# Regenerating Life: The Power of Reproducing People in Desert Turkmenistan

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**Abstract**

In Turkmenistan, Islamic charitable alms (sadaka) are a central part of daily life in the desert villages surrounding Gökdepe town, about five hours drive from the capital, Aşgabat. Adults give sadaka for reasons of religious merit, in order to pay respects to deceased family members and prior to major life-cycle events such as weddings. This article links Turkmen sadaka to other life-cycle ceremonies noted in the surrounding Central Asian countries. Life-cycle ceremonies have been theorised in two broadly different ways, as either concerned with prestige and status or as ethical projects. I bring these two approaches into conversation through the notion of social reproduction. Using long-term ethnographic research, I argue that Turkmen sadaka reveals how the economics of daily life and social reproduction are directly dependent on divine gifts. It is an ethical project for those participating that, at the same time, has recognised social consequences in terms of status and prestige.

**Keywords**

Turkmenistan – Islam – ritual – hierarchy – life-cycle – exchange – ethics

## 1 Introduction

I began field research in Turkmenistan in the fall of 2015, having spent the better part of four years working with various Turkmen bureaucracies to be granted fieldwork permission. Although gaining access to Turkmenistan was a lengthy process, once there I faced few impediments to my ability to conduct research. Through my affiliation with Magtymguly University, I was able

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to secure a base in the capital, Aşgabat, and for a little more than a year, I had my own room in the newly built undergraduate halls on campus.[1]

Around the corner from the dormitory was Azadi mosque, officially named Ertugrul Gazi, completed in 1998 and capable of accommodating 5,000 worshippers. Although the call to prayer demarcated the passage of time each day, when daily tasks brought me into the vicinity of the mosque, its size al- ways seemed disproportionate to the footfall of worshipers. The lack of regular prayer, whether at home or in a mosque, corresponded to that of friends and acquaintances throughout the university – teachers, house mistresses, students – in addition to that of people outside this elite circle.

Nevertheless, many Aşgabat residents I came to know closely attend to "life-cycle ceremonies" such as weddings, funerals or circumcision celebrations. These events (*toý*) were a booming industry and a cause of considerable financial outlay for many households, whether rural or urban, that are more or less wealthy. This essay selects one such event – a *sadaka*, or *hudaý ýoly* ceremony held to commemorate a death or given prior to a significant celebration (*toý*). For urban residents of Aşgabat, *sadaka* entails either the charitable distribution of food, particularly around Oraza Baýram (Eid al-Fitr) or Gurban Baýram (Eid al-Adha) or is a commemorative event held at certain intervals after a death. In the former example, *sadaka* can range from distributing cookies among work colleagues or to strangers or driving to one of the pilgrimage sites outside of the city.[2] This form of giving *sadaka* is met with approval and encouragement by the various state-operated media platforms such as the TV channels Miras or Altyn Asyr.

But by far the most prevalent urban reference to *sadaka* or *hudaý ýoly* is a cooked meal given to guests in memory of a deceased individual.[3] Victoria

1 Previously Turkmen State University, Magtymguly University (named after Maxim Gorky) was renamed Magtymguly adyndaky Türkmen döwlet uniwersiteti in 1993 and is the main state-supported university, with the largest student undergraduate body in Aşgabat.

2 Research has identified potentially similar practices in Uzbekistan, where mullahs responsible for a shrine receive *sadaqa* donations in the form of money in return for blessings. Abramson and Karimov, "Sacred Sites, Profane Ideologies," 321–324 and Kehl-Brodrogi, "Is- lam Contested".

3 In many of the surrounding countries, "feasts" such as these feature as important stages of mourning. In Kyrgyzstan, Judith Beyer describes how rural Kyrgyz commemorate a death with the ritual slaughter of an animal 52 days following the funeral and hold another commemoration to mark the passage of one year (*ash*). See Beyer, "The Force of Custom". Working in Uzbekistan, Johan Rasanayagam describes how the series of ceremonies that are held on the Thursday after a death and on the twentieth and fortieth days were increasingly under critique. See Rasanayagam, "Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan," 175.

Clement notes that "*Hudaý ýoly*, or path to God, is the Turkmen name for a Muslim tradition commemorating the death of a family member. Some families hold these 'thanks-givings' on the first anniversary, some on the tenth, but some gather every year."4

However, these accounts do not encompass the full range and extent of giving and receiving *sadaka* as experienced at my main research site. These villages were geographically close to Aşgabat, falling within the same administrative district, and had no small number of economic and familial connections linking these villages to the capital and surrounding towns. Yet the contrast between religious observance and practice was striking. Although there was never a designated place for collective worship, both men and women prayed routinely, often beginning in their late teens/early twenties around the age of marriage. Most households fasted during Oraza (Ramadan), an oftentimes lengthy *towir* (prayer) was said at the close of every meal, and *sadaka*, usually translated as Islamic alms, was given routinely by adults.

In these settlements, *sadaka* was given for Oraza Baýram and Gurban Baýram at a holy site or as a commemorative event. But the practice of giving *sadaka* there was not so temporally or spatially delimited as in the city. Nor did rural practices correspond to *sadaka* as it is encouraged by the government, which attributes significance to *sadaka* as a charitable, virtuous gift in which the benefit for the *receiver* is central. Unlike the urban experience of *sadaka* as a commemorative event or charitable act, these rural villages acts associated with *sadaka* were a critical part of a daily life for many of the adults, with recognized benefits for the *giver*. These practices formed, in other words, an important part of the "ritual economy" of these villages.

The importance vested in rural *sadaka,* I argue, is not a simple relic of a "nomadic" past or a legacy of pre-Islamic religious belief. It is neither a direct product of the Soviet period nor entirely a result of the contemporary approach to formulating an "Islam with Turkmen characteristics." Yet by remaining alert to the historical context, especially in relation to Soviet attempts to secularize Central Asia, I suggest a provocative framework that brings *sadaka* into con- versation with other "life-cycle" events.

Drawing on accounts that address the shifting Soviet approach to the suppression of Islam, I detail how a particular conception of "religion" inadvertently gave space for such ritual events like "life-cycle ceremonies." What remains, however, is to understand their continued importance some 25 years later, after the end of the Soviet period. One prominent approach has been to see such life-cycle rituals as sites or events that allow relationships to be

4 Clement, "Alphabet Changes in Turkmenistan," 20 and 280.

Illustration 1 Atabaýaga leading collective prayer for a number of elder men visiting to participate in the wedding and wedding *sadaka* held early in the day. Oct.2016.

Illustration 2 Ogultaç, an elder woman, distributes *çapady* (fried bread) during Gurban Baýram. Oct. 2013.

established on the basis of reciprocal exchange.5 A second approach to life- cycle rituals emphasizes these practices as ways through which statements of identity– whether as a Muslim, customary ideals or community solidarity–are asserted.6 Both approaches are useful but become exponentially more so if taken together, albeit with minor modifications.

