

Acrobats Remember Their Lives

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Introduction

This paper is based on fieldwork I conducted between 2004 and 2005 among acrobats (*dorboz*) in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. My main aim was to collect oral history within this specialized group. I first wanted to draw attention to the ambiguity of being marginalized and needed for a kind of entertainment service, but I gave up this idea soon because, contrary to my expectations, the acrobats turned out to be anything but marginalized. By the end I had fourteen interviews, of which only four can be classified as ‘classical oral history documents.’

According to oral history theory an oral history text becomes ‘an oral history document’ if 45 minutes of speech have been collected (Niethammer 1985). This was only the case for these four documents. Although I spent several days with each acrobat, when it came to interviewing him or her, the result was quite meagre. The bulk of my material consists of fragmentary recollections by a number of acrobats about their life histories. In this paper I shall consider those fragments emerging from these life stories, which focus on the sense of belonging to a group of professionals. They are represented in the oral reminiscences as a well-defined group which have numerous ways to legitimise their occupation, and which also take pride in their way of life. I shall try to show that the *dorboz* construct their collective identity by combining projections of the distant past of their group as related in stories by the master with individual reminiscences.

For centuries acrobats have entertained the onlookers in the bazaars and streets of Central Asia; they have also performed at public festivals and in well-to-do households at joyful life cycle rituals. They have generally been referred to as *dorboz*, which literally means tightrope walker. In fact *dorboz* is a collective term used to denote various types of public entertainers, including the magician (*fokusnik*), the strongman (*polvon*), the tightrope walker (*dorboz*), and the ‘boneless’ or double-jointed acrobat (*besuyak*). Ideally, the profession of the *dorboz* is handed down from father to son, but in practice we also come across cases of newcomers with no artistic family background joining the *dorboz* and being accepted as apprentices.

Acrobats form working groups that travel through various regions of Central Asia. Economically prosperous regions, such as Tashkent or Samarkand, particularly attract these groups, but so do other densely populated regions such as the Ferghana Valley with its cities Namangon, Andijon or Farghona. Each group is led by a master who is responsible for both the artistic and financial management of his group. When I was hanging around with the jugglers and wanted to

interview them, the members of the group always sent me to their leader, who was responsible for telling the story.

Most people in Europe are brought up with a particular conception of history, which may prevent us from understanding other ways of conceptualizing time. We are so fundamentally convinced that everybody should be aware of, and be able to narrate their chronological history, that this may lead us to the conclusion that having a history in our sense constitutes one of the basic human characteristics, a universal phenomenon. For example, research on the Gypsies of Europe has led some historians to the assumption that the Gypsies are a people without a history (Blasco 2001, Marushiakova and Veselin 2005). The evolutionist approach to the Gypsies, which viewed them as a people belonging to a 'primitive race', a term which was first used in order to differentiate these peoples from the 'civilized ones', was supposed to prove that there are people with and people without culture and history (Burenhult 2002). We need to remember that our European historical consciousness is also rooted in heterogeneous mythological and Christian ways of storytelling. Modern European historical consciousness was fundamentally shaped by the intellectual currents of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and by the emerging historical scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schlatter 1989; Lévi-Strauss 1980: 27–36; 47–56).

The Craftsman

Historical consciousness and its reproduction in a story by a non-professional were described by Lévi-Strauss with the concept of "*bricolage*". By this, Lévi-Strauss refers to a person's ability to link various historical events, which under certain circumstances could be connected. The narrator, metaphorically speaking, has some raw material at his disposal, such as his own recollections, stories, which he has heard, so-called facts and various things he has read, and he combines all these with the help of his 'toolbox'. The story thus created is influenced by his personal taste as well as by the expectations of the community for whom the piece is created. In contrast to the craftsman, the scholar is not dazzled by the masterpiece. His task begins where that of the craftsman stops - he questions the 'facts', and subjects the material to scholarly scrutiny. It is my contention that the acrobats as storytellers may be assigned to the category of the craftsmen.

One could say, the scholar and the "*bricoleur*" expect a message. But for the "*bricoleur*" the message is something already written or spoken or thoughts already thought by someone else; he collects these like a type of commercial code, which allow him to be ready for all new challenges as they contain the whole professional experience of one group in a condensed form (but under the condition to belong to the same class like the former). (Lévi-Strauss 1968).

