

Environmental Humanities in Central Asia

Relations Between Extraction and
Interdependence

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11 The power of apricot

Border disputes, land scarcity, and mobility in the Isfara River basin¹

Asel Murzakulova

Following the collapse of the USSR, land, and water disputes in communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border intensified along with the spatialisations of new national states. Conflicts along borders in the Isfara River² Valley have occurred with varying frequency since Soviet times. The main outbreaks of violence happened in the upper zone of the Isfara River basin (Vorukh rural district of Tajikistan – Ak-Sai rural district of Kyrgyzstan), as well as in the middle zone of the basin (the rural districts of Surkh and Chorku, Tajikistan – the rural districts of Ak-Tatyr, Samarkandek of Kyrgyzstan). Since independence, the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remains little ‘materialised’: borders are not physically represented and signalled. One can find border infrastructure only at the four official border crossing points along 970 km of borderlands. This is an unusual situation: these countries put in place much more infrastructure along borders with Uzbekistan and China, as well as with Afghanistan (for Tajikistan) and Kazakhstan (for Kyrgyzstan).

The contested borderland areas of Central Asia have predominantly been studied with a focus on state spatialisation and community dynamics,³ interethnic division,⁴ state interests,⁵ international aid and irrigation disputes,⁶ or the geography of access to natural resources⁷ and infrastructural change.⁸ This chapter takes a different angle: to understand the political dynamics in the Ferghana borderlands, I discuss a particular case of non-human agency. I explore the web of environmental processes in the contested areas through the life cycle of the apricot tree. By focusing on the environmental stresses experienced by this tree, I show how interactions with the tree challenge the ongoing political process dominated by states, forcing local people to act according to apricot cultivation interests. This chapter fills a gap in Central Asian Studies which is the virtual disregard for other than human life-forms on political dynamics in the region.⁹ And yet, the apricot tree is an important actor in post-independence border dynamics between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This case demonstrates the importance of studying the environmental history of disputed areas. This approach can help to redefine the perception of border conflicts. It shifts the dominant analysis based on state interests, *e.g.* of the conflict escalations between 2015 and 2021, towards a more complex web of

climate shocks, the erosion of border water infrastructure, mobility, and local economic and environmental priorities.

The life cycle of the apricot tree involves rural residents in everyday routines of cultivation and harvest, or when trees become sick, experience acute thirst, insect infestation, freeze in spring, or lose their fruit. These processes show how apricots shape the behaviour of people in contested areas, by forcing some family members to migrate, by negotiating apricot prices in transborder bazaars and cooperating on watering apricot tree even during conflict escalation. This dynamic challenges the policies of appropriation and protectionism in contested territories. This dynamic I call the power of the apricot. This chapter draws on 15-month ethnographical research which was carried out between 2015 and 2021 (around 20 visits, the longest was 60 days and shortest 15 days). The research data included in-depth interviews and observation at transborder bazaars in the Isfara River basin, along with participation in apricot watering, harvesting, and drying. After field research in September 2022, violence spread along the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan borderland on an unprecedented scale. It was the largest international military clash since the countries' independence: more than 100 people were killed and hundreds of thousands were displaced from both sides.¹⁰ The military conflict physically destroyed villages where this research was carried out: data presented here do not capture dynamics during and after this conflict. To protect respondents, I anonymised the data and used pseudonyms for all names.

The landscape: rivers, borders, apricots

The Isfara River basin lies in the southwest of the Ferghana Valley, an ancient agricultural oasis covering 22,000 square kilometres, populated by 15 million people and shared by Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (Figure 11.1). The Isfara River basin belongs to the Syrdarya River, receiving water mainly from snow fields and glaciers.¹¹ The Isfara is formed in the vicinity of Vorukh exclave (Tajikistan), at the confluence of two smaller mountain rivers flowing from the glaciers of the Turkestan ridge. The river passes through Ak-Sai *ayil aimak* (Kyrgyzstan rural municipality); and on to the Isfara District of northern Tajikistan, then joining the Great Fergana Canal in Uzbekistan, finally entering the Kairakum water reservoir in Tajikistan.