In the rural Turkmen settlements that I knew, relationships were not established through *sadaka* as a form of reciprocal exchange. Instead, social force rested in the ability to give without any expectation or need for something in return. In doing so, these practices were less a statement of identity and more an assertion regarding notions of respect. This respect was indelibly tied to the generative capacity of giving *sadaka*; the recognition that *sadaka* was critical, literally, to processes of social reproduction – the transformation of people as from a daughter into a bride, young boy into a man, or deceased person into a respected ancestor. Whether of health, marriage, birth, circumcision, giving *sadaka* was generative insofar as it effected a transformation. In their ability to give *sadaka*, people were able to create, transform, and literally reproduce life. Thus, I argue, *sadaka* is better viewed as a set of practices actively oriented around the constitution of social life through the ability to give.

### 1.1 *Governing with Islam: from Assault to Administration in Soviet Turkmenistan*

Soviet rule brought with it a concerted effort to secularize Central Asia.7 It is increasingly evident, however, that the way in which this was to be achieved was far from unified and consistent. Economic imperatives, the Second World War, and the shifting contours of leadership, among other factors, all influenced the official position toward religion. The following discussion charts the various official approaches to ritual events deemed "Islamic" in nature and provides a brief outline of the broader context in which they occurred.

According to Abdeed Khalid, the early period from the 1920s through the end of the 1930s witnessed the "Soviet assault on Islam." This was undertaken on a number of fronts, beginning with anti-religious propaganda and, by the late 1920s, with the closing of madrasa, Qazi courts, and mosques.8 Not confined to the removal of officials and institutions, Shoshana Keller writes that

5 See Koroteyeva and Makarova, "Money and social connections" and Werner, "Women andthe art of household networking".

6 See Peshkova, "Woman, Islam, and Identity" and Reeves, "Black Work, Green Money," 108–134.

7 See Kamp, "The New Woman in Uzbekistan"; Khalid, "Islam after Communism"; McBrien, "From Belonging to Belief"; Northrop, *Veiled empire*; and Ro'i, "Islam in the Soviet Union".

8 Khalid, "Islam after Communism," 70–72.

simultaneously, "the Soviets tried to suppress holiday observances, particularly that of Ramadan (Uraza in Uzbek) and Qurbon Bayram."9 The epicenter of the campaign to suppress Islam, Khalid writes, was Uzbekistan, which at the time included the Tajik autonomous region; however, the "stories of mosque closures and the persecution of the ulama crop up in practically every conversation with survivors of the period… the evidence of destruction was the half-destroyed or disused mosques that dotted the landscape for the rest of the Soviet era".10

After this period of intensive anti-religious campaigns, a more stable phase ensued. The mid 1940s through the late 1950s was a period, according to Eren Tasar, of the "lowest levels of state regulation of Islam since the early 1920s."11 In the 1940s, a state-controlled muftiate, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (sadum), sought to establish a single ad- ministrative authority over Central Asian religious lives. Increasingly, religious practices were classified as either "registered" or "unregistered" – a legal move seeking to bring religious activity further under bureaucratic control, which "to the population, … presented a means of becoming faithful Muslims and Soviet people at the same time."12

It seems likely that there was a relaxation in the approach to religiously sanctioned life-cycle rituals during this period. Yaacov Ro'i pushes this assertion even further, claiming that "throughout the four decades from the end of the war down to perestroika… life-cycle rites were common, and were adhered to by all strata, including intelligentsia and party members."13 When it came to funerals, Shoshana Keller is likewise skeptical of the efficacy of changes wrought by the administration given the "curious phenomenon, noted throughout the Soviet period, of party officials who would close down a mosque one day and hire a mulla to do the funeral of a relative the next."14

With the exception of the renewed anti-religious campaigns during the Khrushchev era (1958–1964), a process undertaken more through administrative restraints than arrest or violence,15 the latter two decades of Soviet rule displayed an increasing tolerance of Islamic practices. This was a period characterized by greater accommodation, during "which religion was discouraged

9 Keller, "To Moscow, Not Mecca," 173.
10 Khalid, "Islam after Communism," 72–73.
11 Tasar, "Soviet and Muslim," 78.
12 Tasar, "Soviet and Muslim," 141.
13 Ro'i, "Islam in the Soviet Union," 512.
14 Keller, "To Moscow, Not Mecca," 253.
15 Tasar, "Soviet and Muslim".

and treated as a necessary evil and efforts were still made to "educate" the population about their false beliefs."16

The extent to which 70 plus years of Soviet rule were able to fundamentally alter Muslim practices has led, Devin DeWeese contends, to the emergence of "two camps":

> between specialists more familiar with the Soviet and Russian world, who seem surprised at the persistence of any Muslim or 'national' traditions and insist that Soviet policy failed in its efforts to modernize or Russify, and those more familiar with the Islamic world, who note the striking differences between Central Asia… and other parts of the Muslim world, and who insist that the Soviet transformation succeeded all too well.17

It is hard to assess the extent to which efforts to dismantle visible forms of Islamic institutions and classify religious groups were borne out in the Turkmen SSR. Writing more than 30 years ago, Martha Brill Olcott writes that "available materials on religion in Turkmenistan give little evidence of popular displeasure with Soviet policy; instead, they reveal that Islam is still a vital force."18 Ro'i quotes a Turkmen archival source that complains that, in the mid-1960s, "the younger generation from its earliest years was exposed not just to the celebration of the festivals and the *uraz* [Oraza], but to the everyday practice of religion…. [the] prayer of thanksgiving for one's food was recited after every meal."19 A similar impression is noted by Soviet ethnologist first name? Demidov, who writes in his book on shrine pilgrimage in Turkmenistan that in 1988, although "much has been done in our republic in the way of atheistic work… unfortunately the camel-trodden pilgrim's path to 'sacred' space has always remained wide-open."20

The emphasis on Turkmen "folk" practices is reiterated again by Adrienne Lynne Edgar, who writes that "Turkmen practiced a variety of popular or "folk" Islam focused on the veneration of saints' shrines and saintly lineages. Although many Turkmen observed the Islamic practices of prayer, fasting at Ramadan and almsgiving, they had little familiarity with the great textural

16 McBrien, "From Belonging to Belief".

17 DeWeese, "Islam and the Legacy of Soietology," 302.

18 Olcott, "Soviet Islam and World Revolution," 495.

19 Ro'i, "Islam in the Soviet Union," 511.

20 See footnote 4 in Tasar, "Soviet and Muslim," 323.

traditions of Islam and little institutionalized religion in the form of mosques or professional clergy."21 Although much of Edgar's research is focused on other aspects of the Soviet presence in Turkmenistan, she comments that, unlike in Uzbekistan, where the veil worn by married women (*paranji)* came under direct criticism by the authorities in the 1930s,22 the same did not hold for the *ýaşmak*, "which required a women to cover her mouth with a scarf in certain circumstances."23 In Turkmenistan, "a few desultory articles appeared in the press, and there were periodic proposals to make it a crime to force a woman to practice yashmak, but little more. There were no mass burnings of headscarves and no public conversions to a yashmak-free life."24

