including the structural opportunities afforded to them, their own ideas about the new environment they are going into through their experience with the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) community in Tajikistan, familial considerations, as well as their personal circumstances and preferences.

In common with former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics countries (USSR), Tajikistan initially and very briefly looked to the West for leadership. The role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)7 and the international NGOs8 is well documented elsewhere.9 Here it is enough to note that with respect to education:

> We realised very quickly that you (the West) could not really help us. We had to find our own way (in education). (Personal communication: the late former deputy Minister for Education, 2004.)10

The Central Asian countries have therefore looked further East towards Eastern Asia, Japan, for example, to help with capacity building through education. It is important to note that

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4 Birgit Schlyter, “Regionalism versus networking in Central Eurasian space,” The SIPCATS Directors’ (blog), 2 May 2016.

5 The definition of “young” is dependent on “demographic, financial, economic and socio-cultural setting” (Definition of youth, United Nations). Here for the purposes of this study we define young people as being between ages 20 to 40.

6 This is particularly significant in the case of students from rural areas.

7 Among Central Asian countries Tajikistan and Kyrgyz Republic were the ones who sought assistance from international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (Pomfret, 2007) and other INGOs. Official development assistance was given equally to four Central Asian countries: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan is an exception (very few numbers of Turkmenistanis are in Japan) (Ibid).

8 The role of NGOs is significant in the context of Tajikistan and worldwide; to ignore the NGOs roles in the context is “misread the history of the twentieth-century world” (Iriye, 1999, p.424); Akira Iriye, “A century of NGOs,” Diplomatic History, 1999, 23 (2): 421–435, https://doi.org/10.1111/0145-2066.00175.


these links serve reciprocal interests. Regional politics, the desire to establish or increase “soft” power in the area\(^{11}\) trade considerations\(^{12}\) as well as domestic contextual issues such as demographic constraints,\(^{13}\) global competitiveness\(^{14}\) all play a part in negotiating national alliances.

Development agencies such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)\(^{15}\) and the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) to name the ones that are salient to this paper, have maintained a presence in Tajikistan since the early days of independence (the AKDN since 1994; the ADB\(^{16}\) since 1998; JICA since 1993) and have been the catalysts for student mobility through their scholarship programmes. The Japanese government through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), has recently increased\(^{17}\) its scholarship programme for Tajikistani government officials from 5 to 7 as well as for exchange students. The AKDN, one of the first international agencies to work in Tajikistan, has built capacity locally in education, health, rural development, economic enterprise and energy amongst other sectors. Its global scholarship programme was now extended to Tajikistani students and taken up primarily by students from Badakhshan.\(^{18}\)

Existing literature

There is a growing body of literature on Central Asia but much of it tends to focus on the geopolitics,\(^{19}\) state building\(^{20}\) or economic and labour migration.\(^{21}\) Literature on education often focuses on the system\(^{22}\): the lack of textbooks, the curriculum, pedagogy, gender equity and policies.\(^{23}\)


\(^{12}\) The trade relationships of Tajikistan and Japan is very modest, the emphasis of Japan is on supporting Tajikistan in terms of developing infrastructure after the civil war (see Rahimov; Mirozkhid Rahimov, “Central Asia and Japan: Bilateral and multilateral relations,” Journal of Eurasian Studies, 2014, (5): 77–78, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeursas.2013.09.002; Linn, “Central Asian regional integration.”

\(^{13}\) The aim of the international education is to recruit the most talented (Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2015) who can then help the host country with the labour force; see also Akiyoshi Yonezawa and Yukiko Shimmi, “Transformation of university governance through internationalization: Challenges for top universities and government policies in Japan,” Higher Education, 2015, 70 (2): 173–186, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9865-0.

\(^{14}\) Universities are seen as a national strength by Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2015).

\(^{15}\) JICA - Japan International Cooperation Agency.

\(^{16}\) ADB – recognized Tajikistan as a member in 1998. The role of ADB in promoting transportation, energy and trade and moreover in supporting Regional Cooperation is significant. Available at: https://www.adb.org/news/videos/tajikistan-and-adb-15-years-together-fighting-poverty.

\(^{17}\) Since 2008 JICE/JICA program encouraged only 5 government employees and 2 exchange students from Slavonic University of Tajikistan but since 2016 the quota was increased to 7 government employees and a new contract was signed with the Japanese Language faculty of Tajikistan to encourage exchange students from the faculty as well.

\(^{18}\) The AKDN is headed by His Highness the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims around the world including 90% of Badakhshans. The AKDN’s mandate in Badakhshan was to help the community recover from the civil war and to help with the post – Soviet transition.


Research on student mobility for higher education from the former Soviet Union countries is largely located in the comparative education field. Such studies are useful in that they track student movement and progress; examine student motivation and their choices of countries and institutions. However, they do not pay attention to the context from which students come for higher education: the comparative education field is also legitimately critiqued for not drawing on “indigenous” voices.

There has been less attention on how students fare or feel while they are studying abroad although this is beginning to emerge as a field of interest see “The impact of studying abroad on the well-being of Tajik nationals” or challenges for education and by education such as “skills mismatch” in Tajikistan. Even within individual countries it is easier to find research relating to Kyrgyzstan, or Kazakhstan rather than Tajikistan.

Higher Education in Tajikistan is less well researched although this is slowly changing and it is encouraging to be able finally to draw from some ‘indigenous voices and local intellectual perspectives.’ Apart from these studies, one is more likely to get information on the education system from the INGO community reports. There continues to be a lack of inclusion of indigenous intellectual work in the case of research on Tajikistan.