The Narrative Dimension

According to Bernhard Streck, ‘When culture reaches the level of consciousness, it becomes an instrument of communication’ (Streck 2004: 3). A culture of memory and historical memory, in the European sense of the word, only then become part of communication when one acquires a certain awareness of their existence. The kind of consciousness that one has a history which goes beyond key-events like one’s birth, time in the army and wedding, I only found in a few instances when talking to the *dorboz*. In the case of Ahmad, a *dorboz* from Ghova (near Namangan), his life-story was discussed, created and presented by members of his whole group, and in this respect it was a communal product.

This leads me to a second important issue: How did I, as a participant observer and interviewer, manage to elicit the life-stories? The narrative dimension was probably the most important barrier to gaining an insight into the historical consciousness of the *dorboz*. Not for nothing are only the masters of narration in a position to provide the *dorboz* with a historical dimension in the course of the interviews. Tursunali from Vuadil (south of the Ferghana Valley), who is a trained cultural scientist, regarded the oratory art as one of the most important elements in his shows and a key for success. Ahad, “the leader of ‘The Minaret of Kokand’” (*Quqon minori*) from Kokand (western part of the valley) had won many prizes for his rhetorical skills at acrobats’ competitions, and Pulot Toshkenboev had studied history at the university and was thus well versed in narrating history.

Storytelling is a craft, an art, which not everybody is able to perform. Pulot, a member of a long line of acrobats and director of a little circus, was the exact opposite of the above-mentioned Ahmad, who had no idea about his life story and created it with the whole group before my eyes. Pulot not only was a qualified historian but also held a PhD. He had acquired his knowledge from books, from stories, which were part of the family tradition, and he had conducted his own research on the history of acrobatics and the circus. It can be concluded that the narrative performance of history has a multiplicity of potential sources, such as formal education, the skilful manipulation of ‘memory pegs’, stories and so-called facts transmitted orally as well as written materials.

Lutz Rzehak observed in Afghanistan how the narration of a life story was often delegated to someone who had more rhetorical skills rather than entrusted to the person whose life story it was (Pahwal and Rzehak 2004: 5). In our own society we also experience situations in which storytelling is taken over by one of the partners (in a couple) or by one person in a group of youngsters. In the case of the acrobats it was the master of the respective group of *dorboz* who undertook the task of storytelling.

Strictly speaking, I have only heard three of these masters relate a narrative that went beyond the story of their own lives because photographs, newspaper

articles, medals and tales from the past can also serve as ‘memory pegs’. As far as the skill of storytelling is concerned, the ability to combine all the details to a unified whole is far more important. However, not every *dorboz* possessed this skill. But does the fact that someone was reluctant or had difficulties telling me his story mean that he did not think about it? Can I therefore assume that many *dorboz* performed their daily duties without ever reflecting on their lives and activities? Was it for them less important to consult former masters, history books or other sources? It should not be forgotten that in order to reflect about oneself, one’s own history or the history of one’s community, one not only needs time to distance himself from daily pressures, but also an understanding that it is important to have a history and that one should care about it. For some of the *dorboz* other things were simply more important.

Ikram from Kosonsoy (north of the Ferghana valley, near Namangan) belonged to those *dorboz* for whom their profession was important. In his personal archive his life was fully documented with photos, videos, articles and decorations. Thus it depends on someone’s self-confidence, his organizing skills and also his personal circumstances how well he is willing and able to document his life. But this private archive did not go beyond the documentation of his person. Any reflections on the history of the *dorboz* in general were scarce.

For Ahad *aka*, on the other hand, remembering the past had a completely different dimension. He was able to present a very rich history of the *dorboz*, and the sources of his stories were exclusively what he had heard; thus his knowledge was a result of orally handed down traditions rather than books. Neither did he rely on visual and other aides to prop his memory.