However, it is more productive to view these sources as indicators of what the state was trying to achieve rather than as accounts of achievements in changing behavior. This is the approach taken by Julie McBrien as she sketches out a particularly Soviet form of "secularization." By understanding which elements of religious practices were targeted and which were ignored, McBrien substantiates the existence of a Soviet concept of religion that "foregrounded ethnonational belonging rather than internal belief."25 In particular, during the period of national delimitation, many spiritual practices and life-cycle events were classified by Soviet ethnographers as an element of "everyday life" (*byt*) and were regarded positively as markers of cultural distinction rather than inherently "superstitious" or religious.26 The propensity during the Soviet period to view Turkmen religiosity as based on "folk" notions rather than scriptural practices fits into a broader pattern in which life-cycle rituals, among other features of acceptable "religion," were permitted:

> the Soviets attacked the public structures of Islamic religious life, they ignored the elements of the private sphere, in essence those aspects of Muslim life related to the home and family life. As a result, proper Muslim behaviour and religious observance came to revolve largely around the proper keeping of life-cycle and other 'domestic' rituals.27

21 Edgar, "Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation," 26.

22 Northrop, "Veiled empire" and Kam, "The New Woman in Uzbekistan".

23 Edgar, "Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation," 236.

24 "Soviet views of Turkmen women in the 1920s continued to be shaped by tsarist-era notions of nomadic exceptionalism" Edgar, "Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation," 135.

25 McBrien, "From Belonging to Belief".

26 Hirsch, "Empire of Nations".

27 McBrien, "Turning Marx on his Head," 90.

For McBrien, there is no paradox in that the Soviet era both impacted religious practices but did not succeed in eradicating them entirely. It wasn't that a blind eye was turned toward these "traditions," but a certain concept of religion was at work such that "even when religion was restricted, traditions were kept and many religious rituals were termed tradition."28 Developing a similar argument, Paolo Sartori adds that Central Asians were also actively involved in cultivating Islam, "not as 'religion' in the narrow secularist understanding of the term, but as an episteme… that the constitution of an Islamic culture was made possible, among other things, by Central Asians' encounters with the past and most notably with what they perceived as an Islamic past."29

The domestication and privatization of "religion" alert us to the need to view religious practice in the post-Soviet space as having "its own peculiarities, resulting from the extremely secular environment created by the Soviet authorities."30 One such peculiarity is the persistence of life-cycle events and other "domestic" rituals as important sites for practicing Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia. In the Turkmen context, certain state-sanctioned interpretations of these rituals form a notion of an "Islamic heritage" used to underpin the post-Soviet nationalist project.31 This process has been described as the "instrumentalization of religion,"32 whereby Islam is drawn upon to strengthen the "precarious legitimacy" of the Central Asian nations.33 However, balancing support for Islamic values while maintaining centralized, secular authority has not been without difficulty. How can, Sebastien Peyrouse asks from the perspective of these national governments, "a key place be granted to Islam while maintaining the principles of secularism and controlling the movements that the authorities consider, rightly or wrongly, as 'dangerous', 'extremist' and 'terrorist'?"34

A partial answer to this question in Turkmenistan is arguably the promotion of religious festivals like Gurban Baýram (Eid al-Adha) and Oraza Baýram (Eid al-Fitr), less an opportunity to promote scripture, prayer or collective worship at a mosque and more a time "when it is written to give to the needy, visit

28 Montgomery, "Islam, secularism and danger," 45.

29 Sartori, "Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors," 16–17.

30 Bissenova, "Central Asian Encounters in the Middle East," 253.

31 Akbarzadeh, "National identity and political legitimacy in Turkmenistan," and Kuru, "Between the state and cultural zones".

32 On Uzbekistan, see Rasanayagam, 2014; on Kyrgyzstan see McGlinchey, 2011; on Tajikistan see Heathershaw & Roche, 2011; on Azerbaijan, see Heyat, 2004. For a comparative approach see Karagiannis, 2016 and Hann & Pelkmans, 2009.

33 Hann and Pelkmans, "Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia," 1518.

34 Peyrouse, "Islam in Central Asia," 246.

friends, neighbors and those nearby, to make '*kabul*,' give *sadaka*35 to every household generously."36 Through Turkmen language state-owned television channels, the population is enjoined to participate in giving *sadaka* as a moral imperative central to the promotion of *Türkmenlerde*.37 The President himself hosts a *sadaka* meal and the Turkmen nation sends gifts to Mecca and Medina and wishes good fortune on other countries, with Turkmen elders to "bear witness to the promises made to the traditions of humanity and inner-morality."38 Several times a year, the President reportedly distributes *sadaka* – for example, at the start of Oraza (Ramadan) in 2018, when dates were given out to orphaned children. With an unusual degree of imagination, the benefits of *sadaka* were recently extended to include, "Turkmen *sadaka*… as a contribution to the fight against climate change" (Nov 27, 2017, orient.tm).

As a pious practice of charitable giving and an abstract virtue of humanity, *sadaka* thus promoted fits well in the contemporary nationalist project as part of a "traditional" Turkmen livelihood centered on a romanticized version of nomadic life intended to define an appropriate set of cultural parameters of Turkmen identity. While this perspective is valuable for understanding the importance these rituals hold as part of a nationalist agenda, it does not provide much insight into how such events might also form, perhaps for difference reasons and in opposing ways, an important "ritual economy."

An influential body of work understands life-cycle rituals as crucial to maintaining relationships of obligation through the exchange of gifts and as an "arena for conspicuous consumption."39 For Cynthia Werner, the competitive aspect of feasting and gift-giving serves to maintain households in networks of financial support, all the more important given the retreat of state welfare, jobs and income in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.40 Werner writes that, "all gifts, therefore, are given in expectation of some return. From the Kazakh perspective, only a reckless person would choose not to continue participating in the ritual economy."41 Research undertaken at roughly a similar time in Kyrgyzstan

35 Charitable giving.

36 News article, http://tdh.gov.tm/news/tm/articles.aspx&article8761&cat23 (accessed September 5th, 2018).

37 A rough literal translation of the word implies something like "Turkmenness," akin to "Englishness".

38 News article, http://tdh.gov.tm/news/tm/articles.aspx&article8761&cat23 (accessed September 5th, 2018).

39 Koroteyeva and Makarova, "Money and social connections,"

40 See further Turdalieva and Provis, "Dynamics of Reciprocity and Networks of the Kyrgyz through Bishkek *Toi* making".

41 Werner, "Women and the art of household networking in rural Kazakhstan," 63.

draws similar conclusions, as "life-cycle celebrations… help people cultivate, maintain, and expand networks through the reciprocal exchange of gifts as well as non-gift exchanges of goods, information, favors, and advice…. they know they must give in order to receive."42 This remains an influential perspective, with Maria Louw writing in 2007 that in Kyrgyzstan, "*to'ys* are important occasions for the exchange of gifts and favors… The act of giving a gift creates indebtedness on the part of the recipient, who must provide a counter-gift of equal or greater value in the future in order not to lose face."43

Although these works fully integrate spheres of ritual and everyday life, they nevertheless rely on problematic assertions of sociality as formed through debt-making – what David Sneath typifies as a "reciprocalist folk theory of the mind."44 The sociological utility of events is recognized as an individualist acquisition of power, connections and prestige through gift-giving as debt-making with the persistence of such rituals as a product of individual investment insofar as they provide a site for the aggrandizement of social connections.

