

## **The Past as a Burden: Washers of the Dead between Merit and Stigma**

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### **Summary**

In some parts of southwestern Central Asia, washing the deceased before burial was (and to some extent still is) traditionally undertaken by professional corpse washers, a low-status, marginalized group. Against the backdrop of a popular recourse to tradition and the past in these countries as a resource for identity formation after the demise of the Soviet Union, this article asks how people whose collective memory of the past does not fit in neatly with the current representation of a harmonic pre-colonial society negotiate their status in society. Historically, corpse washers formed endogamous groups in many larger Central Asian cities and were considered ritually polluting by the majority population. They were and are at the same time perceived as people with special powers who inhabit a liminal space between life and death. Corpse washers lived in their own residential quarters apart from other inhabitants and both parties followed certain rules of avoidance. Soviet policy officially abolished their stigmatization and discrimination. New professional pathways opened up and many corpse washers left their former profession and their living quarters to settle elsewhere. Today, corpse washers have to adopt new ways of justifying why they stick to a profession considered to be impure and base although alternatives are available. Representations of the profession as meritorious and God-sent sometimes come into conflict with modernist, scripturalist interpretations of Islam that oppose traditional Central Asian burial customs.

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### **Introduction**

Recourse to “tradition” and “heritage” plays an important role in the shaping of identity in all former Soviet Central Asian countries. An idealized past Golden Age is pitched as a “model for the active reconstruction of the present” (Shils 1981: 209). Within this process, the notion of time encapsulated in these terms is deliberately employed to establish certain discourses concerning the past. Words like “tradition” and “heritage” are not neutral, but carry inherent — in this case, positive — assessments of time. They serve as vehicles for the establishment of official narratives about the past which relegate alternating memories to the margins.

Uzbekistan has pushed forward the moral resource of “tradition” and “heritage” quite vigorously, among other things in the realm of traditional professions, crafts and art. Everything allegedly autochthonous, i.e. non-Russian, ranging from modes of professional knowledge production, transmission and techniques to day-to-day practice and output is subsumed under the phrase of the so-called Golden Heritage (Oltin Meros).<sup>1</sup> Frictions, antagonistic interests and — judged against contemporary standards — dubious past practices are largely masked in favor of a harmonious picture of an organically organized pre-colonial society. Many craftspeople readily embrace the Golden Heritage discourse as it puts them in a favorable position as upholders of a national tradition. Some have integrated allusions to past practices into their self-representation and have gained much social (and economic) capital by presenting and re-enacting the past (Shils 1981). What space, however, does this framework allot to professional groups whose past does not fit in with today’s organic concept of the past?

Taking the Central Asian professional corpse washers — a marginalized, low-status group — as an exemplary case, this article explores continuities and discontinuities in their perception and self-perception on the basis of ethnographical fieldwork and archival research carried out predominantly in Uzbekistan and, to a lesser degree, in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan between 2009 and 2011.<sup>2</sup> In the course of my fieldwork, I conducted unstructured interviews with female corpse washers (mostly in Samarkand and Bukhara), attended burial preparations and mourning ceremonies and talked to women who provided other death-related services like lamenting the deceased or conducting the mourning ceremonies. Since death, burial and commemoration are deeply gendered issues, I was only randomly able to observe or talk to male washers; they tended to refer me to their spouses as a rule. Archival records on the washers are scarce and scattered. The sources are mostly from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with some referring back to the late 1700s.

The proper way of dealing with death, burial and mourning is an essential marker of Muslimness in Central Asian perception (Privratsky 2001: 96f). One of the indispensable rituals to be carried out after a person’s death is the preparation of the deceased for the burial, which basically involves washing and shrouding the corpse. In many parts of the Muslim world, the washing and shrouding is performed by close kin, neighbors or friends and is considered a meritorious deed. In southwestern Central Asia, however, these duties were — and still are among parts of the population — not supposed to be fulfilled by the bereaved, but by professional corpse washers. Corpse washing as a profession was practiced in many places in pre-Soviet

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1 This clear-cut distinction between autochthonous and alien does not correspond to actual practice, however, where fusions between styles of different ages and provenance abound (also Shils 1981: 209).

2 My gratitude goes to the Gerda Henkel Foundation for making this research possible.

times: Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, Tashkent, Nurota, Urganch, Qarshi, Marghilon, Khojand, Namangan, Andijan and Osh, for example.

As a rule, washers of the dead have an inferior social status and often form hereditary, endogamic groups. Some scholars maintain that professional corpse washing only exists in areas with a strong Iranian cultural influence or substratum (Sahraee-Smith 2001; Snezarev 2003: 121–122); Soviet researchers, more specifically, suggested Zoroastrian origins (Sukhareva 1966: 325, Snesarev 1973: 134–135). While Jean Calmard portrays the employment of professional corpse washers in Central Asia in a generalizing manner, *viz.* as a social norm (Calmard 2011), Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg (2013) identifies professional, hereditary, low-status corpse washers as an Arab phenomenon restricted to certain Middle Eastern countries, but unknown in non-Arab Muslim localities, which is obviously an erroneous assumption, too.

Interestingly, the word *ghassāl*, which was used for corpse washers as well as washers of clothes in classical Arabic, came to be regarded as a derogatory term in the Arabic context. Nowadays, only washers of clothes — who have a lower status than corpse washers in Arab societies — are still named *ghassāl*, while corpse washers are termed *ghāsil* or *mughassil* (Beg 2013). The literal equivalent in Central Asia (*ghassāl* and similar terms) is a standard, non-derogatory term for a professional Muslim corpse washer. In the local Tajik and Uzbek idioms, *murdashuy* and *o'lik yuvuvchi*, “washers of the dead” are the most widely known standard terms, while other words such as *pokchi*, *sūgi*, *maddoh* (Ashirov 2007: 115–116) and *pokshuy* — terms of avoidance that are considered to be “more polite” by many people — clearly point to the low prestige of the profession.