Whenever people possessed any photographs of *dorboz*, they were mostly keen to show them to me. It was a matter of pride to have a photo of oneself. Therefore, when I took a picture of my interviewees, they always asked me for a copy. In most situations the photos were carefully staged; hardly anyone saw the value in being photographed while working. They preferred to stand at attention when their photos were taken. The collection of photos is like the preservation of moments, the capturing of time. Other documents, which go beyond that, such as newspaper clippings, correspondence with official institutions, as well as certificates, were exclusively possessed by group leaders. It is also remarkable that, even though a few of my interviewees owned such private ‘archives’, it was only Ikram who used his collection as a memory aid to tell his story. For the purpose of this article, I will, from all the available elements, construct the typical life story of a *dorboz* and then analyse it in detail.

Elements of an Acrobat's Life Story

In the life stories the following recurring elements can be discerned:

- family background
- the chronology and lineage of one's masters
- events in the life cycle and the profession (education, army, marriage, organizing a group of acrobats, medals, travelling routes, the births of children, role of the wife, retirement)
- legends of one's own profession
- future prospects

In which order these different elements are connected and how they are elaborated on always depends on the individual narrator's creativity.

Family Background

There are ideal conceptions of an acrobat's life, and these are represented by certain values. Ideally, one wishes, for example, to be part of a long professional lineage. Thus the term *otakash* (father's profession) was one of the most common expressions I heard while interviewing acrobats who descended from families practising the same profession. It was interesting that in these life stories a key experience that would have explained why they had become *dorboz* was missing. They had been born into a group of acrobats and that was all that really mattered. The same value attached to the professional lineage is also represented by the frequently used term *ustoz-zoda* (born into a master's family). This name refers to the symbolic power ascribed to the genealogical line.

Descent

If an acrobat has no such professional family background, he often stresses that he himself is the founder of a new 'dynasty' or that it was because of him that the whole family had become a *dorboz* family. To have an ancestor in the profession or to be born into a family of acrobats is of significant value. In both cases continuity and the long-term transmission of skills and knowledge between generations of performers related to each other through kinship are of central importance.

Masters

The succession of the masters who have taught an acrobat is like an emblem of his artistic abilities. However, some acrobats are unable to present a long line of masters because their training was not varied enough. Instead, these *dorboz* point

to legendary ancestors with whom they cannot have had any geographical or personal connection. It seems that the master is responsible for establishing a young acrobat in the profession and for preparing him for an independent professional life as an acrobats' leader. In the absence of real ancestry of masters, the legendary ones come into play.

Biographical Stages

The biographical chronology often resembles an encyclopaedia entry. It typically consists of a simple compilation of facts without any additional narrative elements. Only a few of the *dorboz* made an effort to embellish their stories. Especially their time in military service was presented as a narrative of adventures because several of the acrobats used to perform in their battalions and thus were often freed from their daily duties as soldiers. In addition, they were also permitted to perform in other places. This freedom was especially emphasised in the biographies, and often it was the only time that included adventures, although generally every acrobat seems to be keen to present his life as being full of changes and excitement.

The constituent values of change and excitement are represented by the following elements: The *dorboz* often move because of the shows, visit different cities, take part in various competitions and get prizes for their work. Often a simple invitation to other republics is seen as a reward, but to be invited to Moscow is one of the most important rewards, which can even be topped by a special certificate, issued in the Russian capital. Even invitations to England or elsewhere are not considered to be of equal significance.

Only when the children have grown up and have taken over their father's profession, can a *dorboz's* life be regarded as successful. Then he can start to think about retirement, as the responsibilities and duties of the leader are slowly taken over by a younger *dorboz*. If this process is successfully completed, the old master retires. But if he did not manage to educate his children in the *dorboz* tradition, or if they have fallen prey to alcoholism (as is often the case with the father himself), then life is considered a failure and the life story ends in the past without reaching the present.

Fictional Elements

Apart from the life stories being told like encyclopaedic entries or adventures, there are additional fictional elements inscribed into memory as well: These are legends and prayers. Legends appropriate history. By using real or fictional events to tell a story, they can invest a thing or an activity in contemporary time with a sense of purpose. Legends internalise and reflect human actions, and, in this particular case, the activities of the acrobats.

In legends, three basic elements can be discerned:

1. a miraculous incident
2. the power of a process to establish a pattern
3. the explanation of the relevance of the process for the audience (Ecker 1993).

Nevertheless, the fictional parts, such as the legend of Hazrat Ali, of Hazrat Bilol, the legend of the tightrope walker from Quva, the legend of the Gypsies, the legend of the mountains or the legend of the Day of Judgement, do not necessarily contain each of the three elements simultaneously.