For Johan Rasanayagam, working in Pakhtabad, Uzbekistan, it would, however, be inaccurate to understand ritual events as simply expressions of individual status. When describing a series of rotating feasts, whereby those within a group take turns hosting, Rasanayagam recognizes that these are opportunities for raising financial capital but that "they can also provide a template for explicitly Islamic ritual."45 These are events that allow people to construct, shape, and form what it means to practice Islam through a process, described by Svetlana Peshkova, "of self-formation—of human individuation—essential to understanding what it means to be "truly" Muslim."46

Whereas the focus for Rasanyagam and Peshkova is on the individual who, through his or her practices forms a sense of Muslim identity, these "life-cycle" events have also been analyzed for their capacity to enact community membership.47 For Svetlana Jacquesson, a Durkheimian quality is emphasized with participation as a means through which the "social identity" or "solidarity" of the living is affirmed – memorial feasts seek to integrate members into a community.48 Working in southern Kyrgyzstan, Madeline Reeves suggests that the financial investment continually made in rituals, despite economic

42 Kuehnast, "Better a hundred friends than a hundred rubles," 19.
43 Louw, "Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia," 77.
44 Sneath, "Transacting and enacting," 98.
45 Rasanayagam, "Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan," 41.
46 Peshkova, "Women, Islam, and Identity," 49.
47 See further Abashin in Reeves, "Black Work, Green Money".
48 Jacquesson, "The Sore Zones of Identity".

hardship, is a "crucial means for affirming social presence" that is all the more necessary "in the context of protracted absence," as many adults spend long periods of time working in Russia. The tendency for remitted money to be invested in the ritual economy is, according to Reeves, wrapped up in "concerns about the proper accumulation and distribution of wealth; about the production and maintenance of respectful relations."[49]

Reeves does not directly address why it is that young and middle-aged men and women are willing to invest hard-earned money into "traditional" forms of sociality. However, Judith Beyer's work is relevant, as she directly takes up the question of "custom." Beyer's work allows us to grasp how it is that seemingly "traditional" structures of proper accumulation and respect retain salience. Working in Talas province, Kyrgyzstan, Beyer is concerned with theorizing *urmat* (respect) and *uiat* (shame) as indicative of the force of custom, or *salt*. Beyer asks the reader to conceptualize custom (*salt*) not as a duty imposed externally through rules but as something internally generated. It is not a pregiven category but requires continual processes to make it a reality. For Beyer, *uiat*, or "shame-anxiety," is internalized from childhood and becomes an emotion that is acted on through a process of self-evaluation and self-reflection, not as an external sanction imposed by others.

In the following section, I take up these approaches to Central Asian "life-cycle rituals" in the context of rural Turkmen *sadaka.* The ethnographic account presented suggests that *sadaka*, as practiced in rural Turkmenistan, recognizes the individual benefit but does not seem to generate the antagonism and competition as noted above in the works by Koroteyeva and Makarova or Werner. Put another way, *sadaka* persists as an important aspect of daily life because the practice is motivated not by the creation of debt between individuals or deities, but by its importance when cultivating a certain definition of life. However, unlike the proposal by Rasanaygam, the cultivation I highlight is centered less on self-reflection or aspirations toward a "Muslim identity" than the realization of tangible benefits in the here and now, there being no contradiction between acquiring these benefits and being a good Muslim.

Like Beyer's conceptualization of *salt* as the "force of custom," the importance of practices such as *sadaka* resembles momentum, described as "a way of doing things and rationalizing them that moves through time and accompanies its bearers wherever they are."[50] For Beyer, there is an "inevitably hierarchical relationship between young and old… understood as an inherent aspect of custom." I seek to problematize this inevitability by proposing that

49 Reeves, "Black Work, Green Money," 114.

50 Beyer, "The Froce of Custom," 174.

*sadaka* or *hudaý ýoly* are privileged sites of social reproduction, defined as "the ensemble of activities through which people secure the conditions for their future existence."51 How does rural Turkmen *sadaka* produce and maintain relations of hierarchy through notions of respect?

### 1.2 *Sadaka and Social Reproduction*

Prior to his granddaughter's wedding, Atabaýaga held a *sadaka* meal.52 The following ethnographic discussion focuses on this event, which I refer to as a "wedding *sadaka*," although the semantic distinction between this and other kinds of *sadaka* would not have been used by Atabaýaga or those attending. Nor did the format of this wedding *sadaka* differ from a *sadaka* held after the safe return of a son from military service, after the birth of a child or the celebrations surrounding Gurban Baýram and Oraza Baýram. All these *sadaka* events involve the ritual slaughter of sheep, undertaken by the male members of the household, that is cooked largely and served only by these men while the guests who come to share the meal are physically segregated on the basisof age and gender.

Atabaýaga's *sadaka* – if it was specified in conversation, it was referred to as such – constituted a distinct event prior to, but indelibly connected with, the upcoming wedding of his son's daughter. It was additionally impossible to isolate the wedding *sadaka* from other ritual aspects and daily life. The overlap between the wedding *sadaka* and wedding celebrations and the need to con- textualize the occasion reflect the recurrent difficulty in analytically separating a lived world into a series of discrete events. However, these complexities also provide an opportunity to explore three necessarily interwoven factors – patriarchy, sacrifice and social reproduction.

It was not an accident that Atabaýaga, as an elder man, was well-positioned to host the wedding *sadaka.* The practices associated with giving *sadaka* increase in recognition and efficacy with age.53 I argue that it is through the actions associated with giving *sadaka* that a social order – in this instance, hierarchy – is established. This hierarchy, put bluntly, is one in which older men are able to give the most and to the most people – a *sadaka* meal. As a gesture

51 Foster, "Social Reproduction and History in Melanesia," 2.

52 With the exception of the two major urban centers, Aşgabat and Gökdepe, all people and place names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

53 In other families, the wedding's *sadaka* might be hosted by the father. Because Ballymaga still lived with his only son (*körpe*), it was his name associated with the event. For my interlocuters, "*körpe*" referred specifically to the youngest son. The term for "grandchild" was "ag*tyk*" and "great-grandchild," "*çowluk*".

of fertility and a bestowal of life, the ability to give is unevenly distributed, with the recognition attached to *sadaka* varying depending on age and gender. The guests that come, through their presence and respect, recognize the value of the elder male household head to produce transformation and in so doing manifest and normalize age and gender distinctions.