In the region under consideration here, the hierarchical order of professions was determined by two interlinked models in pre-modern times: according to the “religious-moral model,” a given professional is attributed an inherent social status irrespective of the economic potential of his/her profession, whereas in the “economic model,” people’s social status varies according to their wealth and income (Centlivres 1972: 163; Dağyeli 2011: 235–247). Professional corpse washing was judged with the first model in mind, which emphasizes immaterial aspects. According to historical sources, the washers were not poor by definition; they enjoyed similar economic standards to small-scale craftsmen and petty traders. Corpse washers, however, held the lowest social rank, even within the subaltern segment of the population, which consisted of crafts that involved habitual contact with polluting materials, such as those performed by butchers, barbers and tanners (Snezarev 2003: 123). The skills of corpse washing, like most marginalized and discriminated professions, were often handed down within a family. As a result, extended families with a low status came into being who bore the stigma of a kind of inherited “pollutedness” that would cause them to be avoided — the dominant pattern of interaction practiced by their social environment. In the nineteenth century,

washers of the dead formed endogamic groups and their lives were largely restricted to specific quarters with teahouses, mosques and water basins of their own.<sup>3</sup> Such was the case in Bukhara and Khiva, for example. Whether due to distinct cultural patterns or as a matter of group size, professional washers did not live separately, but among the general public in towns in the Ferghana Valley (Ashirov 2007: 115). The reasons for this have not been researched adequately yet.

Who exactly are these professionals, then? In Iran, as far as we know, corpse washers predominantly stem from economically disadvantaged groups and ethnic minorities, mostly of Turkic origin (Sahraee-Smith 2001: 58). In the region under scrutiny in this paper, however, professional corpse washers are not recruited from an ethnic or confessional “Other” as a rule, but belong to the same ethnic, confessional and linguistic groups as their respective social environments.

Western Central Asia has witnessed a long and complex history of migration and settlement, of ethnic, religious, cultural and political interrelations, of adaption and counter-movements, all of which has led to distinct local cultural specificities throughout the region. The Iranian substratum hypothesis would, to a certain extent, explain why professional corpse washing still exists in limited areas all over the traditionally sedentary territory, while it is not practiced or even known of in others. In the old city of Samarkand with its long-standing Persianate culture, for example, professional corpse washers are to be found in every residential quarter, whereas these are totally absent from the predominantly Uzbek town of Chelak only a few dozen kilometres away, where professional corpse washing is regarded as an alien, “Tajik” tradition and is slightly frowned upon. People from Chelak with whom I talked during my fieldwork related the employment of professional washers of the dead to a lack of filial love and piety and denounced it as not being “a proper Uzbek tradition.”<sup>4</sup> The Uzbek ethnographer Adham Ashirov states that in the Ferghana Valley, the dead may either be washed by professionals or by their kin, depending on the precise locality of the settlement in which they lived; only the Qipchaq of the Valley (a Turkic population with tribal traditions) strictly refuse to allow non-kin to wash the bodies of the dead, saying “we do not allow strangers to touch our bones” (suyagimizni begonaga ushlatmaymiz; Ashirov 2007: 114; cf. also Karmysheva 1986: 142; Sukhareva 1966: 325; Karimova 2013). Ashirov interprets professional hereditary corpse washing as an urban phenomenon peculiar to the inhabitants of historically important cities, whose practitioners also served adjacent villages occasionally (Ashirov 2007: 115). As a matter of fact, the divide between populations who employ professional washers and those who don’t seems to be less informed by

3 Although these quarters might be older as such, they are only mentioned in sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

4 The notions of Tajik- and Uzbekness are, of course, a recent twentieth-century phenomenon and may not be meaningful when talking about earlier periods or the cultural imprint left on a locality. All of my interlocutors in Chelak had first-hand experience of Samarkandi burial traditions; some of them were, according to modern ‘national’ understanding, even of mixed Tajik-Uzbek origin.

ethnicity than by tribal or non-tribal traditions.<sup>5</sup> While groups with a non-tribal background predominantly rely on the services of professional corpse washers, (formerly) tribal groups wash the dead within the family. In a mixed environment like Samarkand's (Tajik-Uzbek) or the border regions of the Ferghana Valley (Uzbek-Kyrgyz), this tribal/non-tribal divide tends to become ethicized and differences in ritual are perceived of as markers of the ethnic "Other."

### **Breaking free from the bonds of confinement: the washers of Bukhara**

In historical Bukhara, a separate quarter called Murdashuyon (i.e. "Washers of the Dead") or Labi Havuzi Murdaho (literally "Pondside of the Dead") existed within the *rabot*<sup>6</sup> in the southwestern vicinity of the citadel (ark). Around forty of its sixty to seventy houses belonged to professional corpse washers (Sukhareva 1976: 170). The Murdashuyon quarter existed at the end of the eighteenth century at the latest since it is mentioned in two deeds dating from 1794/1795 and 1799/1800 respectively that refer to the Tarmatoy-Bī Mosque situated in a quarter known by that name (Sukhareva 1976: 171). Along with the mosque, a teahouse, a school, the men-only Tūqumduzon bathhouse and a graveyard called Shaykh Khilvatiy or Imom Hafsi Saghir; the quarter featured two water basins — one called Jilavkhona (lit. "horse-tack store") and the other Murdashuyon (Sukhareva 1966: 64, fn 57; Sukhareva 1976: 171).<sup>7</sup> The Jilavkhona water basin and its southern neighbor, the Mavlonoi Asiriy basin, were fed by Bukhara's main public water supply, the Shāhrūd Canal, as the Soviet art historian Lazar Rempel noted (Rempel 1981: 145–146). The Murdashuyon basin's water feeder is difficult to specify. The basin as such remains unmentioned in some of the sources. It is, for instance, absent from Rempel's water-supply scheme, which represents the historical condition of the late nineteenth-century canal system (Rempel 1981: 146), while it is shown on the maps

5 The term "tribal" is rather contested due to its roots in colonialism and its use to deliberately misrepresent peoples and their social and political orders (Sneath 2007). It is used in this article for two reasons: firstly, the usage of "tribe" corresponds in some ways with certain local conceptions of collective identity. It is understood as a translation of *elat/elatiya*, *qavm*, *qabila*, *uruk* and other indigenous terms frequently applied in south-western Central Asian sources to classify social groups with respect to their allegedly shared provenance of an apical founding father. Secondly, a denaturalised usage of the word "tribal" that leaves room for the constructedness of genealogical representations can be effective in explaining differing ritual practices and cultural valuations between groups of people informed by differing conceptualisations of social orders and conditions (Kraus 2004).