The major irrigation system in the study area was built as a Soviet state project for specific agricultural production. During decollectivisation in the 1990s, this plan was replaced with market demands, causing deep agrarian changes in the now disputed territories. Kyrgyzstan followed the path of radical liberalisation reforms: each rural resident received a private land plot.¹² In Tajikistan, diverse forms of collective *dehqan* (Tajik: peasant) farms survived.¹³ The latest decree on land reform in the study area in 2016 distributed land shares among the workers of the remaining collective farms. The major

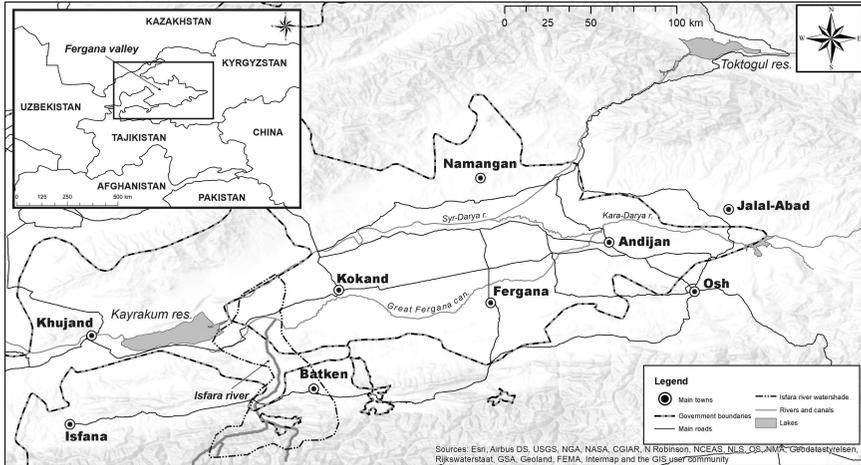


Figure 11.1 Location of the region under study in the Fergana Valley. Map by Evgeny Shibkov.

difference between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is that in Tajikistan *dehqans* can lease their land, but they cannot sell it as villagers in Kyrgyzstan can. The greatest result of these reforms for the villagers was the right to choose how to use land and what to grow. For example, Surkh in Tajikistan had specialised in growing tomatoes and other vegetables for local canning factories during the Soviet period. After independence, these canneries, like many industries, were in crisis. As in Kyrgyzstan, the expansion of new apricot orchards was partly the local answer to broader crises of the post-socialist economic transformations.

Figure 11.2 shows changing land use in the villages of Kara Bak (Kyrgyzstan) and Lyakon (Tajikistan). The striped parts show the area where apricot trees were growing when the main irrigation network was completed in 1970. The areas with apricot trees in 2016 are highlighted in gray. The situation in 2016 shows an extensive shift from the cultivation of forage crops, grains, and vegetables to apricot cultivation.¹⁴

Alongside China and the Middle-East, Central Asia is one of the ancient centres of apricot cultivation.¹⁵ The apricot tree (*Prunus armeniaca*) spread from Central Asia and China to Europe by Silk Road.¹⁶ Now, Central Asia is globally the richest centre of apricot diversity, including four eco-geographical subgroups with different distributions of apricot varieties.¹⁷ The Isfara River basin is characterised by the cultivation of the following varieties: Mirsanjali, Kandak, Khurmoi, Baboi, Supkhoni, Isfarak, and Tadzhaboi.¹⁸ During the Soviet period, in addition to traditional apricot varieties, new cross-breeds were created and propagated to suit different climates.¹⁹ Gareev Botanic Gardens and nurseries in the Fergana Valley were important sites for apricot grafting



Figure 11.2 Land use situation in the village of Kara Bak (Kyrgyzstan) and Lyakon (Tajikistan) in years 1970 and 2016. Map by Evgeny Shibkov, based on Source Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS, USDA, USGS, AeroGRID, IGN, and the GIS User Community. The figure was first published in Asel Murzakulova, ‘Challenges of social cohesion and tensions in communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border’, UCA-MSRI Research Paper 4 (2018).