Research was conducted in a number of desert villages all within a single administrative district, Gökdepe Etrap,[54] approximately 150km northwest of the capital as the crow flies and between 5–8 hours from Aşgabat in a four- wheel drive vehicle. Over 13 months, I was able to visit approximately 25–30 settlements distributed across roughly 100km2, although extensive periods of research were undertaken in three locations. The smallest settlements could be a single household, situated around a well and referred to as an "*öý*," which contrast larger settlements termed "*oba*." The word "*öý*" can refer to a single house, although in this context it usually implies a house and associated well. It was not possible to grow any form of crop agriculture there and households were almost entirely dependent on livestock for their income, in cash and in kind.

I came to village C in the back seat of a Toyota Hilux in the first weeks of November, a brief moment of lukewarm weather after the heat of summer but before the snow. There is one main road that leads into, and out of, C. Reaching the village from Aşgabat requires driving around 50km northwest to Gök- depe, the largest town in the eponymously named *etrap*[55] in Ahal *welaýat.*[56] The mayoral seat (*häkimlek*) of Gökdepe *etrap* is located in the town, as are the headquarters of the 11 or so *daýhan birlişik* (farmers' associations) that operate across the *etrap*. The border with Iran is approximately 35km south but is interrupted by the Köpet-Dag mountain range, with the only official border point some 100km away. Running through Gökdepe is the Karakum canal, allowing for the irrigated production of cotton and, more recently, wheat or barley.

I had last been in village C 15 years ago. That was the time of the first president; now we were in the epoch of the second.[57] During the intervening years,

54 An *etrap* is the smallest administrative district, followed by *welaýat*.

55 District, a smaller administrative division than *welaýat*.

56 *Welaýat* – province. Although Ahal *welaýat* geographically encompasses Aşgabat, the capital is under separate administrative jurisdiction.

57 Sapamyrat Nyýazow became the first secretary of the Ashgabat party organization (Gorkom) in 1980 and in 1985 became First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party. After independence in 1991, he remained president until his death in 2006. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow assumed presidency in 2006 and has variously named the contemporary period as the "Epoch of the Powerful State," "The Happiness and Might Epoch," and "Epoch of New Revival".

Illustration 3 View of the center of Village C taken from the highest sand dune around. The photograph encompasses more than two thirds of the village's house-holds, including a number of village wells. In the far distance, the salt pan(*takyr*) can be seen running the length of the village. Nov. 2015.

the village had grown, with sons marrying, settling, building new homes and raising more livestock. As before, the village consisted of an apparently haphazard dotting of uniformly flat-roofed, mud-plastered, single-story structures arranged roughly around an area of hardened and cracked ground. Adjacent to many houses were *gara öý*58 and here and there a satellite dish was propped against a wall.

On arriving, we immediately sought the house of Ballymaga, an old acquaintance.59 Ballymaga's eldest brother had since passed away, but his other three brothers remained in good health. Their parents had moved to village C sixty years ago and while the five brothers stayed, their four sisters all married husbands in other villages. Apart from Ballymaga and his four brothers, the other families in village C consisted of two brothers, of a similar age to Ballymaga, and the households of their married sons.

58 Circular structures like yurts, similarly covered with felt.

59 The honorific "*aga*" is used to indicate the speaker's seniority. "*Aga*" is also used in more specific contexts to refer to a paternal grandfather.

Inside the house, Ballymaga sat propped up on his elbow with two cushions for support while I poured us hot, mild green tea into small bowls. Candy was piled in another bowl placed in the middle. His granddaughters came in to see what was going on, were given a couple of candies from Ballymaga as *sadaka* and left with the empty thermos, which they returned refilled. It gave them a good excuse to come back in the hopes of a second candy. Ballymaga explained that in the past bread might have taken the place of sweets in this *sadaka*, but now he said, "*children are full* [these days] *andarenolongerattracted to bread*." Although the content of *sadaka* had changed for Ballymaga, the form remained the same. He continued, saying that "*whenever you see a child you can give sweets, always you must give with your handsand it's important to give an evennumber* (jübüt)."

In another room, the wife of Ballymaga's grandson, Baýramgül, kneaded bread. She did not come into the room where Ballymaga, Durdy, and I were sitting, and when Baýramgül walked between other buildings she held the *ýaşmak* between her lips.60 I would later discover from Baýramgül that when

Illustration 4 Ballymaga and his great-granddaughter sitting together in the kitchenroom. Mar. 2016.

60 Scarf held by a married woman between her lips as a sign of respect. I have used "respect" here specifically. Although interactions between a married woman and her in-laws are often the most circumscribed, especially in regard to her husband's older brothers and her father-in-law, married women in rural Gökdepe generally wore ýaşmak around older men and women with whom they were not acquainted.

Illustration 5 Ballymaga's grandson's wife, Bäyramgül, kneading bread. Nov. 2015.

she made bread she would often keep one loaf aside to be distributed as *sadaka*. After tearing the loaf into a number of pieces, Baýramgül would give her eldest daughter instructions as to whom the bread should be given, most often her closest neighbors.

At the time, Ballymaga's son and grandsons were taking care of the sheep, goats and camels. The livestock moved seasonally between 5–25km from the village based on a carefully weighted balance between well water salinity and the availability of grazing. Unlike most households in village C, Ballymaga and his sons did not manage *kolkhoz* animals (explained below). However, Ballymaga's brother looked after camels for Maxim *kolkhoz*, a not insignificant circumstance.

In 1994/5 presidential decrees had transformed the Soviet model of collective agriculture (*kolkhoz* or *sovkhoz,* translated as collective or state farms, respectively) into *daýhan birlişik* (the farmer association), which have remained until the present.61 Although the internal organization of the farms presented a departure from the Soviet period, the boundaries of these 'new' associations remained virtually identical to those of the old Soviet-era farms. The campaign

61 The two terms – *kolkhoz* and *daýhan birlişik* – are used interchangeably by livestock keepers. "*Daýhan birlişik*" translates literally as "farmer cooperative". "*Daýhan*" implies the cul- tivation of land rather than raising livestock.

to collectivize agriculture in the then-Turkmen Soviet Republic stretched across a period of at least two decades, beginning around 1929, with dramatic effect. Families like Ballymagas' were forcibly relocated, sometimes over long distances, while practices of livestock management were altered with technological advancements that meant more wells could be dug, desalinated water trucked in to desert areas from the irrigated zones, veterinary assistance provided and fodder distributed in the winter. Many settlements were incorporated into a new national electrical grid, schools established in remote rural areas and stores set up in larger villages. With independence in 1991, many of these social services disintegrated. At the same time, restrictions imposed during the Soviet era on the number of privately-owned livestock were removed.