6 Historically designating a suburban settlement, the term was slightly anachronistic in the nineteenth century. Even by the ninth century, the *rabot* already lay within the outer city walls, which were rebuilt and expanded in the sixteenth century (Nekrasova 1999: 11, 13, 14).

7 Graves from both of these are said to have existed in Bukhara, albeit in two different places and at quite a distance from the corpse washers' quarter (Bukhoriy 2012: 41–42, 140). Yo'ldoshev et al. state that graves of Hafsi Saghir purportedly existed in several city wards, but do not provide any specific details about them (Yo'ldoshev et al. 2001: 65).

drawn by Parfenov and Fenin, the best-known topographical documents on pre-Soviet Bukhara (originally from 1872 and reworked several times), but even these maps do not specify the influx (Sukhareva 1966: 28). The location of the historical quarter of Murdashuyon can be outlined approximately by its borders: the northern borders were marked by the two-storey Khoja Nihol madrasa and the Toqi Tirgaron (“Dome of the Arrow-Makers”); the western and south-western borders by a street lined with shops where saddle-weavers, harness vendors and cotton carders sold their wares; and the north-eastern borders by an arms depot (*tüpkhana*).

**Figure 1: The former quarter of Murdashuyon in Bukhara**



Source: Non-scaled drawing based on maps from Sukhareva 1966, Sukhareva 1976: 102 and Rempel 1981: 115, 146, 150

Notwithstanding the name, the Murdashuyon quarter was not exclusively inhabited by corpse washers, but was divided into distinct sub-quarters whose social fabric was defined by different crafts and services, all of which were of a rather modest standing. A number of locksmith families in the quarter were specialized in the production of hoes (*ketmon*) for construction and agricultural work (Sukhareva 1966: 214). The producers of donkey and camel saddles (*tūqum*) insisted on the

distinctness of their Tūqumdūzī neighborhood as opposed to the areas of the corpse washers. The Tūqumdūzon bathhouse was not located far from the Tūqumdūzī bazar street. One junction with a blind alley was known as the Street of the Leech Barbers (kūcha-yi šulukchihā). Finally, the Murdashuyon quarter included a city morgue (gharībkashkhāna), where corpses of the executed who came from outside the city or were otherwise not looked after were deposited. If any of the deceased's relatives turned up, the corpses would be handed over in exchange for money. If not, the prayer of mourning was recited and the bodies were buried nearby at the aforementioned graveyard (Yo'ldoshev et al. 2001: 30).

Handling the corpses of the executed could also involve rather dubious activities that some contemporaries even found appalling. The eminent Central Asian writer Sadriddin Aini (1878–1954), himself from the oasis of Bukhara, recalls a ghastly scene in his childhood memories about a band of totally destitute, bald-headed, scabby men (kafangadoī<sup>8</sup>), euphemistically called bobachahoi janobi olī ("The Rich Sons of His Highness"), who by official order were entitled to grab such corpses. Displaying the bodies in front of the Tūqumdūzon bath-house boilers, they would block the road from both sides and press passers-by to hand over what they called "shroud money" (kafanpulī). If anyone failed to pay, they would threaten to put their scabby hand into his mouth. Occasionally the kafangadoī would display corpses until the stench became unbearable and only then disposed of them somewhere outside the city (Aini 1990: 289–290 and 304–305). Aini's kafangadoī are probably identical to the gharibkash. It is, however, unlikely that they were from among the washers of the dead. The ethnographer Olga Sukhareva, one of the most influential Soviet scholars on Central Asia, describes corpse washing — despite of its bad reputation — as a rather lucrative business since the washers would receive the best set of clothes that the deceased had possessed from his or her family along with cash and other payment in kind (Sukhareva 1966: 326).<sup>9</sup> The dirt-covered, rag-clad kafangadoī, by contrast, lived among the ashes and dust in the permanent darkness of the Tūqumdūzon bath-house boilers (Aini 1990: 305). They may have belonged to the most humble part of the large group of bathhouse servants who were partly responsible for collecting combustible rubbish throughout the city to heat the ovens (Rempel 1981: 148).<sup>10</sup>

The confinement of Bukharan corpse washers to their own quarter was not enforced strictly: some washers left their traditional locality and settled down elsewhere in

8 Kafangadoī implies utmost poverty; even the money for one's shroud is lacking.

9 The giving away of one or more sets of good-quality clothes is connected to a perception of the corpse washer as the bailee of these clothes, which will be needed by the deceased on Judgement Day (Sukhareva 1966: 326–327).

10 The kafangadoī may only have resorted to their business in the course of the eighteenth century, as the German biologist and explorer Eduard Eversmann still describes criminals and enemies getting their throats slit and their corpses displayed for three days on the Registan instead of being carried away immediately (Eversmann 1823: 72).

Bukhara before the mid-twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, a couple of families lived in the quarter known as Tabibon (“Healers”), which was mostly home to craftspeople and traders (Sukhareva 1976: 140). The exact location of the washers’ houses within Tabibon is unknown. Yet another group, with around twenty households, had come to live in the neighborhood (*guzar*) of Juyzar in the Juybar Quarter (Sukhareva 1966: 326). So even though they were rather immobilized with respect to social advancement, corpse washers were not restricted to living in a single residential district by early Soviet times. A family’s locality made a difference in many ways. The rules of segregation concerning corpse washers, for example, were enforced in different ways even within the city of Bukhara. While it was common practice throughout the city for corpse washers to form a separate, endogamic community (since other citizens observed rules of avoidance), restrictions could be lifted for ritual occasions in some locations. The corpse washers of the Juyzar neighborhood would be invited to life-cycle rituals within their quarter just like everybody else by the mid-twentieth century. They sat together with the others and partook of the same food — a practice alien to the Murdashuyon quarter (Sukhareva 1976: 115 and 1966: 326). By the same token, the whole Juyzar neighborhood would participate in the corpse washers’ life-cycle events.