Studies on Central Asia culture (usually from the field of ethnography or anthropology) explore the status of Islam after communism or the position of women in society. Little attention has been paid to the relationship between education and culture. Niyozov’s study is an exception drawing on cultural concepts to explain the perspectives of teachers in Badakhshan. Our study is another exploration of the relationship between culture and education, this time, with respect to student mobility in higher education.

Conceptual approaches

This article frames the Tajikistani international student experiences within the concept of trans-locality and the cultural values of nomus (keeping the family name/honour high) and kase shudan (becoming one’s own person or shaping one’s own destiny).
Translocality

Student mobility is often cast (as is migration for economic purposes) in a transnational framework. However, we find the term “translocal” to be truer to the actual situation and experience of the students. While they cross international borders, they remain linked to their locales through family networks, through cultural factors and through personal agency in their new environment they maintain that to use the term “transnational” is to emphasise the nation rather than the individual actor. The term “translocal” as Conradson and Mckay observe, was coined by Appadurai:

… to describe the ways in which emplaced communities become extended, via the geographical mobility of their inhabitants, across particular sending and destination contexts.

Conradson and Mckay hold that the term better expresses the actual relationships between students who are abroad and their places of origin since: familial, communal perspectives continue to influence the students in their new geographical spaces.

Conradson and Mckay extend the definition of translocalities as encompassing but also transcending the regional movement of people (to which the term has been generally applied) to include international mobility. They maintain that it is not the geographical space and context but the cultural norms that the students carry with them to their new contexts that are salient and better captured by the term “translocal” which emphasises, not impersonal national boundaries but personal lives abroad. Hence our focus is on the relationship of the students to their familial, communal and cultural ties that constitute their translocal status.

Culture as a mobility contributor

Although overarching structural factors, including national and regional as well as international factors shape the arenas within which students can exercise their mobility decisions, their personal response to the opportunities (and constraints) resulting from these factors, are located in the presence, negotiation and re-interpretation or expansion of the meanings of certain cultural values.

Student mobility provides the space in which these values are tested, contested and re-shaped more consciously than in the homeland context. We use two such cultural values, the idea of nomus (keeping the family name “high”) and that of kase shudan (becoming one’s own person) to examine how students’ translocality affects their interpretation of these two cultural concepts. The emphasis that Tajikistani culture places on education is significant (see section 2.2.3) as a contributor to students going beyond immediate local context to further their studies and is embedded deeply into the psyche of communities in Central Asia where the notion of traveling out of immediate context in search of new knowledge has been an important factor in intellectual history of the region as a whole.

But first, we need to define what we mean by “culture.”

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38 Ibid.
41 Conradson and Mckay, “Translocal subjectivities.”
42 Ibid.
43 As noted earlier, the collapse of the Soviet Union suddenly changed the status of some people who then became immigrants in their place or residence and the notion of “mobility” itself therefore now had an additional, counterintuitive and contradictory dimension to it. This is a rich area for further study about how mobility is understood by communities in transition without movement.
44 As Stephens (2007, p.29) argues that cultural things describe the action but Storey (2007) emphasises that at the same time cultures can be contested. Within the cultures there are concepts that also can be contested not simply endorsed or universally accepted.
45 This covers rural-urban, regional and international mobility.
At one level, culture is defined by the material expression of it in art, literature, theatre, architecture for example, that both embodies and sometimes challenges the norms of society. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the concept of culture is drawn from the social definition of it which links it to meaning-making and meaning circulation within a group. In this sense culture is concerned with two things:

1. The knowledge and ideas that gives meaning to the beliefs and actions of individuals and societies;
2. The ideational tool which can be used to describe and evaluate that action.\(^\text{46}\)

However, meanings are not always simply agreed on and circulated. As Storey\(^\text{47}\) explains:

Cultures are always both shared and contested networks of meanings. Culture is where we share and contest meanings of ourselves, of each other and of the social worlds in which we live.

His statement acknowledges the dynamism of culture and the fact that agency has its space within it. Stephens describes\(^\text{48}\) culture as “ideational” and extends that to include problem-solving. Culture, he holds, is the way in which human beings solve the problems that the environment, human and physical, sets them. In that sense then culture carries with it the ideas of change, adaptation to new circumstances, empowerment and decision-making.

Culture comprises two dimensions: firstly, ideas, beliefs and knowledge that are meaningful to individuals and societies, and secondly, the description and evaluation of those beliefs and activities. Culture, then, is both content and evaluation. Culture is both “what is” and also “what is acted upon” it possesses both passive and active characteristics which in turn create the tensions between tradition and change, the individual and community, the indigenous and the exogenous.\(^\text{49}\)

Hence, culture, is both a given set of rules, behaviours, ideas that are accepted as a norm or tradition as well as a dynamic, reflexive, contested and evolving network of meanings.

**Nomus: Keeping the family honour high**

The word most commonly used by the Tajikistanis in defining nomus\(^\text{50}\) is “dignity.” The concept encompasses the notions of honour, maintaining the family name, reputation and status and to what might be termed “ethical” behaviour. The students’ testimonies which inform this description, confirmed both the breadth of the concept and its relevance to them as students abroad as is discussed in this article. One either has nomus is called “banomus” or “with nomus” or one does not and so is “benomus” or without nomus. The concept derives from conduct and is linked to what is considered “good” behaviour, contributing to communal activities responsibly, maintaining dignity, and not bringing shame to the family or community. With respect to education, nomus is also demonstrated when one does well in one’s education at all levels.

The idea of nomus is highly gendered although that is also now changing (see section 4.1). Girls and women in a family carry the nomus particularly in how they deal with their sexuality. They are expected to conform to the culture in which modesty and propriety in sexual matters is emphasised as is the importance of sexual relationships being strictly located within wedlock. Any violation is seen as the fault of the girl or woman and draws punishment from the male members...
of the family who are the guardians of nomus (see section 4.2). Men do not bear an equivalent responsibility in terms of their sexuality. Their nomus lies in whether they are the stronger or the weaker partner in a relationship and their ability to provide, and to care for their family (see section 4.1).