However, the state ownership of livestock through a system of centrally managed *daýhan birlişik* remained. As in the Soviet period, state-owned animals are managed through *daýhan birlişik* that are responsible for leasing animals to livestock owners, who are paid in kind with a specific percentage of the offspring. The state has also retained ownership of almost all agricultural land.62 As is the case with Ballymaga and his brother, the responsibility for managing *daýhan birlişik* livestock could be worked out between brothers.63

If it was common for brothers like Ballymaga's to establish households near each other, so too was it typical that his sisters had married husbands in other villages. Likewise, Ballymaga's daughters, two of whom I came to know quite well, had married men in the nearby village of G, about an hour and a half drive from village C. The eldest sister, Bägül, married Begenç, and her young- er sister, Ýazbibi, was married to Begenç's *ýegen* – cousins on their father's side. The sisters lived a short walk from each other and remained close (see diagram 1).

Begenç's father, Atabaýaga, was recognised as the Molla for village G, which meant he was responsible for reading the prayers for the men at major events like celebrations (*toýlar*). There was no designated center for worship in the village, and in the temperate months these collective moments of prayer took place on the sand outside his house. Most of the time for men, and all of the time for women, a quiet corner of the house that faced Mecca sufficed as a

62 In the Gara Gum desert region where Ballymaga lives, the state crucially also owns wells dug during the Soviet period that constitute the vast majority of all deep wells. How access to state-built wells and land for privately-owned animals is orchestrated is a delicate topic. It would seem that an informal arrangement is worked out, with privately owned livestock allowed access to key resources by coopting owners into simultaneously managing *daýhan birlişik* livestock.

63 (Behnke 2005; Lunch 2003).

place to pray, with family members taking turns using the household's prayer mat. Begenç's father was not able to write *doga* – small inscriptions, written in Arabic script and folded into a piece of cloth. They are worn either as a curative against illness – especially the illness of *çile*, which affects young children–or to prevent misfortune. Women commonly employ them against camels that might kick. The skill of writing *doga*, I would later discover, was held by Ballymaga, who was himself a Molla. Neither man, despite being advanced in years, was able to read or write Russian and spoke only a handful of Russian words.

One of Atabaýaga's main roles was to calculate auspicious days (*sähetli gün*) for funerals, weddings, *sadaka* commemorative events and mark the beginning and close of Oraza (Ramadan) and Gurban Baýram (Eid al-Adha). Determining the *sähetli gün* for any major event required some care. A *sadaka* should be held on a Thursday or Friday prior to a celebration (*toý*), these being the days that the dead make *zyýarat* (pilgrimage) to the house. However, the auspicious day for the celebration itself is calculated according to a different calendrical system based on a number of factors, including the movement of a star and the direction of movement for the participants in the celebration.

Atabaýaga applied his calculations when he came to determine the auspicious day (*sähetli gün*) for the *sadaka* meal held prior to his granddaughter's wedding. I first met Atabaýaga's eldest granddaughter, Gülşirin, as she was engaged to be married. She was intent on putting together the items needed for her *bukja* (trousseau), sewing *keşde ýaka* (embroidered collars) for her

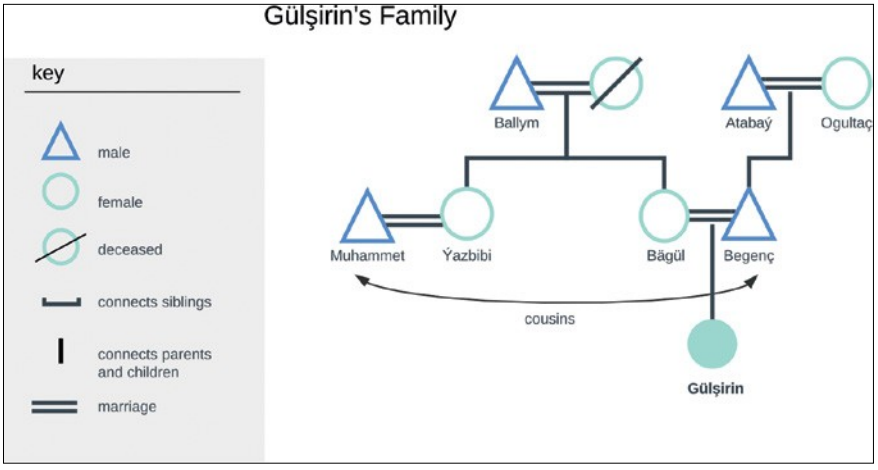


Diagram 1 Detailing the kinship relations between Gülşirin and her maternal and paternal grandparents.

Illustration 6 The difficult task of training new camel mothers to be milked. Apr. 2016.

post-wedding dresses and calling on her cousins to help knit slippers (*çeşke*). After the wedding, she would have to give most of the dresses, pants (*balak*), socks and slippers to her new female relatives in pairs of items, as is typical with gifts. These items form a recognizable category of gifts (*sowgat* or *podarka*) that are given between married women at significant celebrations.64

Most often, the gift is contained within a *saçak*– a bag of bread, sweets and cookies given by the guest to the hostess. The gift is removed from the *saçak* and some of the food is partially replaced by the hostess with food from her own household. Upon leaving, the guest is given back her *saçak*. Bägül would take a *saçak* containing a small gift – like a kitchen towel – when a neighbor celebrated the birth of a child, and for the same occasion she would take a much larger gift for her sister or close relative. Although a *saçak* containing food is taken to a *sadaka* meal, no accompanying gift is included. The exchange of such gifts is limited to celebrations (*toý*) and is never part of a*sadaka* meal.

64 I have occasionally offered a word like "podarka" because, despite the Russian origin of the word, it was either used exclusively or, as in this case, interchangeably with the Turk- men word. The decision to do this is to avoid any sense that the Russian past has been whitewashed in favor of a misguided notion of Turkmen authenticity.

Months before her wedding, Gülşirin started to stay indoors more often, stopped milking the camels and began to watch what she ate, only nibbling when oil-slick *tüwi* (R., *plov*, rice with meat) was served, tearing small pieces from the shared loaf at the center of the tablecloth and filling up on *çal*65 in- stead. When her mother and father moved the household to *meýdan*66 in the spring, she stayed behind in the village with her younger sister to care for their grandparents.

Illustration 7 Showering the mother-of-the-groom with plastic children's toys. The lady standing is the mother-of-the-groom's *elti* – a term indicating that the women are the wives of brothers. Oct. 2016.

65 Fermented camels' milk that is drunk with every meal. The milk fat separates, which al-lows it to be skimmed off and processed into cream (*süzme*).

66 Spring pastures.

Illustration 8 The bride, Gülşirin, wearing the wedding *kürte* after she has been "taken"from her natal home (*gelin aljy*) but prior to the ceremonial revealing of her face. She is pictured here on the arm of her husband. The unmar- ried girls in the photograph who do not wear *ýaşmak* (scarf covering the mouth) are her husband's cousins ( *ýegen*, which denotes that they are thechildren of his father's brother), while the married woman is the wife of her husband's *ýegen*. Oct. 2016.