and selection for Kyrgyzstan. In Tajikistan, apricot saplings were produced by the Gafurov Institute of Horticulture and Vegetable, also in a similar area.²⁰ But sapling production was not completely under state control: ‘folk breeders’ (*narodnye selektsionery*) played an important role, specifically in the preservation of traditional varieties, and later also the conservation of Soviet hybrids. After independence, state-owned system of sapling production was largely destroyed in Kyrgyzstan, while in Tajikistan, most of the nurseries survived, but underfunded: most of the recent new varieties have been produced and preserved by ‘folk breeders’.

Dried apricots constitute the largest export good from border regions in north Tajikistan.²¹ According to Kyrgyzstani authorities, Batken District (covering the part of Isfara River basin) produces 20,000 tons of apricots each year, of which 75% is exported to a processing plant in Isfara District, Tajikistan.²² Extensive entrepreneurial networks have emerged around this industry, across borders.

According to my respondents, the most important difference between apricot and other fruit trees in the study area is that the trees are not demanding on the soil quality and are drought-tolerant. Therefore, apricots grow all along the river basin. In recent decades, villagers have also begun to actively cultivate the slopes of hills and middle mountains for new apricot orchards (Figure 11.3).



Figure 11.3 Apricot trees in the Isfara River basin, Ak-Sai. Photo by Murzakulova 2018.

Life cycle of apricot tree and human mobility in the Isfara River basin

I often heard my respondents talk about life in the valley as linked to the life cycle of an apricot tree. A good season with a good harvest makes people's lives more predictable for a certain period. As Aizhamal told me when we went up to her orchard in the Kyrgyzstani village of Kara-Bak:

I will start selling dried apricots closer to September, before the children go to school, to buy clothes and school supplies for them. I always keep about 30 kilograms in reserve until spring, I sell about 70 kilograms gradually depending on the need for cash, it helps if I need to make some contributions to toy [traditional ceremonies] or buy something for children and family needs²³

Aizhamal's village is located in the middle reaches of the Isfara River and borders with the Tajikistan village of Lyakon. She is raising two children alone. Like most of her fellow villagers, her income consists of selling apricots, livestock-derived produce, and small earnings such as mending clothes. Aizhamal bought saplings for her garden in the Isfara market, the nearest town of Tajikistan, from a seller who has a good reputation among her fellow villagers, who had already received harvests from the trees they had bought. Apricot growing is a long-term investment, which does not require a large starting capital. The return increases many times during the life cycle of the tree. Saplings in 2015 cost 150 Kyrgyz soms (2.5\$). For approximately three years, until the first harvest, watering, fertilisers, and pesticides cost around

60\$ for 6 acres of land (in 2015). One can grow four to seven trees on an acre: after three to five years, the tree will give a small harvest of around 15 kg, after seven to ten years, the harvest from one tree can reach around 60–70 kg. After drying, the weight of apricots is reduced by an average 70%. The price for 1 kg of dried apricots depends on quality and fluctuates between 200 and 800 soms (3–12\$). But all these calculations that we discussed with respondents omitted the investments that family members make in the form of labour. The cultivation of apricots is not labour-intensive, compared to the cultivation of tobacco or rice, which are also cash crops in the Isfara River Valley. Labour is mostly needed for tree pruning, watering, harvesting, and apricot drying. As the demand for labour increases during these periods, day labourer services (*mardokers*) are widespread in the valley. However, for smaller gardens such as Aizhamal's, family members do everything themselves: 'We planted saplings 8 years ago, they began to bear fruit in the third year, the variety is called *mirsanzhalil*, my apricot is gold-coloured, as fragrant as fruits from heaven'. Aizhamal speaks about the trees with care: the process of creating her apricot orchard was a great challenge for her.