Communal relationships are defined, and behaviour judged, through actions that include demonstrations of integrity, communal philanthropy, hospitality as well as sensitivity to communal circumstances. Joint projects to help neighbours to build their homes, contributing to the funeral expenses of the deceased, “spring cleaning” a common area within the neighbourhood, hosting people to “bless” a new house, all require the participants to execute the work with integrity and generosity of time, labour, finances hence becoming “banomus” rather than “benomus.”

The changing political and economic landscape has meant that the concept has evolved in other ways too. It is the young who now volunteer their time, to both their neighbourhood communities and to NGOs to gain experience to enhance their educational or employment prospects. With respect to family, gender norms are more relaxed and more equitable (see section 4.2). With respect to education, in pursuit of excellence the ability to go further afield. The reference points for nomus expand from “keeping the family name high” in the locality to keeping the regional and then the national name high (when attending international schools for example) as mobility expands in ever – widening circles, outwards.

*Kase shudan: Becoming one’s own person

The notion of “kase shudan” or “sohibi khud shudan or odami obrumand shudan” literally means “being one’s own master” and is an altogether internal process. It implies maturity, confidence, self-reliant and being in control of one’s own destiny, although there is an element of being recognised in the community as being such a person. It is, intrinsic value which becomes particularly important as students move out of the localities and are exposed to geographical separation from family and locality as well as to new cultural experiences. They identify it as a strengthening of a personal, internal set of values, honouring independence of thought and action, resilience, growth, self – development, implying agency and accountability to oneself (see section 4.3.1). *Kase shudan* is recognised in the local context as implying the ability to act rather than be led by circumstances.

*Cultural understanding of agency

Historically, Central Asia has been known for as a space in which intellectual enquiry and exchange has flourished. The idea of travelling in search of knowledge is embedded deeply in the Central Asian psyche. What is interesting is “search of travel” through travel considered to be important in helping individuals to transform their life. The Tajik proverb of “To musofir nashavi, musulmon nameshavi” meaning “you will become a Muslim only when you become a stranger,” and “Az tu harakat az Khudovand barakat” meaning “You move and Allah will grant you abundance.” These proverbs, thought to originate from the poems and philosophy of classical authors such as Nasir Khusraw, Abuabdulloi Rudaki, Farrirudini Attor (themselves travellers in the search of knowledge) amongst other prominent figures in Central Asia’s intellectual history, promote the notion of the knowledge-seeking through travel within a person. As the local proverb says that “Rizqi mard dar qadami mard” meaning “A person’s achievements depends on each step he takes.”

**Methodology**

The overall research question is how Tajikistani students exercise their further mobility decisions and negotiate the two cultural frameworks that they then inhabit. We use a case study design in

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51 For a time after the civil war economic considerations were more urgent and education was put second to basic needs.
this qualitative research\textsuperscript{52} drawing on data collected from two different groups of students: one of whom are studying and have studied in Japan and the other, in England. The two sets of students are separated by time, location, and even the researchers’ focus (see research questions below) but connected in terms of country of origin and their desire to seek further education outside their national or even regional borders. The case studies are intrinsic in nature\textsuperscript{53} although there may be resonances with other contexts and participants. We wanted to explore how structural and cultural factors intersect influence young people’s choices as they re-shape their connections to their homeland, and re-negotiate cultural meanings in the new geographical and cultural contexts they find themselves in.

The study chose to focus on student’s perspectives on themselves in encountering the unfamiliar. The countries and peoples of Central Asia have been connected through the ages in multiple ways, educational exchange being one of them. This study looked at far – off, unfamiliar locations where both the culture and the languages were new to the students (although see section 4.3 for their perceptions of Japanese culture). Additionally, while there have been many studies of economic or labour migrations, there is very little research on the motivation and experience of Tajikistani students abroad. This research is a small step in filling that gap.

As mentioned above, structural factors (see section 2) also had a role to play in where the students chose to go for their studies.\textsuperscript{54} England was the first place where a group of students could come on scholarships from the AKDN to England specifically to London\textsuperscript{55} and the presence of the ADB and JICA program on the forging of closer ties between Japan and Tajikistan both in terms of scholarships and other aid and trade relationships meant that Japan was “open” for Tajikistani students to come for further studies.

**Data collection method: In England and Japan**

The students in England were asked to explain the concept of *nomus* through focus group\textsuperscript{56} discussion through the use of purposive sampling. The focus group data collection method allows for individuals in a group to reflect on an issue and re-consider their views in the light of other views expressed. A corollary of that is that one testimony, when uncontested, is understood to reflect the views of the whole group. The students debated the idea of *nomus* in a dynamic process as they engaged with its meaning in their location as Tajikistani students in England. The same students were interviewed again in 2017 in a focus group setting and asked to reflect on their experiences with hindsight on motivation for coming to England and their ideas of *nomus* to validate the earlier findings and take account of any new perspectives.\textsuperscript{57} In the case of the group in London, they were able, as a cohesive group that had studied together, to be open with each other and the researcher, challenging, debating as they offered their thoughts and experiences and feelings.

The research questions were:

**What does *nomus* mean?**


\textsuperscript{54} See section 2 on focus in London in the early part of the post – Soviet era and on Japan ten years later, because of the choices students made to go into the unfamiliar.

\textsuperscript{55} At that time, there was very little data on Tajikistani students. The students in this study were therefore drawn from London only.

\textsuperscript{56} Focus groups are often used for triangulation purposes: to activate and corroborate collective memory, and to qualify and offer alternatives to given perspectives (Fontana and Frey, 2000).