Gülşirin's wedding would consist of many stages: the initial visit from the groom's family (*gudaçylyk*), writing out of the *salgyt* (dowry), the celebration of engagement when the groom's family presented her with the dowry (*ýüzük dakmak*), her own celebration (*gyz toý*), and the final morning of her "capture," when she was to be taken to her new family (*gelin aljy*).67 The *nika*68 ceremony would be conducted in the presence of her new *gaýynekeje* (husband's older sisters) and officiated by a Molla from a nearby town. Preceding each of these celebrations, a *sadaka* meal would be held.69

67 There is also the celebration of *gelin gaýtargy*, which marks the return of the bride fromher first visit to her natal home after the wedding.

68 Considered to be the Islamic part of the wedding, often translated as "*nikah*" in other countries.

69 The sequence of sibling marriage according to birth order is followed fairly strictly. Therefore, "*gaýynekeje*" are invariably married women.

Atabaýaga's wedding *sadaka* fell on the evening before the *gelin aljy toý* – the moment when the bride is taken by the groom's family to her new home. This was to be the largest *sadaka*, calculated in terms of number of guests, and a lavish affair. The slaughter[70] of at least one animal (*janly*) – a young male goat (*çebiş*) or sheep (*tokly*) – defines these events. It is the number of animals consumed that demarcates large and expensive events from smaller and more modest *sadaka.*[71] The slaughter is undertaken either by the host or his brothers/sons, although the responsibility for cleaning the carcass and butchering the meat usually falls to young men and women. The format does not differ either for the routine slaughter of animals for household consumption or those occurring prior to Gurban Baýram (Eid as-Adha).[72] Women are prohibited from slaughtering any livestock at any time.

Neighbors, friends and relatives from village G and surrounding settlements were invited, coming together for a meal at what was referred to as "Atabaýagalarda," which literally translates as "at the house of Atabaý's." On the morning of the *sadaka*, Muhammetguly, the recognized cook in the village, began to get the fires ready for cooking the broth that forms the basis for *dograma* – a dish reserved for celebrations consisting of torn bread, rubbed together with shredded meat and chopped onion, over which a broth is poured. Cooking for large numbers of guests is the preserve of men to the extent that women are prohibited from taking an active role in cooking or serving, although it falls to them to do all of the cleaning up and much of the tedious work of preparation. Guests were seated in clearly demarcated rooms. The choicest rooms were given to the elder men, with the next best room allocated to the elder women. This pattern was replicated for the younger generations while younger men and women close to the family served the food and did not sit with the guests. There was no format to the seating within the room, leaving it up to all individuals to sit where they choose and move after the meal to another spot if they liked. The serving order followed the same pattern as the rooms – on the basis of gender and age – with younger girls permitted to serve the women and young boys the men. At the close of the meal, Bägül's mother-in-law read the *töwir* (prayer said at the close of a meal), with hands cupped and the group around her similarly arranged. For the elder men, this responsibility fell to Atabaýaga as the recognized village Molla.

70 The verb "*çalmak*" is used in this context as "to cut."

71 Guest numbers range in size, usually from 20–200.

72 The celebration of Oraza Baýram (Eid al-Fitr), which signifies the end of the Oraza (Ramadan), follows a similar sacrificial format.

Illustration 9 Muhammetguly, the recognized cook (*povar*., R.) of village G, stirring one of three similarly sized pots (*gazan*). He is cooking in a vacated livestock enclosure (*ýatak*) adjacent to the house. Nov. 2015.

Illustration 10 A bride and her unmarried younger sister-in-law (*baldyz*) preparing *manty* (meat dumplings) in the household's *gara öý* (tent), which now serves as a kitchen. Nov. 2015.

Hosting a *sadaka* meal is an expectation prior to every major celebration (*toý*) and is usually held, like the example above, the night before.73 But *sadaka* may also be given in recognition of a promise fulfilled – for example, after a successful lambing, the safe return of a son from military service, or an ankle well healed after a fall. As with the examples of commemorative meals noted above in urban Turkmenistan, *sadaka* held after a death is a sign of respect (*hormat*) for the deceased. On these days, the dead are said to enjoy the smell of cooking coming from the house.

Several things occur when a meal is held or an item is given as *sadaka*, including a meritorious act (*sogap*) connected to one's fortune (*yrsgal*). Understandings of "*yrsgal*" and "*sogap*" focus on the perceived benefits for the person giving *sadaka*, with "*yrsgal*" implying the benefit realized in this life – something akin to "fortune" – while "*sogap*" refers more to a meritorious act and gives slightly greater weight to benefits after death. One's fortune (*yrsgal*) is linked to those of others within a household. Conversely, "*sogap*" pertains to individual sin (*günä*), which can be redressed through meritorious acts like giving *sadaka*, taking care of a neighbor's child, or making sure all the dishes are washed up. These are all ways through which sin may be expiated.

The concern with fortune (*yrsgal*) and meritorious acts (*sogap*) are both related to a persons' maturation. The capacity and need to control one's fortune (*yrsgal*) are linked to marriage and the eventual separation of the couple from the fortune of the parental household. The need for meritorious acts (*sogap*) is tied to the gradual acquisition of sin, from the sinless state of childhood to transformation into adults who are said to lust and deceive. For both boys and girls, this transition from childhood occurs around the age of 10/12 and for girls may also be linked to the onset of menstruation.

The purity (*arassa*, lit., clean) of children is cited as making them valued recipients of *sadaka.* Those who are disadvantaged are also considered suitable receivers of *sadaka*, with orphaned children often held to be the most in need. In daily life, *sadaka* is usually a couple of candies, as Balyymaga gave to his grandchildren above; a loaf of bread, as distributed by Baýramgül to her neighbours; a meal held either in commemoration of a death; a promise made; or prior to a celebration (*toý*). Although all forms of *sadaka* – from a couple of candies or a small amount of cash to a major event feeding a hundred people – are said to be equally beneficial, this belies the recognized practical hierarchy that associates the magnitude of the *sadaka* with the benefit received. The *sadaka* held prior to Gülşirin's wedding could not have consisted only of

73 The fact that a *sadaka* should be held on a Thursday evening or anytime on Friday is a factor when deciding on an auspicious day for a celebration.

Illustration 11 In the foreground, an unmarried girl and her *jigi* – this term denoting either the children of your brother, as in this case, or your younger siblings – sit for a breakfast of home-cooked *gowurdak* (fried meat), carrotpreserves, and bread with margarine from the market. The new bride sits in the background. Jan. 2016.

distributing bread, nor would the deceased be appropriately commemorated with candies to children.