Legends of Origin

Legends of origin constitute a popular means for communities to appropriate history. They often function as a means of self-assurance and contribute to providing communities with a sense of rooted-ness in both space and time. Events described are chosen as circumstances require. Sometimes different origin legends compete with each other, as in the case of the *dorboz*, who may simultaneously subscribe to religious and secular legends.

Religious Legends

The most common legend, that of Hazrat Ali, was related to me in various versions. Presumably it had been orally transmitted before it was first committed to writing in the course of the early twentieth century.

The *dorboz* in their time also had a certain statute - a "*risola*", in which certain prayers and poems that were to be read during performances were written down and which recounted the origin of tightrope walking, with the blessing of the Prophet (*sic*) Ali. The *dorboz* narrate a story in which the Prophet Ali had a never-ending fight with the infidels, with the *dev*, the *lyax* (mythical beings, fairy-tale pelicans) in the province of Xaybar. Nobody was able to take their barbarous fortress, the Shahri Xaybar. The fortress was surrounded by rocks and water, and the Prophet, who had brought with him an army, could not find a way in. But then he fashioned a rope, fixed it and let his army march on it over the water. Thus they destroyed the infidels and conquered Xaybar. As a consequence of this event he blessed tightrope walking and the equipment necessary to perform it. (Borovkov 1928: 16)

In this story the rope and walking on it are sanctified by a holy man; he invents the activity of tightrope walking and at the same time blesses it; in this way the importance of tightrope walking for the process of the Islamisation of the area is demonstrated: we are told that tightrope walking made the victory of Muslims over the infidels possible.

In another version narrated to me by Tursunali it was a tightrope walker who "passed by Hazrat Ali and his troops who had besieged the fortress of Xaybar" and then helped him to win a victory by using the rope. In this version the exis-

tence of tightrope walkers is (consciously or subconsciously) attributed to pre-Islamic times, but they then contributed to the process of Islamisation. This legend demonstrates the high degree of self-esteem of the tightrope walkers: they were the ones who helped Ali.

Other stories are subordinated to or incorporated into more famous origin legends and explain certain aspects of the acrobats' art. There is, for instance, the story of Hazrat Bilol, an African slave who was one of the first converts to Islam, and who was subjected to unspeakable tortures by his master. He was covered, so one *dorboz* told me, with a huge stone, which made it almost impossible for him to breathe. Only his will to survive and his physical strength enabled him to endure these sufferings. The *polvon* or circus strongmen re-enact this event when they load themselves with giant stones, which have to be carried by up to ten people.

Tursunali made another pre-Islamic reference to the work of circus strongmen by pointing to Rustam *polvon*, a legendary hero of the "*Shohnoma*", one of the first Modern Persian books, written by Firdousi. Rustam *polvon*, an outstanding hero and king of the ancient Persians was said to possess such an extraordinary strength that he could easily be held up as an example for all circus strongmen.

According to the legend narrated by Ahad *aka*, tightrope walking was brought from Kashgar to the Ferghana Valley, and the people from Kashgar had learned it from the Arabs. The main element here is the proximity of tightrope walking to the central lands and guardians of Islam. Not only his references to Hazrat Ali but also the mentioning of the Arabs as both the ancestors and masters of the *dorboz* serve the purpose of connecting the profession to Islam. At the same time, Ahad *aka*'s story also included references to mountain shepherds who cannot have been Arabs. Thus Ahad *aka* places the origins of the *dorboz* in mythical times, and that is probably where they belong.

Secular Legends

Another attempt to explain the origins of tightrope walking is undertaken in a myth about the mountains. Tursunali's opening words are characteristic: according to him, it is impossible that Hazrat Ali ever came to Central Asia and brought with him tightrope walking as he never left the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, the activity of tightrope walking must have been invented in the mountains. There, the inhabitants probably fixed a rope between two mountains in order to cross the gorges and used long sticks to maintain their balance while doing so. These words take the following facts as starting-points: Tightrope walking was not introduced from the outside; instead, it is a genuine Central Asian invention. The legend underlines this assumption by maintaining that tightrope walking came from the mountains, i.e. from a place very near the plains of the Ferghana Valley. Tightrope walking thus is considered to be older than Islam. It

was probably practised by the first people who lived in the mountains and spread from there throughout Central Asia. Similar legends can be found in Dagestan, where it is not a rope but tree trunks laid over rivers which cause people to develop the necessary skills for tightrope walking (Winkler 1988: 186-87).