In 2015, there were late frosts in the Isfara River basin; the cold and humid spring contributed to part of the harvest being lost. The humidity leads to the spread of the Kotur disease, which affects stone fruit trees.²⁴ This disease is caused by spores of the fungus *Venturia inaequalis*, which is spread by the wind and infects trees during flowering and fruit set, resulting in dark warts on the fruit. The disease reduces yields and makes the appearance of the fruit unattractive for sale. This disease is not new to the region: it is more common in the more humid, upper zone of the basin. Along with these extreme climate events in 2015, major changes in crop production strategies also contributed to the spread of the Kotur disease.

After independence, apricot cultivation in the Isfara River basin became a monocropping production system for several reasons. The growing market demand for dried apricots and established sales chains to foreign markets made apricots a major cash crop in the valley. Other contributing factors include the overlap of apricot-human mobility dynamics. Since the maintenance of an apricot orchard is cyclical (spring and summer are the main seasons), it fits the family labour distribution 'planning'. The cultivation of apricot combines well with the timing of people's wage labour mobility. The villagers plan their absence in the valley for periods when the family needs less labour, while their immobility is associated with periods when agricultural labour is needed.

Many villagers became migrant workers since 2000, when the oil boom started in Russia and Kazakhstan. Since then, they have been massively planting their plots with apricot trees. Monoculture plantations on private plots contribute to the rapid spread of the Kotur disease, since the transmission from tree to tree is more intense and does not encounter gaps that could be caused by other crops. As one interviewed agronomist from Isfara (Tajikistan) told me, one of the biggest factors for the orchards' vulnerability is that after

independence, pests and disease prevention measures became everyone's private concern. Creating and maintaining an apricot orchard increasingly require an influx of cash in certain periods of tree life cycles, as Aizhamal describes:

That year we barely managed to get about 30 kilograms, due to illness and frost, we lost most of the harvest. In the village everyone had problems because of this disease, so I started looking for a way to somehow save the harvest. I tried various pesticides, recommended by neighbors and traders in the market. We incurred more expenses and there was no profit.

At the beginning of summer, when the scale of the crop's loss became obvious, Aizhamal's eldest son, who had just finished 9th grade of high school, left for work to Russia. Aizhamal associates this decision with a wider set of reasons: the lack of permanent income, her son's desire to help his mother and compensate his father's absence, his need to enter adulthood. But as she mentioned above, her budget planning is closely linked to her apricot harvest: this indicates that a good harvest that year could have delayed her son's early end of schooling and decision to migrate. The life of an apricot tree has launched many processes in Aizhamal's life: on the one hand, a good harvest can guarantee income, making life in the valley more predictable and reducing her family's economic insecurity. On the other hand, harvest losses make Aizhamal's life more connected to the fate of the trees, and more vulnerable to the processes that the apricots are experiencing. Care for the apricot tree is woven into her daily routine, making her life and the tree life cycle interconnected and dependent, in both directions.

In neighbouring Surkh in Tajikistan, in the same year, villagers lost 90% of their harvest of early apricot varieties.²⁵ This seriously undermined the hopes of many families who had invested all their efforts in cultivating the orchards. Unlike Aizhamal and the residents of the Kyrgyzstani village of Kara-Bak, residents of Surkh have an acute shortage of land and use the hills and the sunny side of a mid-mountain strip for growing apricots. As the local agronomist Abdurahim aka commented: 'We have just a mountainous relief that does not allow us to provide every person with land in the valley part. Well, if there is no land, then such a distribution of land at heights is a good opportunity'.²⁶ Surkh's gardeners have developed several varieties of local apricot, ideal for the climate of the valley. To set up an apricot orchard, people manually clear the ground of large stones and then irrigation is supplied to mountain slopes by an electric pump.

Like Aizhamal's son, Abdurahim aka left for labour migration after graduating from school in the early 2000s: remittances helped him to build a house and support his family. In 2015–2016, the government started distributing lands in Surkh: he received 20 acres of land because his mother had worked for a collective farm. But villagers who did not work in the collective farm or

who did not have relatives who worked in the collective farm could not get a land share.