\textsuperscript{57} The dynamics of the focus group method was evident in their response to the question what do you think would have happened to you if you had not gone abroad to which one participant stated “my life would have been miserable with no good job” and was challenged by another who said “I don’t think that. I see many people here who did not go abroad but are in good jobs or businesses and are doing well.”
What does it mean for you (as students abroad)?

What made you decide to come to London to study?

Would you have chosen (your field of studies) differently if you could have?

The students in Japan were asked about their motivation for coming to Japan and *kase shudan* was one consideration among many push and pull factors that they cited. The enquiry into student mobility, student motivation and student perceptions of their place in their new environments was conducted through semi-structured interviews and biographical narratives. The researcher used snowball sampling. With biographical narratives, the focus is on the individual alone and yields an in-depth perspective on the participant’s views, feelings, opinions and experiences. This data collection tool, used with students in Japan and those who returned to Tajikistan allowed the researcher to understand the events that were related to students’ lives prior to international mobility, during their international studies in Japan and, for some, their post-education experiences.

The key research questions of this study were:

Tell me about your educational experience?

What motivated you to pursue higher education?

What motivated you to pursue higher education in Japan?

The difference in the data collection methods were not as important as the way that the questions were framed: the group in London was asked specifically about their ideas on *Nomus* while the group in Japan offered the notion of *Kase Shudan* unprompted by the researcher. The group in Japan referred to *Kase Shudan* shudan without prompting and it emerged as an important consideration for them. The students in London, when asked about *Nomus*, reflected on its relevance to them while they were in London. Section 3.2 describes the research participants, and the context in which data was collected.

The research participants

The main participants of the research in Japan were current and former Tajikistani students aged 20–40 (see Table 1) who have spent more than a year in Japan. The empirical work in Japan started in June 2016 and continues up to date. The researcher also paid attention to the gender of students, their marital status, work experience and regions they came from as each of these variables has a different impact on students’ perception and experiences. They were drawn from diverse tertiary educational institutions throughout Japan. Students defined themselves being from Capital of Dushanbe (*markazi Dushanbe*), Khatlon, Sugd, Badakhshan and the districts republican subordination of Tajikistan.

Most destination cities in Japan for Tajikistani students are: Tsukuba, Osaka, Tokyo, Beppu and Nigata.

The students in England, on the other hand, were interviewed first in 2009 and then in 2017 (see Table 2), and numbered six: two women and four men. They were between 26 and 30 years old.

58 The biographical research method was used, to understand “both social reality and the subjects, worlds of knowledge and experience” (Apitzsch & Johann, 2007, p.3) and the dynamism of the phenomenon of mobility and complexity of motivation. The use of biographical research began in 1920s in the study of migration in the field of sociology and later expanded its roots to other social and humanity field, psychology and medicine as well (Apitzsch & Johann, 2007; Rozenthal, 2004); see Ursula Apitzsch and Irini Siouti, “Biographical Analysis as an Interdisciplinary Research Perspective in the Field of Migration Studies,” The University of York, April 2007, https://www.york.ac.uk/res/researchintegration/Integrative_Research_Methods/Apitzsch%20Biographical%20Analysis%20April%202007.pdf; Gabriele Rosenthal, “Biographical research,” in Qualitative Research Practice, ed. Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium and David Silverman (London: Sage, 2004), 48–64. ISBN 0-7619-4776-0.

59 The researcher had noted the idea of *nomus* while in Tajikistan and wished to explore its significance for students studying abroad.
In contrast to the students in Japan, these students were studying at one institution, under one scholarship programme offered by the AKDN for Ismaili students.

The students in England were amongst the first Tajikistani students from the region of Badakhshans coming into the London for higher education as a group. They form part of Ismaili Muslim students on the AKDN scholarship programme at the Institute of Education, (now part of the University College London) as well as Islamic studies at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. Their programme was a capacity building programme and the conditions of the scholarship were that they would go back and serve their community for at least three years after which they were free to pursue their own professional plans.

They were exposed not just to London but also to their global Ismaili community comprising people from East Africa, Canada, India, Pakistan, America to name a few. This served to make the group reflect deeply about who they were as Ismailis and as Tajikistanis and these reflections informed their discussions of nomus as we shall see later (see section 4.2).

The Tajikistani in Japan comprise students from the government departments in Tajikistan whose studies are facilitated by the Japanese government and who required to go back to their government jobs upon completion of their studies. There are also other students who obtained scholarships offered by government of Japan and the Japanese programs operating in Tajikistan as well as students who are self-financed.

**Findings: Cultural concepts in transition**

One of our main findings is that the concepts of nomus and kase shudan have both undergone change, not just as a result of movement abroad but also as a consequence of changes within the political and economic structures within Tajikistan itself. The two shifts are not always congruent however. While nomus is critiqued by the students in some of its old and new forms in Tajikistan, kase shudan, we find, has taken on new meanings and new manifestations amongst the students.

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60 There were others students on different programs through AKDN scholarship
abroad. It is important here to recall that the students in England were asked to think about *nomus* and what it meant for them: *kase shudan* was identified and cited by the students in Japan, themselves.

**Nomus and gender**

The meaning of *nomus* underwent scrutiny in a number of aspects by the young Tajikistanis in England. In speaking of the practice of passing on ancient family feuds, young Tajikistanis recognised the burden and barrier this poses to mending fractured relationships. They also queried the role of *nomus* in disadvantaging women and girls more particularly and with more pronounced consequences. The argument that the men's *nomus* resided in being the breadwinner for the family was also challenged in the focus group: the women argued that the girls now also occupied that (male) space for *nomus* because they also contribute to the financial stability of the family. Again, in the economic situation where jobs are no longer guaranteed under the new dispensation of capitalism, not being able to provide for the family as is not automatically considered to make a man *banomus* qualified.