This legend, similar to the legend of Hazrat Ali, elaborates on the religious dimensions of the sense and purpose of tightrope walking and thus demonstrates a higher degree of self-confidence among the practitioners of the profession. The *dorboz* do not link the origins of tightrope walking to the life of a holy man but instead connect it to the early stages of the history of mankind. The legend of the mountains does not sanctify the object of the rope but presents it as an indispensable tool for moving around in the mountains.

All the legends incorporate certain ideals of the acrobats. One legend, however, was explicitly told by Ahad *aka* from Kokand in order to demonstrate these ideals and the purpose of tightrope walking in more recent times: Once the *dorboz* were invited to a celebration of the Shah, where they performed their art. Suddenly the Shah asked them for a heretical trick, which involved walking on the rope in the direction opposite to Mecca, something very difficult, as this route was very steep. The risk was high, but the *dorboz* agreed and as their reward they demanded from the Shah the release of nine prisoners. The elements of this story - granting freedom and being generous and charitable - once again are indications of the moral values to which the *dorboz* subscribe. They need prosperous societies with peace and stability so that they and their art may thrive. Besides, their challenging of the Shah demonstrated their defiant attitude towards all forms of authority.

The motif of freeing prisoners can also be found in the legends of Mahmud *polvon*. These stories are very famous in Xorezm; they narrate the journey of Mahmud, the circus strongman, and his return from India. The Indian ruler has taken many of Mahmud's countrymen as prisoners of war and Mahmud follows them. On the way he experiences many adventures, and he also gets married. Later he fights in the army of the Indian Raj, and for this service he is offered many presents; instead of accepting them he asks for the release of his compatriots (Ibn Hussayn Devon 2001). Mahmud, the athlete, was so famous in Xorezm that a whole architectural complex devoted to him was built there, consisting of a mausoleum, a sepulchre, a mosque and a fountain. Today this compound is a popular holy site, especially visited by young married couples. The place is supposed to give the man the strength he needs in order to found a big family. The many legends, which were told about Pahlavon Mahmud already during his lifetime and soon after his death, aptly demonstrate his enormous popularity.

Quva

Not only stories include legendary elements concerning acrobats. Geographical places can also be considered legendary. In Uzbekistan the legendary city of all

dorboz is Quva. But none of the *dorboz* I talked to could explain why. Only Tursunali suggested that it may have had something to do with Quva being one of the oldest places in the valley, and that in the sixth and seventh centuries it used to be the biggest urban centre in the south of the Ferghana Valley.

Family Legends

In contrast to legends of origin, which refer to the remote past, Pulot Toshkenboev explains the beginning of tightrope walking in his family with an ancestral legend.

It consists of the following elements:

- the art of tightrope walking was learned by one of the storyteller's ancestors during the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*)
- during the journey he was initiated into the profession while sleeping [dream]
- this talent was innate; otherwise it would not have been so easy for him to acquire the profession, but the dream was necessary to activate it
- he returns home from Mecca to show his people what he learned on his journey to the holy sites

The legend ends with the founding of a *dorboz* dynasty and the death of Hajji *dorboz* and continues as a biography.

Although, as Casimir has shown, legends can also preserve tragedies of a peripatetic existence (Casimir 1987), it is remarkable to what extent such elements are absent from the stories of these Central Asian acrobats. All these legends display a basically positive attitude of the acrobats to the emergence of their profession as well as a sense of belonging to the group.

Excursus: Legends About the dorboz by Outsiders

Only once did Tursunali mention to me that it could have been outsiders, possibly Gypsies (*luli*) from India, who later settled in Quva, who were responsible for spreading the art of tightrope walking throughout Central Asia. But he refused to repeat this comment in a more formal interview, and no other acrobat ever mentioned India in connection with the origin of their profession.