In the village, the main source of livelihood is agricultural activity. If, for example, a teacher works at school, and she does not have a personal plot, a vegetable garden, in general, it is difficult to survive. Because there is very little income. I think that, of course, there was some discontent in the distribution of the land share, and maybe there is still. Because there is very little land available, and there is no one to blame for this.²⁷

Lack of land in Surkh stimulates outmigration to neighbouring Asht District and Kanibadam city. Those who move to a new place bring with them sapling of the apricot tree, which serve as a symbol of *hope* for a source of income in the new place. At the same time, the ability of apricot trees to grow in rocky and arid soil helps Surkh residents adapt to land scarcity. But they also need to invest, for example, in irrigation expenses. Usually, pumps feed off the subsidised grid; in rare cases, pumps are powered by more expensive diesel generators. Studies by local agronomists show that these soils have only 0.5–0.6% of the required nutrients:²⁸ without organic and other fertilisers, it is difficult to harvest a reasonable crop. For Abdurahim aka also, the new apricot orchard is a hope for a more stable future for his children. Thus, the condition of the apricot trees can symbolise the intention of people regarding their future with a focus on development in the valley or outmigration. While one can still find untended gardens in Kara-Bak (Kyrgyzstan), in Surkh (Tajikistan), this practically never happens: those who do not care for their gardens (land) may have their land seized and redistributed by local authorities in Tajikistan.²⁹ In practice, this norm has never been applied because there is an acute shortage of land in Surkh and it is a very valuable resource. In Kyrgyzstan, private land cannot currently be expropriated, although since 2010, the government has been trying to pass such legislation, at least in relation to urban land with high market value.

As shown in this section, the seasonal and life cycle of the apricot tree has strongly influenced the family labour distribution during massive agrarian change and the growing labour mobility of rural life. Apricot orchards have empowered land owners, allowing them to adapt to these transformations.

Cross-border dried apricot bazaars

People living in the Isfara River Valley call their apricot – local gold. This expresses the importance of apricot to the local economy in this arid and disaster-prone region of the Fergana Valley. I came to the apricot bazaar in Surkh in the early morning when the trade was just beginning. Even rows of dried and processed dried fruits were lined up symmetrically along which buyers strolled, eyeing the product, and suggesting their ‘own’ price to start bargaining. One kilogram of dried apricots with the stone can be sold for

200 soms (\$3), while stoned dried apricot cost 500 soms (\$5.5). This price is comparable to the price of one and a half kilograms of meat (based on average prices in 2018). Therefore along with the traditionally widespread animal husbandry, apricot production is attractive. The *kandak* (sugar) variety is of particularly high value (up to 8\$ per kg in 2018). People leave the fruit to dry on the tree and then harvest. This variety is in great demand in Russia, where it is widely used in sanatoriums for the prevention of diseases of the cardiovascular system.

Ikhtiyor is a trader at the Surkh bazaar, who has been selling apricots for more than seven years. He started trading after he was deported by the Russian authorities for a minor administrative violation: ‘The only source of income in the village is migration or trade. Since the first way was closed for me, there wasn’t much to choose’.³⁰ According to Ikhtiyor, the bazaar has its own players: large buyers who buy and sort dried apricots with and without stone for further transportation to the markets of Russia and Kazakhstan. Then, there are the average buyers who bring dried apricots to local markets in different parts of the country (Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan) and to the capitals of both republics. There are the villagers who bring one to two bags of apricots from their garden for sale and resellers who buy dried apricots from the villagers’ hands and resell them at the bigger market. Big gardeners usually have their own middlemen who take goods directly from the orchard, bypassing the market. Cross-border dried fruit markets have their own temporality: major market days alternate among the communities of Surkh, Chorku, Isfara (Tajikistan), Samarkandek, Kara-Bak, and Batken (Kyrgyzstan).³¹ Thus, each trader has a chance to look for the best price during alternating bazaar days, moving from one location to another. At the bazaar, you can sell apricots of any quality. Buyers sort apricots by grade and quality, using machinery in Tajikistan. Both Kyrgyzstan som and Tajikistan somoni are freely used in the apricot trade (Figure 11.4).