The early twentieth century brought some major shifts for the corpse washers’ quarter. Firstly, it lost its name. From 1911 on, the Murdashuyon quarter came to be known as Jilavkhona, possibly in order to avoid the term murdashuy, which, at least today, has an impolite aftertaste. More changes were to occur in the Soviet period. In the 1927 census, the notorious quarter was found to house twenty-six families or a total of 104 inhabitants (Rakhmatova et al. 1995: 74). A restructuring of the city from 1929 onwards, however, united Jilavkhona (formerly Murdashuyon) with Tabibon and yet another quarter; the new unit was eventually called Karim Mustaqim. Not much remained of the original quarter of Murdashuyon. The Toqi Tirgaron, one of the gateways to the Murdashuyon quarter, was torn down some time after Bukhara was taken by Bolshevik troops in 1920 due to “dilapidation” (Sukhareva 1966: 44). The Tarmatoy-Bī mosque and Khoja Nihol madrasa probably shared the fate of many other religious buildings that had survived the capture of Bukhara by Bolshevik troops in 1920, only to be finally destroyed between 1924 and 1930 (Zarcone 1997: 173).<sup>11</sup> Resulting from a hygienist discourse, the water basin of the washers was, like most of Bukhara’s water basins, closed down after 1924 in an effort to curtail diseases (Pincent 2007: 126). It was filled up and the place rebuilt. A theatre, a school and several administrative buildings stand here today; the rest is just open space. The bazar and the shop rows at the Registan were closed down in the 1930s and transferred to the margins of the old city, where the bazar came to be

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11 The Khoja Nihol madrasa still existed in 1920/1921, as a post-conquest photograph of a parade on the Registan with the madrasa in the background shows (Rempel 1981: 89).

known as Kolkhoznyi Bazar (Pincent 2007: 79, 129) — this became an important place for corpse washers to resell clothes they had received as payment.

Today there are no architectural vestiges of the historical Murdashuyon quarter left, neither eminent landmarks nor traditional housing areas. However, some inhabitants of adjacent quarters still have vague memories of the quarter and upon my inquiry situated it somewhere near the Gavkushon Canal at today's Somoni Park, which although not totally correct at least points in the right direction. A small community of washers of the dead (around twelve families) lives in a tiny neighborhood at the rear of the Mavlonoi Asiriy madrasa today, a building located on the southern outskirts of the former Murdashuyon quarter, which predates the mid-eighteenth century. This compact settlement only houses some of Bukhara's contemporary professional washers; others live scattered across the city or have abandoned their profession altogether.

### **Relocation and oblivion: the washers of Khiva and Samarkand**

While historical information about the corpse washers of Bukhara is limited but still fairly good, it is scanty at best when it comes to most other cities of the region. In early twentieth-century Khiva, around twenty families of corpse washers lived in a separate quarter close to the mausoleum of Polvon-Ata (Snesarev 1973: 135). Their task not only consisted in washing the dead of the city and adjacent areas, but also in standing sentinel over the corpses of those executed for three days, preventing family members from taking the bodies away (Snezarev 2003: 122). The corpse washers were exempt from normal taxation, but maintained a (hitherto poorly researched) relationship with the khan's karnaychi (trumpet signaller), whom they had to entertain and to whom they paid their tithe (Snezarev 2003).

By the 1950s, the number of professional corpse washers in the old city of Khiva had dwindled to five elderly men and women; there were no young people left to succeed them (Snesarev 1973: 135). This remarkable decline may not only result from the new accessibility of more prestigious occupations for people hitherto confined to a single inherited, low-prestige profession, but also be due to Soviet urban-planning schemes at that time. The old city of Khiva, Ichon Qala, was converted into a "museum city" in 1967 (Pincent 2007: 81, 92). Great efforts were made to preserve and reconstruct the historical monuments, while living in the old part of the city was discouraged. Services that were necessary were only available in areas outside the city walls. In my interviews, old city residents readily recalled how in Soviet times they had complained in vain about the poor or totally nonexistent supply of water, gas and electricity. This difficult situation pushed many of them out into the new living quarters built around the old town. These effects resulting from city planning added to diversification in people's choice of employment, which arose during Soviet times. Many corpse washers not only left the old city, but they gave up their profession altogether, which led to the near-abandonment of the washers'

quarter. In 2007, there were only a few corpse-washer families left in the old part of Khiva. However, people were able to indicate where the traditional corpse washers' quarter was without much hesitation. Wherever corpse washers stuck to their profession in new settlement areas, they did not form homogeneous quarters along professional lines any more.

In Samarkand, even the memory of the corpse washers' quarter has been lost. Gulnora opa, a former resident of an old city quarter behind Rudaki Square just opposite the Registan, pondered for a long time when asked where the washers' mahalla (living quarters) might have been, but in the end she was unable to come up with any suggestion. The only thing she remembered was that as a child in the 1950s, she had heard the elders say, "Hurry off to the corpse washers' mahalla" when somebody had died — which suggests that such a neighborhood must have existed at that time. Today, washers of the dead lived all over Samarkand, she stressed, but only among Tajiks and Eroni.<sup>12</sup> Uzbeks would wash their dead themselves. Her statement was typical of what many old city residents in Samarkand say, who likewise recall that a corpse washers' quarter existed once, but are unable to say exactly where. Belkis Karmysheva, the Soviet scholar and specialist on Uzbek tribal groups, relying on her field notes from 1962, says that corpse washers, butchers and barbers (that is, members of "polluting" professions) had been expelled from Samarkand at an unspecified point in time and were resettled in a village in the Pastdargom district (possibly Sazaghon) in the west of Samarkand (Snezarev 2003: 133 n. 107). I was unable to find any other information on that issue, however.

Since there is no need for those washers of the dead who remain true to their profession to keep up pre-Soviet settlement patterns, which restricted them to specific city quarters or localities, they now live scattered all over the cities' districts, be it as a strategy to avoid stigmatisation or for other practical reasons such as to be closer to their customers. Their social environment seems to accept or even welcome this relatively recent mode of cohabitation.

### **Issues concerning the dichotomy of "Self" and "Other"**

All over southwestern Central Asia, populations that employ professional corpse washers live side by side with populations who do not. Although differences in washing do not follow ethnic lines as such, they are often taken to be a visible expression of ethnicity. While questions of ethnic identity do not figure prominently in everyday life, they came up quickly as soon as the topic of death and burial was raised in the conversations I conducted. In my fieldwork, individuals from communities without a professional tradition often emphasized that they fulfilled the duty of

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12 Descendants of Shiite immigrants from Khorasan. In Samarkand, most of the Eroni speak Uzbek as their mother tongue, while in Bukhara, most speak Tajik.

washing their dead out of love and respect for their ancestors and denounced the practice of others who handed their deceased over to strangers.