The theory, however, that India is the homeland of acrobats has for centuries been repeated over and over again in Central Asian literature. This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the *dorboz* themselves make every effort to connect the origins of their profession to the origins of Islam; in contrast, representatives of the *literati* seem to distance it as far as possible from Islam and locate it in India. Abdumansur Salabi Nishapuri (961-1038), for example, wrote in his book "*Ghurar al abbori fi muluk al fars*" about Bahrom Ghur (420-438) and the

Indian influence on the arts. Bahrom Ghur was a Sassanian king known for settling many Indian artists in the Persian provinces. Their estimated numbers vary from 400 to 12,000 (Nurdzhanov 2002: 35; Sundermann 1980: 134). Besides, it is certain that there were Indian artists in Central Asia even before Bahrom Ghur had invited them. But does that prove that the acrobats also came from India? Maybe many acrobats went to India during the times of Bahrom Ghur, and yet no one wrote about it - the Indians in Persia, that was the real sensation, which was worth writing about. They were exotic, as they provided a new and exciting form of entertainment at the court of Bahrom. But one cannot exclude the possibility that by this time there were many indigenous acrobats working in the streets. However, they would have been part of daily life and, as such, not worth writing about.

Since the 10th century 'India' has been in the Islamic world something like a metaphor for the ideal motherland of all acrobats and quacksalvers. Not only Biruni makes comments about this; it has been a popular assumption since the 10th century (Schimmel 1995: 60). But for Islamic scholars 'India' is also a metaphor for something far away and therefore exotic. How this metaphor can lead to apparent ambiguities can be seen in some of Nizami's poems. He talks about the beginning of the winter, in a metaphorical style:

The sweet song of the nightingale had faded away,
and only the croaking cries of the crows sounded, the birds of the Hindu-
race, this useless brood of thieves,
and nothing had remained from the time of the roses than grey thorns.
(Nisomi 1980: 15)

A few lines further down, the hero of the story rests his head on the bosom of an Indian princess (Nisomi 1980: 20ff). This ambiguity makes it clear that India and the Hindu were only a metaphor, an attractive stereotype, which had nothing to do with the realities of life.

A recurring term to denote acrobats was the word "*Kabuli*". In the times when this name was current (from the 9th until the 11th century) the regions of modern Afghanistan, like India, were not part of the Islamic world: they thus constituted 'ideal' places with which the origins of acrobats could be conveniently associated. Bosworth conducted some research on the application of the word "*Kabuli*". (Bosworth 1976: Vol. 1. 93; Bosworth 1976: Vol. 2. 127, 208). He suggests that it was a synonym for "someone from India". This shows that acrobats were regarded as outsiders, as people who did not quite fit the mould of the Islamic world even though, according to al-Biruni, as early as the 10th century they were ubiquitous all over it. This is further attested by numerous Arabic sources (Jacob 1910; Bosworth 1976).

Apart from the word "*Kabuli*", the term "Hindu" is also often used, which clearly carries a negative connotation. To be a Hindu, however, as demonstrated by Sigrid Kleinmichel, did not necessarily mean to have come from India. In-

stead, it referred to people who habitually painted their faces black – something, which used to be commonly done by artists performing on the market-square. It served them as a mask to mark the difference between the actor and the audience (Kleinmichel 1994: 207).

The idea that scholars had of India during the Islamic Middle Ages is characterised by the fate of the Sufi martyr al-Hallaj. He had gone to India to work there as a missionary. His critics and enemies later suggested that he had learned black magic there and especially the Indian trick of rope dancing. This, of course, was not the main reason for sentencing him to death but the fact that the accusation was made at all says a lot about the reputation of acrobatics among the Islamic elite. One of al-Hallaj's hardest critics, the Shiite mystic Shalmaghani, even said that the punishment for al-Hallaj signified the eternal damnation of acrobatics (Schimmel 1995: 105; Mason 1995: 33).

The Prayer

In Islamic societies prayers have a high value in everyday life. That does not just concern the five obligatory daily prayers, but also the prayer of blessing (*fotixa*), which is frequently recited: for example, upon entering a house, upon taking leave, at the beginning of a journey, in other words, always when people are in need of divine assistance or intervention.

The *dorboz* often pray for a better future for their whole country and for the group of acrobats; they ask for the general wellbeing of the people and for many festivities, which provide the *dorboz* with work. They also ask for prosperous bazaars and political and social stability, sensible politicians and peace in the world.