The economy of cross-border trade in dried apricots is closely intertwined with the local history of labour migration to Russia. During the Soviet period, local collective and state farm workers privately travelled to bazaars in Russian cities to sell dried apricots from their gardens.³² This earlier practice laid the foundation for trans-local trade infrastructure. Until the early 2000s, open borders between Central Asian states kept the rail links with Russia active, so the main cross-border trade pathway went through Tajikistan. Dealers at local bazaars such as Surkh bought apricots from farmers, and labour migrants in Russia sold these through a wide network in Russian food markets. The international labour market regimes built a parallel supply and demand chain of apricots. As Ikhtiyor explained to me, the popularity of certain varieties of apricot in the Russian food market stimulates local villagers to develop and cultivate specific varieties, such as the *kandak*.

However, the apricot trade has been affected by border militarisation in the Ferghana Valley, which began with Uzbekistan mining borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2000–2001.³³ Uzbekistan also began to hinder railway

transit through their territory from Tajikistan. As a result, the passenger flow following the railways began decreasing; migration and apricot trade routes were re-oriented to road travel through Kyrgyzstan (Figure 11.5).

Our conversation with Ikhtiyor took place against the background of sporadic conflict between 2014 and 2019 in the upper reaches of the Isfara River. This was provoked by the construction of a disputed road between Ak-Sai, Tamdyk and Kishemish.³⁴ Kyrgyzstan's government announced the



Figure 11.4 Apricot sculpture in the central bazaar of Isfara city (Tajikistan). Photo by Murzakulova, August 2017.



Figure 11.5 Surkh, dried fruits bazaar. Photograph by Murzakulova.

construction of this road, which the Tajikistan's government considers to be on disputed land, in 2013. The first violent conflict occurred on 11 January 2014 between Kyrgyzstan border guards and Tajikistan border guards over the construction of the road. Zhumaboy Sanginov, First Deputy Governor of Sughd Oblast, talking about the incident, said, 'The construction of an alternative road, which residents of the Kyrgyz village are talking about, should be made only based on intergovernmental agreements on the delimitation and demarcation of the border. This is our position'.³⁵

In April 2017, a Kyrgyz news agency published a story about an elderly woman, Urukka apa, who lives on Kyrgyzstan's border with Tajikistan and protects Kyrgyzstan's border by keeping her father's apricot orchard from drying up: 'The Apricot orchard inherited by Urukka apa is the only obstacle for Tajikistan to take the disputed territory'.³⁶ As part of the discourse of protection of national borders, this media narrative speaks to the importance of the apricot orchard as a symbol of belonging to the territory, and of filial loyalty, a core idea for patriotic media discourses surrounding border issues. At the same time, it simplifies processes by painting a picture of a binary opposition between the interests of Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani people.

But answering my question about access difficulties from a neighbouring Kyrgyzstani village to the bazaar, Ikhtiyor was surprised and said:

I buy dry apricots from Kyrgyz [in Kyrgyzstan] and then resell them in bulk to Yekaterinburg and Novosibirsk. It is always different: sometimes the season can turn out good, but sometimes we can sit without work when the harvest is bad. I have friends among Kyrgyz people who help finding a good product, it is profitable to all of us.

Asel: 'So, what is happening between Vorukh and Ak-Sai does not affect the rules of the bazaar?'

Ikhtiyor: 'Yes, there are fights happening at the upper [zone] (Russian: *naverkh*), this applies to them, but we trade here. Better, of course, when there are no conflicts. Look - apricot has no nationality, in our market Kyrgyz people freely sell apricots, also buyers from Kyrgyz villages are free to come'.³⁷

The distance between political processes at the top, border guard skirmishes and the dried apricot trade in the valley allows one to see the parallel political dynamics. Access to the sale and purchase of dried apricots does not depend on the 'national interest' and its accompanying institutions. The apricot bazaar continues to operate according to its own rules. People's relations across borders in a time of conflict are not purely dependent on state or infrastructures: the apricot economy helps us to see beyond this referent field.