The realization of an act like *sadaka* depends on the active transformation of the donor. Termed *niýet*, or intention, this motivation comes from the recipient in the form of recognition and subsequent submission: he or she says "*kabul bolsuň*." At a *sadaka* meal, this recognition is implicit through the act of eating. However, the necessity for recognition is in tension with the requirements of modesty or, as the expression goes, that the left hand does not know what the right hand gives. This modesty doesn't imply giving less or giving meagerly, but no fanfare should be associated with the transaction and often *sadaka* is given by just saying "meh," a sound that roughly means "here, take it." As Gülşirin's grandmother impressed upon me, "*it's better if you give secretly, if you show people you are giving this is conceit (men-menlik). The sadaka given in one hand must not be known by the other hand. The use and strength of sadaka is gone by talking about it.*"

## 1.3 *Conclusion*

It would be impossible to say that the official approach to religion during the period of Soviet governance presented a single, coherent, well-implemented project. Nevertheless, the 70 plus years of rule appear to have reclassified certain religious practices as national or "traditional," leading to the assertion that Islamic observances were to an extent domesticated and privatized.74 Grasping this historical context goes some way toward explaining why "life cycle ceremonies," in the context of growing financial hardship and criticism from both conservative religious movements and national governments, continue to be cited by researchers working in the region as important milestones in the lives of their interlocutors.

Although this pressure is perhaps attenuated in rural Turkmenistan, I have focused on the rural practices of giving and receiving *sadaka.* On the one hand, *sadaka* appears to provide a distinctively Turkmen perspective on these issues: as far as I can determine, such an emphasis on *sadaka* is not replicated in other parts of the Central Asian region nor in the wider Islamic context.75 However, situating *sadaka* in relation to an official approach to religion during the period of Soviet governance was meant to collapse the difference between rural Turkmen *sadaka* and other forms of domestic rituals and "folk practices" in neighboring countries. This historical context, in turn, generated an interesting direction for analysis by bringing *sadaka* into conversation with the "life-cycle ceremony" that it often precedes. Doing so drew out not only the ethical and religious significance of *sadaka* for those who participate but also the social im- plications associated with the practice in rural Turkmenistan. The continued salience of "life cycle ceremonies," of which *sadaka* is arguably a part, requires drawing together both the historical antecedents and contemporary investment that people, or national governments, continue to make in these events.

By means of a conclusion, I want to return to the opening problematic, or the contrast between urban and rural *sadaka*. It might be tempting to frame these differences in terms of change or continuity – a rapidly modernizing urban context of "transition" compared to the rural stasis of "tradition,"

74 McBrien and Pelkmans, "Turning Marx on his Head," and Montgomery and Heathershaw, "Islam, secularism and danger".

75 There is growing anthropological interest in the similar Islamic practice of *zakat*, often described as a form of religious tithe (Dresch 1998). These two practices are so similar that Jonathon Benthall writes, "sadaqa – almost equally important in practical Islamic teaching – is so closely associated with zakat in the Quran that the key verse defining the purposes of sadaqa (9.60) is treated as referring to zakat" (Benthall 2014: 366).

populated by historical relics. Doing so would imply that spatial differences are implicitly temporal. If rural Turkmen forms of giving *sadaka* appear more "traditional," that difference in spatial terms – urban and rural – would become a historical framework. However, it is increasingly and effectively argued that categories such as "transition" or "tradition" are more useful as analytics for understanding political motivations, rather than as empirical realities.76 A more appropriate question, therefore, might be to ask how a practice like *sadaka* has continued to remain important.

The preceding discussion emphasized how rural Turkmen *sadaka* was an action through which older men, by hosting a meal and undertaking (if not personally, then through male relations) the concomitant sacrifice, became associated with reproducing life. As household heads, only men were able to undertake the sacrifice that formed the essential component of a *sadaka* meal. In the process of giving *sadaka* in these desert villages, we saw how an elder man like Atabaýaga became crucially involved in the transformation of his granddaughter from bride into married women. It is this increasing capacity to give *sadaka* that quite literally makes people a certain age. That is, fathers become senior men through giving *sadaka* because it effects the transformation of a bride into a married woman. The accumulation of status and respect through the ability to give *sadaka* was replicated across other relationships. This might entail giving baked bread to neighbors (for newly married women) or a grandmother handing out candies to her grandchildren.

However, the ability to give *sadaka* across a range of scales, from the very small and routine – a couple of sweets – to a large meal held before a *toý*, belied a practical hierarchy. Different kinds of *sadaka* were implicitly ranked as more or less important on the basis of merit (*sogap*) and transformative impact. In other words, in order to achieve the radical transformation of his granddaughter, Atabaýaga needed to slaughter an animal and host a meal. Looking at *sadaka* as concerned with patriarchy, sacrifice, and social reproduction suggests that in rural Turkmenistan, *sadaka* concerns both the reproduction of people and the reproduction of a certain form of social organization that values elder men. For urban residents, *sadaka* was less linked to "life-cycle ceremonies" of weddings, circumcisions, or births. It was, however, thoroughly implicated in proper burials and the commemoration of the dead – "like many other Muslims all over the world, the Turkmen show great concern for their deceased relatives, which they express in commemoration rituals (*sadaka*) held on the third, seventh, and fortieth days after the death and on the first anniversary."77

76 Verdery, "What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?" and Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm".

77 Kehl-Bodrogi, "Who owns the shrine?" 140.

Illustration 12 Maral with her two grandchildren, who are sitting while she spools yarn. Maral's husband purchased the nylon yarn at the market in Gökdepe, andshe will use it to make *alaja* – long braided rope made of four colors (usually white, red, black and brown, the latter often made from camel hair). Maral will sell the *alaja* to traders who occasionally come to the village. Feb. 2016.

In Aşgabat, these commemorative events transformed the deceased into appropriately respected ancestors. Applying the connected points of patriarchy, sacrifice, and social reproduction to the urban context suggests that a similar structure is pertinent, in which a meal involving the sacrifice of an animal is a generative action.

Given that my research focus was the rural context, a more detailed analysis of *sadaka* in Aşgabat requires future research. But I would like to tease out one tentative difference. In both the village and Aşgabat, the past 25 years of independence have offered spaces where it is possible to engage in spiritual practices. As the preceding discussion has argued, this has led to the reaffirmation of links between the elder generation and reproduction of life in village G, as elders are able to redistribute divine gifts through *sadaka*. In contrast, this connection has not been affirmed quite the same way in Aşabat, where *sadaka* is delinked from future life or "life-cycle ceremonies," while remaining connected to the ancestral past in the commemoration of the dead.

Rather than emphasizing how Turkmen *sadaka* diverges from scriptural orthodoxy as a set of "syncretic" practices, I have sought to detail how a Soviet conception of "religion" inadvertently gave space for such ritual events. In the

Illustration 13 Elderly man sitting in *gara* öý. A *sazak* wood (botanical name, Haloxylon ammodendron) burns next to him, heating the *küýze* (water pitcher) for tea. Oct. 2015.

communities where research was conducted, the continuation of these rituals today is linked to the reproduction of people through a hierarchal arrangement that makes older men and women able to disburse divine gifts. As a field area, the handful of desert villages that formed my research site is insignificant. If it is possible to glimpse how people realize, construct and orient their lives around something they call "Islam," then it may hopefully have wider reach.

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