Even if a man works on the farm while his wife may work in an NGO and earns more money, or he is unemployed but is trying to make a living, his *nomus* is not lost. But if he loses his energy in drug-taking, or alcohol or he is just lazy, then he is *benomus* (Aqlimo, 2009).

The emphasis, it appears, is shifting from simply status to care and effort. Again where previously having a child out of wedlock would have seen both mother and child banished from the family, in current times, the girl or woman is not ostracised in the same extreme manner. The family tries to find and force the man responsible to do the honourable thing and marry the woman but if that is not possible, the mother is no longer rejected out of hand.

Whether this is because of the recognition that the girl or woman could not survive alone under the new capitalist order or because her contribution to the family income is needed under this same new (capitalist) order, is a matter for further research. It is equally possible that the unwanted pregnancies from the time of the civil war might have altered perceptions of the nature of the transgression, which, in those circumstances, clearly occurred without the girl’s or woman’s volition or consent. This acceptance of the girl back into the family in that particular situation might have paved the way for a more liberal treatment of other cases in which the girl falls pregnant. This too needs to be researched further.

The younger Tajikistani are equally critical of what they see as other more recent aspects of *nomus* emerging within their communities. If the economic situation in the nineties resulted in people demonstrating sensitivity to economic realities, then the current tendency of over-consumption is just as apparent and challenged. In speaking of how the term has begun to encompass competitiveness as well as the traditional co-cooperativeness, in current times, the students stated:

> “Now people want to have big weddings to show they too can do it like their neighbours and bring things from Dubai and China. But I think this is wrong because they do not think about the future but just to show off. So *nomus* now is more about showing off” (Doston, 2009).

Similar sentiments had been expressed by other Tajikistanis during other occasions (Karam, 2009; Aqlimo, 2009). When asked whether this was something new or had existed from the Soviet times, the response was unequivocal:

> You could not do this in Soviet times because you would be asked “Where you got the money from?” So I think it’s a new thing (Masrur, 2009).
Nomus and education

A major push factor for students in England was the lack of educational opportunities in Tajikistan at that time since the country was still reeling from a civil war after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Aga Khan scholarships (which had been in operation globally for Ismaili Muslims) were now able to reach the young Ismailis in Badakhshan as well.

The opportunity to study in London and in one of the Aga Khan’s institution and to re-engage with their religious heritage was an important pull factor for some of these students at that time (Doston, 2009; Fotima, 2009). Students reflection on the question of what made you decide to come to London to study?

People were applying to AKDN and the family and others were telling us “x and y are applying; why don’t you apply as well?” (Fotima, 2017).

First reason of going out was for future, for quality of life and good job and family. Remember at that time even to apply it cost 60 somoni to send email and fax (Shams, 2017)

Engagement with the outside world was a relatively new phenomenon given that hostilities continued in the country up to 2000 but the presence of expatriates in the region gave the young people a glimpse of the widening horizons that they wished to access.

“The first reason was for the future life the quality of life and to get good job prospects and to help the family” (Shams, 2009). “I wanted to experience things outside of Tajikistan” (Masrur, 2009). One other person said that too...

While improving the quality of life and economic opportunity was a paramount reason, other reasons were also cited:

[I also wanted to] go abroad to see the world and to experience outside of Tajikistan (Doston, 2009).

Opportunities were limited: even now they are limited. I thought things would be better in London (Masrur, 2009).

All Badakhshaniis had begun to acknowledge English as a universal language as access to knowledge and work. The community had begun to recognise the importance of the language and this was reinforced by the emphasis placed on its acquisition by the Aga Khan. His guidance on all matters was considered to be extremely important by the community and the opportunity to improve the English may have been another pull factor for students who came to London.

The limited opportunities meant that the participants had less choice available to them than (as we shall see later) did the students who opted to go to Japan.

If I had opportunity maybe I would have done something else: engineering perhaps instead of religious education... (Shams, 2017).

It is not that the students in London did not choose to be there: it is that their options were more limited than for those students who chose to go to Japan as the quote attests.

Nomus is also applied to trying to maximise one’s potential. Children and young people are encouraged to do, and be, their best: to work hard at their studies or their professions to keep the family nomus high. The responsibility of holding the nomus is an elastic one, expanding outward from the family to the clan, village, region and the nation. Young Tajikistanis studying abroad describe it in the following way:

61 In the case of Badakhshani Tajikistanis the importance of educational aspect of nomus is further reinforced by the emphases placed on it by their spiritual leader the Aga Khan.
In school I have to study hard to keep my family name high but now also we are Tajiks here (in the UK) and we have to keep Tajikistan’s name high (Potima, 2009).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war of Tajikistan, students were faced with a collapsed educational system and this constituted a big push factor for them, although their options were not many:

Opportunities were limited and there was banomus to get the scholarship. Because a very competitive. I saw people of my age got that opportunity and I wanted it too. Some kind of family pressure was also there when they compared … “they are doing this, why aren’t you” (Shams, 2017).

And

“I think all of us who got into the program were given more opportunity in the family. Your status in the family changed. Did you feel that? [Addressed to the group]. At that time, they slaughtered a sheep (for me) (laughs). [More seriously] if you take nomus to bigger context [of London] we Badakhshans are like small community but we have our dignity and our nomus. And we said to each other “why are you not studying?” [If one of us did not work hard] Nomus for us was a shield not to go astray” (Masrur, 2017).