Apart from the general efficacy ascribed to all prayers, the *dorboz* are said to have special powers in this respect. At the beginning of a festivity they bless the whole house to ensure that the party will be a big success. But the special powers of their prayers mostly relate to children. Ikram, smiling whimsically, told me that he had lost count of the children named after him and after his eldest daughter Nodira. According to him it happens frequently that when a baby boy is born to a couple who was longing for children, he is named after the tightrope walker himself, if the baby is a girl, then she is called after the tightrope walker's wife or daughter. Even during Soviet times, when it was forbidden to pray in public, people implored the *dorboz* to pray for them at all costs.

According to my interviewees only God knows what it is that makes a prayer powerful. But to the *dorboz* it is important that their prayers sound convincing. Ahad of Quqon minori, for example, pointed out that even at the height of the worst political repressions in Soviet times, when prayers were prohibited, they were still recited in public during the *dorboz* performances. However, certain words had to be disguised and were substituted by other words. Thus in the following prayer,

*Maning pirim Ali Sberim hudoduuur. Ikki dono di Mubamadi mustafaduuur!
A kimki pirishiga dast tursa uning taqdiri Allah*

(“My protector Ali, thou art like God, oh Muhammad, thou Holiness! Who serves his protector, is protected by God!”),

the names of holy persons and religious words were exchanged by terms like peasant, Lenin, kolkhoz worker, etc. (Borovkov 1928). The words themselves are of secondary importance, while the real emphasis is on the melody of the prayer and on the idea that Ali as protector is addressed. Religious motifs could also be disguised in a similar fashion. Ikram thus explained to the authorities that his prayers were not really prayers but ancient poems.

Ahad ended our interview with the following prayer:

May Allah illuminate all our ways.

May he take away what is written in his book about us.

So that the lives of the people who look at us with reverence and who believe in us,

So that everything they work for, everything that they have in their lives, may be blessed so that they can host many festivities.

When someone wants a son, may he be given a strong and healthy one.

When God is asked to give someone grandchildren, they should be beautiful and prudential.

May there be many festivities, so that we can serve them then. (*bizmat*)

Conclusion

One should not forget that the biographies of the *dorboz* display a great deal of diversity. In order to understand them, however, it is useful to analyse the common features of their lives. These inform their position in society as well the reasons for their self-confidence, which can differ from master to master, depending on whether someone has had a happy and fulfilled life or not. In contrast to Casimir, who presented the lives of peripatetic people in terms of tragic events, acrobats claim a high status in Islam through their stories and their practices of remembering. Tragic stories concerning either acrobats or Gypsies in Central Asia are (in my experience) always told by outsiders who empathise with others.

In accordance with their self-awareness as belonging to the ‘cultural assets’ of the region and due to the dominant status of Islam in Central Asia, acrobats try to locate their origins either at the sites near their actual localities or in Islamic lands. They would never emphasise a story, which places their origins in strange societies, like India. Instead, this is done by outsiders, typically those who disapprove of public entertainment on religious grounds. The acrobats are aware of the cultural heritage of the region they inhabit. It is in this cultural landscape, in literature and in oral traditions, that they find the sources of their corporate identity. They are not willing to represent themselves as “professional strangers”; instead, they claim to be an integral part of mainstream Central Asian culture.

I was unable to discover any trace of marginality in the self-representations of acrobats. Instead, like most other professional groups in Central Asia, they also display a high level of group consciousness, which guarantees the internal cohesion of the group, characterized by the ideal of endogamy (Slezkine 2004: 21, 33). Basing their economy on descent gives the whole professional group the possibility to intermarry their daughters with families of comparable economic and social standing. Thus, some of them stay within their own professional groups. However, that does not marginalize them; it simply locates them in a niche, which, like many other such niches, also has its boundaries. One problem they have to face is their violation of the taboo of performing in public, a taboo, which mostly concerns girls. Girls never used to perform publicly before World War II. The incorporation of girls into the shows was probably made possible by the emancipation of women in Soviet times. The newly acquired consciousness of Islamic values puts the problem into a new light and can be seen as a relic of Soviet times. Acrobats are part of the everyday culture of Central Asia. Through their stories they symbolically locate themselves in its very centre without shame or the sense of being marginalised.

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