The “Other” is mostly marked in ethnic terms that follow modern twentieth-century terminology, but there is reason to assume that this terminology blurs the actual background of the divide. Thus, Uzbeks from a small town near Samarkand claimed that washing the deceased within the family was a sign of genuine familial love and “Uzbek behavior” — an attitude which “the Tajiks of Samarkand” were allegedly lacking. On the other hand, Kyrgyz from the Ferghana Valley put Namangani Uzbeks down for relying on professional corpse washers, while they themselves would never give away their dead. These statements, and many more to similar effect, seem to support the assumption that it is not actually an ethnic boundary that delineates “the Uzbeks” from Tajiks on the one hand and Kyrgyz on the other; rather, the divide runs between groups with tribal traditions of this kind and groups without any. In the vicinity of Samarkand, many villages are inhabited by Uzbeks whom Karmysheva would count among the “late tribes” (Karmysheva 1976: 209ff.) who still keep up kin washing, while so-called urban, “early tribal” (Karmysheva 1976: 165ff.) Uzbeks from Namangan follow the custom of professional washing. Karimova’s observation that there are only very few professional corpse washers in rural areas (Karimova 2013) might also relate to this assumption.

In his book, Adham Ashirov shows a photograph of the g’assol Abdusamat ota Toshmatov from Kosonsoy who — although it is not stated explicitly — is most likely to be a professional washer, given that Kosonsoy is an ancient Tajik-majority town (Ashirov 2007: unpaginated illustration section). Contemporary ethnic identities and death-related practices, however, do not always match in such a straightforward manner as the above-mentioned Iranian substratum theory would suggest. Ethnographic findings show nicely that anthropological processes in this part of Central Asia — and the Ferghana Valley is an interesting case in point — cannot be linked to contemporary ethnic self-identification in a linear way. The results of Karmysheva’s field research, conducted from the 1970s to the early 1980s, show quite different patterns concerning the neighboring towns of Marghilan and Rishton. Both are towns with a mixed Uzbek and Tajik population. Professional corpse washing was typical of Marghilan proper and the inhabitants of adjacent villages also enlisted the assistance of these professionals for the washing of their deceased. In Rishton, on the other hand, the washing was performed by family members only and was considered to be a meritorious deed. In Avval, south of Marghilan, washing was handled in yet another way: corpse washers were chosen from the elderly population in every neighborhood, but the craft could neither be passed on within the family nor through apprenticeship (Karmysheva 1986: 142).

“Othering” is not a one-way process. Communities with an intact tradition of corpse washing have good arguments in favor of their own modes and stress their own superiority on civilizational grounds. An elderly blacksmith and local dignitary from

Bukhara explained to me that pokshuy (“purifiers”), as he called them, only existed in Bukhara. According to him, the reason for the existence of separate death-related professions — such as professional pallbearers (tobutbar) — was Bukhara’s superior culture. People here had understood that deceased persons had been ill before dying. In order not to get infected by possibly contagious diseases, Bukharans had relinquished corpse washing to this segregated (alohida) professional group just as they had, for example, handed over other special tasks that implied contact with hair and all kinds of secretion to yet another segregated group, namely the barbers (sartarosh). Everywhere else, relatives would wash their dead and, allegedly, run risks without good cause. Washers of the dead would only marry amongst themselves. When asked whether corpse washers and barbers could intermarry, the old gentleman I spoke to said no. The barbers “would not give their daughters” to sons of washers; marriage was only possible among members of the same profession.<sup>13</sup>

These arguments were even echoed among people from settings where relatives perform the task in order to rationalize the distance built up to professional corpse washers. Nazarqul, an elderly man from the Bulunghur district (close to Samarkand) who had spent most of his life in Tashkent, initially denied that washers of the dead had a marginal social status at all. Later, however, he reasoned that the distance was due to them basing a gainful profession (kasb) on other people’s grief. (In a similar vein, corpse washers were said to be greedy to get the effects of the deceased; see the previous studies mentioned by Snezarev 2003: 123).

In Nazarqul’s home village, there were no professional washers. Instead, relatives would wash the deceased themselves; nobody regarded this as a bad thing. Whoever did the washing would not be reimbursed in cash, but received a complete set of clothes in appreciation of their good services. Professional washers, on the other hand, would wash all kinds of deceased persons, including those who had passed away because of an illness. One never knew whom they had recently washed and whether they might pass an infection on, so it would be wise to keep them at a distance.<sup>14</sup>

More recently, yet another possible fault line has appeared. Often viewed as an isolated region with only time-honoured local customs, the dissemination of new religious perceptions attests to Central Asia’s gradual incorporation into globalized Islamic discourse. Influences from global Islamic movements with their emphasis on a “new Muslim” habitus and a sober, rationalized lifestyle and religious practice also leave their mark on death-related services. Although the employment of professional corpse washers does not range prominently among those practices stigmatized as outright un-Islamic by people following more puritan strands of Islamic thought, the model of the Prophet, which encourages the washing to be carried out by persons who were close to the deceased, is promoted as preferable. As indicated by my

13 Interview conducted in Bukhara in May 2010.

14 Interview conducted in Tashkent in April 2009.

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interlocutors, differing individual interpretations of how to deal with death properly have led to serious ruptures within quite a few families all over the region lately.

### **Segregation and interaction: evidence from the past**

Whether or not to “hand over” one’s deceased to professional washers is a question on which collective and individual opinions may differ, as has been shown above. Strategies applied in coping with the peculiarities brought about by the washers’ status, however, seem to be shared by most outsiders to the profession. Several Soviet authors describe a mixture of fear, awe and disgust that other people felt for the washers of the dead (Snezarev 2003: 123–139). Avoidance and segregation would, in terms of normative claims, be dominant patterns of all social interaction in daily life.

There was no intermarriage between corpse washers and people from other walks of life. The latter would avoid the company of corpse washers and, most particularly, avoid commensality with them (sharing a dasturkhon, a tablecloth set with food). Since washers of the dead were not meant to eat from shared plates, they would bring along their own bowls for their share of food served during the mourning rituals or asked the hosts to be served separate dishes altogether (Snesarev 1973: 132). At ritual occasions like commemoration feasts held on the third day after the deceased’s death, they would not partake in any food or drink provided by the others (Sukhareva 1966: 325; Snezarev 2003: 124). In some places, regardless of their intimate professional connection with the deceased, they would not be invited to commemoration feasts at all (Snezarev 2003: 124 n. 84).