But while most of the young Tajikistanis interviewed endorsed this “national” aspect of nomus, (nomusi vatandori) in as much as they felt they represented their country and should be good students who work hard while abroad to hold the nation’s name high, there were some reservations about the other aspect of nomus vatandori. In Soviet times, nomus vatandori pertained to the upholding of communist ideology, values and policies: it now translates into upholding the current national leadership and their policies. This unqualified endorsement of all things national is no longer universally or unquestioningly endorsed: the love of the country remains unchanged but all national policies and activities are not automatically praised. Cultural meanings, as Storey observes, are being engaged with and contested even as they are formed, modified and acknowledged communally.

For the students in London, the exposure to their fellow Ismailis from around the world as well as British society complicated the issue of thinking about who they were.

The impact was two-fold: not just experiencing a new environment but as part of our programme the issues of identity… community… you get exposure to a bigger community. X led a demonstration. Near the Russian embassy! There was a sense of a new identity as a Tajikistanis (Doston, 2017)

There were issues too of cultural differences:

Society of London was shocking… it opened us … we were more open -minded… we got a sense of tolerance to “just living with it.” I understood that something could be wrong to me but not to him. Things are more relative… (Shams, 2017).

The former students in England when interviewed in 2017 spoke of the cultural differences, the need to learn to co-exist with a set of values not their own and to learn to keep to their own values. Thinking back they recognised how the concept of nomus had changed for them: they now identified a personal interpretation of nomus, distinguishing it from the “communal nomus.”

There is also a personal nomus: we are more open… so the idea of nomus changed. The communal level is still stricter and conservative. Personal nomus and communal level are different sometimes. One thing (nomus) that kept us with our framework and our goal and our objectives kept us safe… (Masrur, 2017)
They recognised that personal growth may outstrip the communal understanding of nomus making the personal response to a different value system more tolerant and non-judgemental, but also acknowledging that the communal nomus helped them retain their own value systems.

The relationship is a complex one: some of the changes in nomus in the homeland were critiqued by the students as the concept becoming shallower (emphasising “show” instead of “communal action”) while their own interpreters broadened the concept (tolerance of divergent life-styles). But they found the values inherent in nomus to be pertinent. The changing political and economic landscape has meant that the concept has evolved in other ways too. It is the young who now volunteer their time, and they do this both to their neighbourhood communities and the more systemised NGOs to gain experience to enhance their educational or employment prospects. With respect to family, gender norms are more relaxed and more equitable. With respect to education, excellence and the ability to go abroad to study is now emphasised. The reference points for nomus expand from “keeping the family name high” in the locality to keeping the regional and then the national name high (when attending international schools for example) as mobility expands in ever – widening circles, outwards.

**Kase shudan and education**

The Tajikistani students in Japan chose Japan (from amongst other destinations they could have chosen) as their country of study and cited a number of reasons for their choice. For some the availability of the scholarship was important: it was the only way to attain comparatively better quality higher education.

> To get my degree from a university with comparatively higher ranking caused me to come to Japan (Saido, 2016).

> When the first time as Japanese language learner I came here I found knowledge is different thing and the one that I knew I felt was surface based and I wanted to learn deeper and educate myself (Mullo, 2016).

Interest in the programme was another factor and yet another was the fact that English was the medium of instruction (although many Tajikistani students now speak Japanese fluently, particularly those who studied in Japanese faculty or those who came with young children to Japan. The presence of other Tajikistani students in the country was also cited as important pull factors. The prestige of the country also played a part in their decision.

It is equally clear that for Tajikistani students in Japan, education is not merely the pathway to economic success although this is an important factor in their pursuit of higher education. Their emphasis on *kase shudan*, their citing of cultural resonances, between Japan and Tajikistan indicate that they see their education as being broader than the disciplines they are studying and as altogether more holistic, building character, self-reliance.

> It is not only about career but I do not see myself growing professionally in the context [of Tajikistan] (Lola, 2017).

This concern for “growth” is attested in the fact that an important reason for wanting to leave Tajikistan was the lack of quality education or access to it, since “good” quality education equates to private education. Students referred to what we call the “brain waste” that they perceived as being a threat to them if they stayed within Tajikistan for their education (Mullo, 2016; Suhrob, 2016; Lola, 2017).

> As I told you that when I came here [to Japan] I felt the knowledge that I gained throughout many years [in Tajikistan] was not enough at all (Mullo, 2016).
University [in Tajikistan] seemed to me very simple compared to my school [in one region of Tajikistan] that I studied there. At school I had very strong knowledgeable teachers. There [at university] were not enough knowledgeable teachers (Qaisar, 2017).

Students who came to Japan did so because they felt the quality of education on offer in Tajikistan was simply not good enough to enable them to take their place in the global economy. We term this factor the fear of a “brain waste” as opposed to the “brain gain” that the students cited was that Japanese education is recognised internationally as being of a high quality. Self-development then is also a powerful motivator and speaks to kase shudan.

The idea of kase shudan is clearly expanding in both local and international arenas. It is the initial motivator for student mobility but it expands through their experiences abroad while retaining its local connection.

**Kase shudan: Individual agency and family considerations**

It is clear that the students exercise agency prior to coming to Japan in making their choices within the structural parameters set by Tajikistan’s national education and wider economic and political alliances with other countries.

I wanted to study abroad so that I would not be a burden to my parents (Hamid, 2016)

... my parents are unemployed. Thanks to my aunt that she changed my life and now I can impact my siblings’ lives (Odil, 2016)

It is also clear therefore that while students value the quality of self –realisation they continue to be concerned with the family and its fortunes, with younger siblings whom they wish to see flourish as they feel that they have been able to do.

I was lucky that I could finish my university and got my BA diploma but my oldest brother could not finish his university. My two youngest brothers are students and I support my student brothers. I suggest them to learn language and find their way (Mullo, 2016).