Saratan – a period of trial for trees and test for humans

What would happen to Urukka apa's apricot trees if she did not water them? Drying is the process by which moisture disappears from the tree, evaporating

water from the wood fibers. The tree changes physically: moisture is removed earlier from the surface layers, while the inner layers retain it. This leads to the formation of internal stresses in the wood and a distortion of the tree. Cracks in wood because of drying make it vulnerable to further environmental stresses and shorten the tree's life.

The drying up of apricot trees in the valley reflects a broader water stress problem. My field observations show that water stress is a multifaceted challenge for borderland villages. The soils are rocky and sandy in the upper and middle zones of basin and can retain little water. After irrigation, moisture quickly evaporates, so low-volume and frequent irrigation is required in these areas. Since the existing irrigation system and methods of water management do not allow the carrying out irrigation properly, water stress became a continual problem of local life.³⁸ The process of liberalising land rights and reforming the water sector adds its own complexity to these challenges. An Isfara water engineer notes the connection between water stress and the consequences of land reform in Tajikistan:

We have more water losses since the dissolution of collective *dehqan* farms. The allocated plots are very small to a maximum of 1 hectare. If at least 5 hectares would have been retained during land distribution, we would have been able to maintain crop rotation. Now one *aryq* (small earth canal), in some places reaches up to 100 users. We have got difficulties: to measure the volume of water, to provide water in time. If you divert water from canal to your field and your neighbor does same, here is where the problems begin, everyone needs water at the same time. The amount of land does not increase, the number of users increases, and the canal remains the same.³⁹

The most acute phase of tension over irrigation occurs during 'Saratan', the traditional designation of the hottest 40 days between June 25th and August 5th. During this period, it is important to water the trees at least four times. During Saratan, there is a high risk of tree death due to lack of watering. A dried-out apricot tree is a big loss to the family budget. Since a tree begins to bear fruit only in its third year, its loss sets back human effort for three years. Saratan is a period of physical trial for trees and a period of testing humans in water management. A saying can be heard frequently in village during this period: 'the most important thing is to get [safely] out of Saratan' (Kyrgyz: *saratandan chyksak bizge boldu ele*). During Saratan, every conversation begins and ends with concern and anxiety for the queue in access to irrigation water. In practice, the presence of a canal and a fixed water supply schedule does not guarantee access to water, for several reasons. Upstream villages can take more water and downstream villages in this case do not receive water. Access to water from transborder canals also depends on the overall political situation: irrigation canals are used as a political instrument between governments.⁴⁰

The canal in Dostuk village⁴¹ (Kara-Bak rural municipality, Kyrgyzstan) flows from the neighbouring Tajik village Karai Baq (Surkh region, Tajikistan).

In the summer of 2016, after two irrigation cycles, the water stopped being supplied. The head of the Dostuk village appealed to the Surkh Water User Association (WUA)⁴² to resume the water supply. He was told that the WUA cannot take care of water for Dostuk village in Kyrgyzstan, as it is not part of the mandate of the WUA. The mismatch between administrative and hydrological boundaries at the regional level is seen as a potential for conflict.⁴³ But as my field data show below, the situation can often be solved at the local level between non-governmental actors across the border.

‘Our gardens began to dry up, I had to find a way out of the situation, and I went to the Karai Baq *murab*.⁴⁴ I told him: if you do not give us water, our apricots can no longer be saved.’⁴⁵ Dostuk villagers also grow maize, vegetables, and other fruit trees, but in his address to the *murab*, the head of Dostuk village emphasised apricot trees. This shows their symbolic value: behind the apricot trees stands the well-being of the people. In Saratan, well-being depends on the trees’ ability to survive the heat. That night, the *murab* of Surkh sent water to Dostuk, and the villagers were able to save their apricot trees.