Like much of the urban population in pre-Soviet Central Asia, washers of the dead often had parcels of land where they grew vegetables and other foodstuffs. In line with patterns of avoidance, other people would not buy groceries from them, though, which forced the washers to sell their produce at far-off markets where nobody knew of their profession. Washers of the dead had mosques, water basins and cemetery sections of their own (Sukhareva 1966: 325; Snezarev 2003: 123).<sup>15</sup> People would not shake hands with them when they met (Snezarev 2003: 124). There was even a taboo about mentioning their proper names (Snezarev 2003: 125). In the mid-twentieth century, a then seventy-year-old man from the Khorezmian town of Khonqi recalled the essential rules of behavior he had memorized in the event of meeting a corpse washer in the street:

If one met them on the street, one had to turn aside, and if one knew the lailat-il-kurashin prayer, one had to recite it immediately. If one didn’t know it, one had to turn

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<sup>15</sup> It remains unclear how strictly these rules were actually observed by the rest of the population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Olga Sukhareva suggests in a rather enigmatic remark that the Murdashuyon water basin in Bukhara might have been used by other people as well during that period (Sukhareva 1976: 167).

one's face towards the sun; otherwise, it was as though one were up to one's chest in blood. (Snezarev 2003: 125)

In order to minimize the risk for other people, a corpse washer was supposed to walk around with his eyes fixed to the ground and not look at anyone (Snezarev 2003). The habit of veiling their face, which was still practiced by some female corpse washers in the mid-twentieth century, might relate to this precautionary measure. An elderly woman from Yangi Bozor in Khorezm who talked to me about a female professional washer back in the 1970s recalled that this woman always used to wear a ring on her middle finger as an indication of her profession. Wearing a ring on one's middle finger as a sign of impurity derived from death-related services seems to be a feature typical of Khorezm (Snezarev 2003: 123, 129).<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, a mullah from Khonqi went as far as to demand the ethnographer Gleb Snesarev to record his data on corpse washers in an extra notebook so that it would be separated from his data on Islamic saints (Snezarev 2003: 125). According to Snesarev, ordinary people's fear of the washers resulted from two different practices, both of which related to death: one was bodily contact with the polluting corpse that those people would habitually experience, the other a reminiscence of an abandoned graveside ritual (*isqot*)<sup>17</sup> by which the corpse washers would symbolically take over the sins of the deceased in return for a fixed remuneration (Snezarev 2003: 124).

Still, the seemingly strict separation of the corpse washers from "society at large" appears to have been far from consistent, even in pre-Soviet times. Sadriddin Aini recalls the incident of a scribe arriving late at his military unit on the outskirts of Bukhara. When asked about the reason for his tardiness, he explained that he had had to stop by at the opium den in the Murdashuy quarter for his habitual glass of wine (*obi hayot*) since the den close to his home was closed that day (Aini 1990: 293). Although the scribe felt uneasy about his confession (which might have been problematic for more than one reason), he was not reprimanded — at least not with reference to the place where he had had a drink.

While the case related by Aini remains, so to speak, safely within the confines of the lowest social stratum, we also have evidence that corpse washers were entitled to (and actually did) contact the uppermost authorities of Bukhara as well. The archives currently reveal little material on corpse washers or topics related to them. One of the rare findings in which the washers come into sight as participants in social interaction rather than being reduced to a profession that was frowned upon is

<sup>16</sup> Its symbolic counterpart may be the thread extracted from the shroud and wound around the middle finger as a protective measure by pregnant women after someone in the family or neighbourhood had died (Snezarev 2003: 99–100).

<sup>17</sup> The *isqot* ritual is described in detail in Bellér-Hann (2001: 12).

a document from Vobkent,<sup>18</sup> a small town around a dozen kilometres away from Bukhara. It dates from Sha<sup>c</sup>bān 1292/September 1875 and is a petition directed at the Bukharan Emir, Muzaffar al-Din, for investigation of a suspicious casualty. Small as the document is, it makes one ponder how interaction between washers of the dead and society at large might have functioned in practice. The document is written by or on behalf of one <sup>c</sup>Umar Bāy Āqsaqāl and the Vobkent association of washers of the dead (ghassālān).<sup>19</sup> The petition involves the following case: someone named <sup>c</sup>Umar Qul had brought a prostitute to his home and “had a wedding” (nikāh) — which is probably a euphemistic rendering of what actually happened. The prostitute died in his house, however. The corpse washer became suspicious of the circumstances and asked for the cause to be investigated. Although the letter does not insinuate that she was murdered, the washer must have felt compelled to take action. What is interesting about this document is not so much the peculiar subject as the fact that the professional corpse washers’ organization turned to the court for help. Fear and aversion, and perhaps distrust in the washers of the dead as a socially discriminated group, obviously did not exclude them from directly interacting with the Emir just like any of his other subjects.

### **Coming to terms with a difficult legacy — making choices in the present**

The Soviet ideal of human equality under the dictate of the proletariat and the call for abolition of creed and superstition as “harmful vestiges of the past” were likely to counteract segregation and marginalization of the kind that concerned the washers of the dead. The Soviet system offered corpse washers unprecedented opportunities to break free from their predetermined professional path, leave their stigmatized city quarters and opt for individual, more prestigious ways of making a living. The social mobility they enjoyed — at least in theory — was taken as proof of the integrating power of the Soviet system.

In a popular-science book, Gleb Snesarev, the Soviet ethnographer of Khorezm, relates the story of a nurse who married a welder from a family of good reputation in mid-twentieth-century Khiva. The young man’s grandfather had been an engraver renowned throughout Khorezm and there were doctors, teachers and a naval officer among his relatives. The bride, on the other hand, came from a local family of corpse washers. The crowd assembled for the wedding was of two minds about the match: some disapproved of it, whereas others pondered on the meritorious deeds the bride’s forebears had rendered to everybody’s ancestors on their last journey (Snesarev 1973: 136–137). From an official point of view, this was a success story.

18 The Institute of Oriental Studies, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, (IVRUz) 407, fol. 258b. I am grateful to Paolo Sartori who first directed my attention to this document.

19 The title āqsaqāl is ambiguous as it could also refer to an official local representative or the spokesman of the Vobkent washers.