Everything depends on family upbringing (tarbiyai oilavi). My father (khudorahmati/may peace be upon him) was very strict person. He wanted us to work hard, to learn well and to become somebody (sohibi khud shavem) (Kuibek, 2016).

**Kase studan: Continuity and change**

One of the factors students cited in choosing Japan was that they felt a cultural resonance with Japanese culture, different though the two are and the second was the importance of having other Tajikistanis living in Japan. While this may be regarded as a natural pull, it is also interesting to note that students cited cultural commonalities between the Japanese and themselves as an important consideration in their choice of place (Sayob, Saido, Khotun, and Hamid in 2016). They valued the emphasis on the family, the respect for elders, and social relationships, symbolised by such activities as tea ceremonies in Tajikistan and Japan. They perceived these values as being common to their own culture and hence providing a sense of familiarity in an otherwise unfamiliar landscape. However, they equally valued the space given to them in Japan to explore their individuality, reflected in their idea of kase shudan, implying that this was less consciously done in the communal setting (Qaisar, 2017; Kuibek, Khotun, 2016).

They recognise the importance and value of Japanese space for exercising agency, thrown into sharper relief through their exposure to another culture which requires them to make intelligent choices about where they are located, how they behave, and how they make choices and decision, all without immediate recourse to communal opinion, wisdom or consent. Geographical space creates other personal space even as it exacerbates distance from the local home space. Trans-
localy, then, enables the students to emphasise the traditional while they embrace the new: continuity is valued as is change.

Study in England and in Japan: Commonalities and differences in the students’ perspectives

For both sets of students, upward economic mobility was an important, but not exclusive or overriding consideration. Both sets see education as being broader than the actual disciplines they study and both recognise that this breadth comes from their very mobility and being geographically and culturally located in a new space. For the students in London, the exposure to “the West” was further complicated by being a part of a course that connected them to the rest of the Ismaili global community as they studied with other young students, from Pakistan, India, Canada and America, with whom they shared a faith but not a culture. This resulted in a conscious engagement and thinking about being Tajikistanis, Ismailis and Badakhshani learning to live with diverse moral values as well. For the students in Japan, they came into a very different space and place where they found cultural resonances on the one hand and yet welcomed the distance from and lack of access to communal decision making, discussion and considerations on the other. They recognised the space as important in enabling them to further develop themselves as 

Who they were as individuals within their communities is what is important for them.

For both sets of students, the concepts gained in significance because of their mobility. The students in London re-evaluated nomus but still considered it to be important in their lives. They engaged with the concept once beyond its actual geographical reach in interesting ways as they sought to both retain their own values and to be open to those of others and the recognition that “back home” the kind of “open” behaviour (between the sexes) would be judged as bannomus but that personally one could simply “live and let live” and “leave well alone” (Shams, 2017). Their actual mobility was the catalyst for focusing on the concept both as a motivating factor for the move itself and for their choices and conduct after the move.

Discussion

In this study, what the researchers found interesting is the engagement the two sets of students had with two specific cultural concepts which appear to have both guided them in their new contexts and to have been re-interpreted by them in some senses. The concept of translocality was felt to be particularly relevant here: it served to nuance the students’ understanding of nomus and kase shudan. In most cases when communities migrate, they cleave to their values even more strongly (for fear of losing them) than those who remain in the homelands. This has been well documented. However, this study found that the students engaged in a re-interpretation (rather than an entrenchment) of the concepts.

Indeed the concepts do not remain static in Tajikistan and further research in this area to examine how the two groups, one “at home” and the other “abroad” might see the concepts evolving. The students in London seemed to imply that communal nomus might be more conservative and sometimes more superficial now than personal nomus.

For the students in Japan the exercise of kase shudan was more pronounced given they were not always able to readily access familial or communal advice before having to make decisions in a new context. They need to be more self –reliant than previously and this enhances their personal development and agency to become more confident in themselves.

The data points to a number of salient features in relation to student mobility and a re-assessment, if not re-definition, of nomus and the importance of kase shudan. Kase shudan is both a moti-

vating factor (see section 2.2) for mobility (and the data seems to indicate that it is a core motivating factor) as well as more pertinent and more consciously considered because of mobility itself.

The data also revealed that some manifestation of nomus are becoming more “material” because of the changed economic situation (due to structural factors63), and critiqued by the young for becoming both narrower and shallower in effect. Kase shudan, on the other hand now includes the notion of becoming more “independent an individual” because economic changes have fundamentally reduced state provision that facilitated families’ support their children through school and higher education. Now, the progress of an individual increasingly depends on their own agency rather than on familial support, although familial moral support is still significant.

It appears that as geographical horizons expand and blur, the need for an internal compass to locate and centre the individual is coming to the fore amongst more community-centred values like nomus as understood in the traditional sense. Nomus is externally validated anchoring the individual firmly in the community although the circle of operation - and hence validation - widens to the national and to the international arena as the young person migrates.

In contrast, kase shudan is a mainly internal process: it is at once the catalyst for mobility (students cited working in Tajikistan in programmes run by the Japanese and that encounter as a motivating factor). It is also a response to the expanding boundaries of globalisation, strengthening a personal, internal set of values, honouring independence of thought and action, resilience, growth, self – development, implying agency and accountability to oneself in a rapidly expanding international horizon. The translocality enables the young people both to reflect on and if necessary to critique the manifestations of nomus in the homeland but also to use the concept in negotiating the new (translocal space). Young people question some of the more modern manifestations of nomus, seeing in them not the value as it has traditionally been understood but a more superficial manifestation in ostentation (in the case of expensive wedding ceremonies) or an unquestioning acquiescence to all things national. These new manifestations in the homeland are contested, although the relaxation in gender rules for nomus is welcomed. As the data revealed they also learnt to live with very diverse cultures without subjecting them to the judgments values that nomus might have exercised, hence they were able to say that some behaviour may be right for that culture but not for themselves. It underscores the translocal nature of student mobility in which the individual leans to become increasingly more self – reliant in a new geographical context.