As we have seen, because of apricot trees’ water needs, they can increase tension between political institutions on both sides of the border, particularly in the high summer. But at the same time, they can trigger a referential field of common dependency that is able to counter-balance these processes. Apricots represent a common well-being value that can catalyse political acts of solidarity aimed at preserving the trees. This kind of bonding practice on the local level during seasonal extremes like Saratan is mostly based on personal contacts, and a common understanding of the well-being and dependency created by apricot monocultures in the valley.

Conclusion

This chapter draws attention to the environmental aspects of political dynamics in the disputed territories on Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan borderlands. By exploring the influence of apricot production, I argue that the apricot tree life cycle produces power relations. In the case of Aizhamal and Abdurahim aka, apricot investments and labour shape local human mobility dynamics: harvest dynamics postpone or reinforce the need to migrate or to stay. At the same time, the power of the apricot helps residents of the valley to adapt to a rapidly changing environment and political dynamics where, along with conflicts in the upper basin area, they must cope with the profound effects of agrarian changes and water stress. But along with this strengthening role, apricot monocropping adds new vulnerabilities. In 2021, early frosts again led to the loss of 90% of the apricot crop.⁴⁶ This shock, along with the drought and mobility restrictions imposed a year earlier due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has put widespread and long-term stress on Isfara River basin residents. The apricot helps us to see the diversity and interlinkages of local politics, labour mobility, trade, agriculture, and environmental processes.

At a regional level, the apricot is embedded in cross-border trade infrastructures. By alternately shifting the trade day (*örük bazaar kun*) between villages

located in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the apricot trade produces its own temporality, where state border conflicts are not necessarily a vital event.

Along with creating community-bonding practices, apricot power can also work in the opposite direction, by increasing the irrigation tensions during Saratan, and human dependency on a monoculture. But what makes the power of the apricot different from that of the national state is that it can produce well-being values capable of engendering an act of solidarity at the local level, as in the example of the obliging murab and trusting traders. These dynamics challenge the hegemonic perception of these contested areas as entirely hostile conflict environments.

In my view, an analysis of the role of apricots helps us to recognise that in this contested territory, in addition to the politics of land appropriation, state border militarisation, and logics of domination, there are other complex environmental, economic, and social processes at work. The focus on the apricot tree life cycle helps us to see non-human power relations, and how people act to support their interdependence with apricots. This often means cooperating with partners across the border, rather than cutting social and political connections. Over the long term, the economic and symbolic value of apricots will be high for rural Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in the face of extreme economic insecurity and fragile human security, exacerbated by border militarisation and conflicts. In a period of such high insecurity, the power of the apricot tree signals hope for communities: difficulties are hopefully temporary. There will be *örük-zar* (flowering of apricot trees) in the spring, and with it will come change for better times in the valley.

Notes

- 1 Research conducted in the framework of AGRUMIG project (EU Horizon 2020, grant 822730), ‘Leaving something behind: Migration governance and agricultural and rural change in “home” communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa’. Filed material collected during the University of Central Asia project ‘Improving Stability and better natural resource management in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’, funded by DFID (2015–2020). I would like to thank all my respondents for their openness and generosity, Evgenii Shibkov (for helping to create the map visualising agrarian change), and Guzal Makhamova (for help in the field and with conducting interviews in Tajik). Opinions expressed in this chapter are only mine and do not express the opinions of any institution or organisation.
- 2 The Kyrgyzstani government changed the name of the Isfara River to Ak-Suu River after a series of conflicts. In this chapter, I use the international name of the river – Isfara.
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- 5 Timur Dadabaev, ‘Securing Central Asian Frontiers: Institutionalisation of Borders and Inter-State Relations’, *Strategic Analysis* 36, no. 4 (2012): 554–568;

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 - 13 Irna Hofman, "Soft Budgets and Elastic Debt: Farm Liabilities in the Agrarian Political Economy of Post-Soviet Tajikistan," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 7 (2018): 1360–1381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1293047>
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- 30 From interview materials, Surkh Tajikistan October 2016.
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- 45 From interview materials with the head of the village of Dostuk, August 2018.
- 46 From an interview with the representative of Alysh-Dan agro-cooperative in Batken, January 2022.