In practice, though, not everybody embraced the abolition of segregation happily, as Snesarev's own field research also shows. Some of his interlocutors emphasized that they did not deliberately violate the rules of avoidance, but were forced to. Perhaps wishing to refrain from open criticism of emancipatory Soviet policies vis-à-vis the ethnographer, they put the blame for the breach of rules on the corpse washers themselves, who would curse them if they stuck to the old avoidance pattern (Snezarev 2003: 124). Irrespective of official discouragement, some Khorezmians would call the corpse washers' profession "impure" and "noxious" (*harom*) well into the mid-twentieth century and regarded the washers of the dead as "third-class people" (Snezarev 2003: 123).

While Soviet ethnography does not focus on individual voices from within the washers' community, I particularly attempted to capture such voices along with others from outside. As a result, a colorful picture unfolded of the ways in which people are coming to terms with their profession today — an inherited legacy from the past for most of them, but a free choice in the present for others.

With more attractive professional paths opening up and a gradual decline in demand for their services, the number of washers of the dead who still practice their profession has dwindled over the years. The case of an old corpse washer from Yangi Bozor who did not have a successor seems to be rather typical. In her family, no one wanted to continue their hereditary profession. Furthermore, even though attitudes among the general public only changed slowly, they still changed. People in Yangi Bozor gradually turned to washing the deceased in their own families due to the lack of professional washers or due to religious considerations since canonical sources favour washing done by relatives. In some cases, members of low-prestige minority groups fill the gap: death-related services at the graveyard are sometimes taken over by Lüli, a Central Asian peripatetic minority group (Louw 2007: 70). Job opportunities for otherwise disadvantaged minorities are only a recent phenomenon in this sector, however.

Another way to cope with the lack of professionals is to reduce the number of washers involved in the ritual. Originally, no less than two professional washers had to attend to the deceased in Khorezm (Snezarev 2003: 103). Today, the picture is considerably more varied. Some corpse washers perform alone and rely on help from the afflicted family, while other washers bring their apprentices along with them. We have to be cautious about calling this a new development, however. Perhaps it is rather the lack of historical information describing the actual ritual performance in detail that makes the one-master-only approach to corpse washing seem novel, while corpse-washer masters may actually have been in short supply in many places.

In-depth research among professional washers never developed smoothly and is still difficult to this day. In general, there was a lot of distrust towards people from outside the corpse washers' community, and patterns of avoidance that concerned washers, myself and other parties made communication hard at times. When I first

met the murdashuy Jumagül apa in Khiva in 2006, she would not receive me in her own home, but came to my host family's home instead as they had generously arranged an interview for me. My "host mother" and Jumagül apa were both self-conscious and rather unsure about the appropriate behavior in this unusual situation: my host mother put some tea, sweets and bread on the table — the usual treats for guests — but Jumagül apa did not touch anything despite being prompted again and again, behavior that would have been totally unacceptable for any other kind of guest since guests are expected to at least taste a morsel of bread and sip a little tea. Once my host had left the room, Jumagül apa gradually relaxed, but the atmosphere remained reserved. Jumagül apa had not been born into a family of corpse washers, she told me; she had been trained as a nurse at the place where she met her future husband. Her in-laws only revealed to her that their family were corpse washers after her marriage — and that Jumagül would have to join their professional path now that she was also a member of their family. This was all the more urgent since her mother-in-law had already passed away without handing her profession over to another woman to serve the female part of their customers. Under these exceptional circumstances, Jumagül apa learnt the profession from her father-in-law. While telling her story, she did not show any sign of regret about the turn of events in her life or any averseness to her subsequent occupation, but mused about people's prejudices, which she had also shared before going in for the profession:

I also used to be like that [i.e. full of prejudices] earlier on. When I was at a wedding, for example, and a washer of the dead turned up, I would think to myself: "Why does she have to come here? What does she want? She has no business here!"

Many of my interlocutors with a hereditary background as washers had never questioned their predetermined professional path or the rules of avoidance that went with it. They would explain their choice of profession with simple reference to their family heritage. Mahfuza opa, whom I met in 2011, lived in Bukhara, in a quarter of the inner city near the Maylonoi Asiriy madrasa (south of what used to be the historical Murdashuyon quarter). Her parents and grandparents had been washers and everyone took it for granted that she would also take up this profession. In her street there were still about ten or twelve families of corpse washers who were using facilities of the former madrasa for professional purposes. They had divided up the cells in the inner courtyard amongst themselves and allotted every washer some space to store the surplus gifts washers would receive from their clients. These gifts often include the clothes of the deceased, his or her bedclothes, linen, cushions and other personal belongings. The washers store them in the madrasa until they decide to resell whatever they do not want to keep for themselves. Resale is not very easy, however, since many people know about the history of the items, and if the washers try to sell them on a nearby street, customers try and persuade them to sell the garments at a low price. Many washers therefore resort to other bazars. Unlike corpse washers elsewhere who are scattered all over the city or, in smaller places, are the sole representatives of their profession, the Bukharan washers are relatively well organised,

with a professional association of their own which holds meetings in a building near the Khoja Baror graveyard north of the old city from time to time. The corpse washers from Mahfuza opa's street also take turns sitting at the entrance to the madrasa to receive customers who turn up unexpectedly (i.e. without having phoned them beforehand). Their payment is twofold today. For one thing, corpse washers receive a certain minimal municipal income if they hand in receipts on which the customers have confirmed their services. The bigger part of their income, however, is generated by way of direct donations in cash or kind from their customers. Today, a professional washer of the dead can expect to receive between 30,000 and 40,000 so'm per washing.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, he or she receives presents or money and the obligatory *saru po* (lit. head-and-foot, i.e. a complete set of clothes).<sup>21</sup> In rural areas, the *murdashuy* is given around 10,000 so'm plus clothes. Before the advance of money in villages, remuneration only consisted of fabrics, clothes and grain. In Khorezm, elderly women preparing for their death set aside a special ring for the corpse washer to cover the expenses (Snezarev 2003: 123).