The process of kase shudan begins before the student leaves the community to seek further education. The structural factors discussed above, the economic changes in particular already mean that the students need to rely on their own (internal) resources (rather than familial support) to enhance their educational opportunities. In contrast to the Soviet times, they now need to secure scholarships to pursue further studies abroad. Kase shudan is simply brought into sharper relief when they make the move. One might add the students’ inherent resilience which is an aspect of kase shudan has to be exercised more consciously in the adjustment to a new environment, culture, and the day to day pressures of working and living away from familial support. For the students in England the resilience was evident in coming through the civil war and then being able to pick up their lives and improve them.

Yet the two values are not oppositional as they seem, we would posit that there are close connections between nomus and kase shudan. Both values are about personal development albeit within different geographical contexts. Both are predicated on an idea of education as the development of the whole human being. Both are being re-interpreted by young people through their educational choices. Student mobility has acted as the catalyst for re-evaluating both values. And the idea of being master of one’s own self is itself located in the communal and cultural notion of what ”self” means.

63 The move from command to market economy.
In a sense *kase shudan* is also an extension or re-interpretation of *nomus* in a changed context. The re-interpretation takes account of the individual, shaped by the communal, cultural ideas of individual responsibility within the community, but living on their own outside of the usual family and community frameworks and yet honouring those connections. They keep in touch with families, continue to morally support and encourage others to learn foreign languages, to learn different skills. They participate even from afar in family problems and issues and family celebrations of weddings, births. It is then that the geographical space is felt most keenly, and the physical disconnection felt most acutely. However, these very feelings attest to the continued engagement with the family and community even at a distance.

Every time I talk to my parents I tell them to be careful about their children’s education. My parents live in Moscow with my two brothers; however, I do not like my brothers to become labour migrants. I tell them [my parents] to push my brothers to study well (Rauf, 2016).

My older brother could not finish his university because of the economic situation in our country [Tajikistan] but now I myself support my two younger brothers to continue their education (Mullo, 2016).

I wish to go back [Tajikistan] and change education system in Tajikistan, starting from classroom settings (Zebi, 2016).

It is the notion of *kase shudan* that pushes individuals to search for the ways to become master of themselves. The data also points to how access or lack of access to new global information can shape the way people think and act locally, leading to the re-interpretation of cultural concepts. Translocality both internationalises local communities as well as helping international students to stay connected with their geographically distant localities.

While the home space will always offer unchallenged belonging, the return and indeed the contribution may well be delayed. Tajikistan has continued the ancient practice of seeking knowledge in different places but bring it back home by providing scholarships to government officials who then return enriched and ready to apply that knowledge. However, all those who do return find that while they have had their perspectives of governance, education, agency and leadership altered, they return to a work context that has remained little changed in their absence.

Conclusion

This study has found that the concept of translocality is important in trying to understand the way students navigate their altered geographical and cultural spaces when they go abroad to study. It confirms that students’ decisions and their explanation of their motivations reveal an increasing ability and desire to exercise greater agency and independence of mind and action. Their explanations demonstrate they want to continue and be linked to traditional cultural values but at the same time are ready to re-interpret them for their changing reality. The study found that translocality is a two-way process: the young Tajikistanis from Badakhshan brought their expanded understanding to bear on the value of *nomus* back to their localities on their return and the Tajikistani students in Japan continued to honour and be guided by traditional values even as they exercised greater agency in far-off locations.

There is a regenerative tension and a nuanced understanding in students’ consideration of certain cultural concepts such as *nomus* and *kase shudan* between the traditional and the new. Even as they re-interpret *nomus* the England students continue to consider it important but acknowledge that their own personal growth has made them re-think the concept in personal terms, and even as the students in Japan speak of *kase shudan* their reference points continue to be related back home. Cultural values are re-shaped by political and economic factors from within Tajikistan but also by increasing agency exercised outside of the national boundaries albeit within certain structural (national) parameters.
Using the filter of educational mobility, the article has demonstrated that there is an unexplored intersection between the two values: nomus with its locus in community and kase shudan with its locus in the person or individual. While structural factors can constrain or expand student choices, their translocality gives them both anchorage within their cultures and the space to interrogate it, and re-interpret certain concepts to heighten their relevance in a translocal context. The concept of translocality allows for continuity of culture and for the interpretation locally and in international spaces and both by exercise of individual and communal agency.

As with all enquiries into under-researched areas, this study raises important questions that would merit further research. It would be interesting to research and compare the ideas of nomus and kase shudan amongst students in Tajikistan as well as beyond it. The notion of “transreligiousity” could be another area of further research. The issue of identity and of how that plays out when students return to their homeland would be yet another area of research. It is hoped, that this study makes a contribution to the “discourse of particularities” and begins to open up an area of research and debate that is not yet fully engaged with. In an increasingly globalised context, the nuances, shifts and balances between the local and the international; the particular and the universal; the structural context and the exercise of agency calls for further research into Tajikistani and indeed Central Asian student mobility both within and beyond the region and how they negotiate their identities and cultures in altered spaces particularities in research “the discourse of particularity” versus the “universalizing of discourses.”

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Competing interests

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64 Chankeliani, “Charting the development of knowledge,” 3.
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Appendix 1. Students in Japan: Individual interviews.
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1. Japanese Language Learners.
2. MEXT – Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.
3. JDS – Japanese Grant Aid is funded by the Government of Japan through Official Development Assistance (ODA).
4. Filled out the interview Questions.
5. IUJ – International University of Japan.
6. Filled out the interview Questions.
7. Filled out the interview Questions.
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