While hereditary corpse washing is considered an option that is taken up without any further ado, people who intentionally take up this profession are likely to meet with lack of understanding on the part of society. They are — or feel like they are — expected to provide arguments that rationalize their choice. Dilshoda, a professional corpse washer from Samarkand, opted for a religious line of argumentation when explaining to me why she had decided in favor of this profession. She viewed her work as an obligation to society, which pleased God at the same time. When talking about her choice, she stressed two reasons — a spiritual call she felt, but also a hidden family history:

In a dream one night, I saw a man approaching me and shouting: "Dilshoda, why aren't you coming? Where are you? We need to wash a corpse!" and then I entered a room where everybody was already at work and I saw how you have to do it ...  
 Several people have committed suicide in my family: my paternal uncle (amaki), the husband of one elder sister (pochcho), a niece (jivan) — she was only eighteen years old! — and yet another person. As for me, everybody thought I was crazy (jinni). Then it turned out that my great-grandfather had also been a washer of the dead back in pre-Soviet times and that he had wanted to pass the profession on to somebody else.  
 [Interposed question by my host, Nigora: Was that the man in your dream?] — Yes, it was. Two intermediary generations had not worked in this profession and for some reason, nobody in the family ever talked about our great-grandfather having been a corpse washer... I had a relative, my büvi<sup>22</sup> from my amaki's side, and she taught me what to do when washing a corpse, the words you have to say and so on. But she only

<sup>20</sup> This was in 2009. The sum was then around 15 and 20 euros respectively according to official rates. An average monthly salary in Uzbekistan is around 500,000 so'm, which is around 200 euros according to official rates, but only around 120 euros according to black-market rates. In 2011, the amount in Bukhara was already 100,000 so'm (35 euros) and more.

<sup>21</sup> The set of clothes received as compensation for services is not to be confused with the symbolical safeguarding (amonat) of clothes for Judgement Day.

<sup>22</sup> Honorary term of reference for an elderly woman.

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told me these things [theoretically]. Until my büvi died, I had never as much as washed a dead person myself. When she passed away, one of her washers — there were four Tatar women because my büvi was also a Tatar — fetched me because I had been so close to her ... Then I looked around for a master (usto) for quite a while, but I couldn't find anybody. One murdashuy turned me down because I was too young — I was only about seventeen or eighteen at the time.

This happened around 1980. Dilshoda then went off to Tashkent to study until 1984. In the difficult years after independence, she tried to migrate, but experienced severe economic mishap and finally made a vow to wash whoever was in need of a washer, if only she found a way to make a living. Soon afterwards, a destitute Russian woman died, an alcoholic who was all alone without any relatives left in Samarkand. Dilshoda said that many washers would have refused the job but she did not. A short while after, Dilshoda unexpectedly got back a large sum of money she had lost years earlier when trying to migrate to Israel. Ever since then, she had been washing all kinds of women, even from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, which is usually a sensitive topic in Samarkand. Dilshoda's understanding of her work is that of an all-encompassing obligation to humans irrespective of their ethnic identity, social status or religion. She had come to develop a very special outlook on life and appeared at ease when talking about death. To the horror of my acquaintance Nigora who had first introduced me to Dilshoda, she pointed to her dress during our talk and said it had belonged to a woman who had died young. When asked if she did not feel sorry for the dead, especially when death came unexpectedly, she said no; distancing herself from any feelings of sorrow or mourning was part of her job.

Dilshoda also enjoyed a reputation for having special powers in her neighbourhood, which was why people would consult her about healing, too. Similarly, Mahfuza opa conducted purification rituals (alas) on demand. Although I was very surprised to hear this initially, I learnt that many corpse washers practice as healers and perform other rituals related to illness and health. Their professional activity in the liminal zone between life and death equips the corpse washers with polluting and beneficial faculties at the same time, which is why they can perform healing and purification rituals in spite of their inherent “pollutedness” as washers. Their liminal status between this world and the afterworld provides them with power and this power adds to people's fear of corpse washers, just as the alleged impurity derived from bodily contact with the dead does. Corpse washers are, in fact, held to be the only ones who possibly have the power to avert imminent death through special rituals. One of my interlocutors, a middle-aged woman from a quarter near the Gur Amir mausoleum in Samarkand, recalled how an elderly neighbor of hers had called for a murdashuy to perform a ceremony since she was afraid of dying soon. The whole ritual of repelling death had to be conducted by a murdashuy in order to be effective. It also necessarily involved a bloody sacrifice in order to substitute the human blood,

which otherwise — according to popular belief — metaphorically flows when the Angel of Death takes one's life.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Professional washers of the dead still inhabit a liminal zone in two respects. In a spiritual sense, they stand somewhere between life and death, which is a source of supernatural, but also of polluting faculties, both of which are frightening to others. Many of my hosts felt uneasy or expressed fear when talking about accompanying me to a corpse washer. In a mundane sense, washers of the dead are still viewed with suspicion because they are allegedly base members of society and people keep themselves aloof from them. Contemporary washers of the dead face twofold pressure to justify their profession: firstly on the grounds of the customary yet everlasting contempt based on questions of ritual pollution and purity, and secondly because they have remained in or have adopted a profession of such low prestige, although exit options have been available for almost a century now. Washers pursue practical strategies in securing their economic existence, some of which imply the partial disguise of their identity and activity. Furthermore, in an attempt to elevate the status of their profession discursively, many corpse washers argue that what they perform is a meritorious deed and a service to the community. Some washers claim to have been chosen for their task by God or by their ancestors' spirits, much in the same vein as folk medical healers and religious specialists do. Depending on locality, ethnic or other affiliation, and certainly also on individual attitudes informed by historical and recent, religious and profane discourses, many outsiders to the profession rely on the services of the washers, while others totally deny the necessity or admissibility of professionalism in washing.

The debate about the correct mode of washing also touches on questions of autochthony and tradition — resources valued highly in contemporary Central Asia for creating meaningfulness, identity and legitimacy. Given its perceived great age, corpse washing might theoretically be embraced in the Golden Heritage discourse. This is not the case, however; the corpse-washing profession and its specific history is officially rather ignored. The depiction of an organic, mutually supportive pre-colonial and especially pre-Soviet society favored today in Central Asia does not allot much space to groups whose collective memory contradicts the ruling conception of history.

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23 The ritual, during which a sheep was slaughtered and its head cooked, is highly reminiscent of folk medical cures by transfer (*ko'ch* / *qochuruq* in Tajik and Uzbek respectively), where evil spirits that harm the patient are lured into a sacrificial animal or even into inanimate objects that serve as scapegoats, thereby saving the human being (During et al. 2007).

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