Twenty-five Somonis for a Good Future

How Young Women in Tajikistan Shape Their Futures and Secure Their Present

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Abstract

In Tajikistan the concept of "womanhood" developed in the Soviet period remains at odds with local conceptions of gender roles. These competing forms of female agency force young women to creatively shape their future, drawing on the paradigm of womanhood that befits their life-world. Here, we see how young women take their future into their own hands, in a society that scrutinizes female behavior and seems to restrict women's agency. Recognizing that an encounter between two people can change the life course of one of them, this article employs a cross-biographic approach to under- stand women's agency in Tajikistan. Based on the biographies of a *bakhshi* (fortune teller) and two young women who visit her, I explore how these two women of marriageable age deal with their emotional world and a society where failure to marry stigmatizes the whole family. The conscious decision of these young women to meet a *bakhshi*, to actively allow the *bakhshi* to influence their life course, offers insight on female agency and young women's strategies in managing their emotions, controlling their futures, and securing good luck (*bakht*).

Keywords

women – biography – bakhshi – Tajikistan – marriage

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Fahrangiz: What can you say about good fortune (*bakht*)?
Soro: About *bakht*—they say that she [your sister] had no desire to find good fortune. Her good fortune is bound; it is possible to open it, it is necessary to do the *qaytarma* [de-witching], to take the string. The longest it can take is six months.

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Fahrangiz went to Soro, a local *bakhshi* (fortune-teller), to inquire about her sister Gulnora's future and her own, as their mother had become worried about Gulnora, who was almost past the prime age for marriage (17–20 years).1 Soro was supposed to give an answer to this "problem" and suggest a solution, for fate is seen to be not entirely beyond one's control. *Bakht* (fortune, luck) is seen as something that can be shaped, made, unmade, and remade by a specialist. This article discusses the intimate relationship between Soro—a fortune-teller and traditional healer—and two young unmarried women who seek her help. In so doing, we see how these women shape their futures and secure their presents.

Young women in Tajikistan are expected to be married off between the age of 17 and 22, at the latest. If they pass this age, they risk being seen as "abnormal" by the community, stigmatized as either an old maid, a student, or having some handicap or disease that makes her unsuitable for marriage. The urgency of finding a match in this period weighs on the girl and her family. According to local custom, it is the boy's family that comes to ask for marriage; hence, girls appear powerless in shaping their future marital life. Furthermore, it is the father who gives his consent for the marriage, and he can do so without consulting his daughter. Of course girls are by no means simply victims of male decisions; girls invest a lot in performance—clothing, appearance, character, behavior, and friends—to influence potential husbands, and they have different strategies and possibilities to influence their future. Among the strategies used to shape one's future marital life is consultation with a *bakhshi*, who is believed to have the power to interfere in social relationships.

Since the Soviet period, the role of *bakhshi*s as social, mental, and physical healers have been discussed in the Central Asian context. Usually, academics

1 While I have anonymized the names of the two sisters I have left the one of the *bakhshi* Soro because she is an authority in the community.

have described *bakhshi*s as proof of the mix between pre-Islamic shamanism and Islamic traditions.2 This leads some to question the Islamic legitimacy of the *bakhshi*, with some local religious authorities labeling the *bakhshis* as "non-Islamic" and actively seeking to root out their practice. Today, Islamic religious authorities throughout Central Asia are highly critical of *bakhshis* as anti-Islamic precisely because they interfere in personal matters and emotions through their engagement with spirits and their ability to shape future for- tunes, both good and bad. Regardless of the anti-Islamic labels some give the *bakhshis*, it is right to see them as both women and men of authority and pre- servers of local traditions.3 Thus, despite the very real tensions that exist over the Islamic appropriateness of the *bakhshi*'s activities, here I am less concerned with these conflicts of classification within Central Asian religious history than with the biography of Soro and how she engages with young women, particularly Fahrangiz and Gulnora.

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2 For a good discussion of this argument (shaman-Islamic traditions) within a traditional and biomedical discourse during and after the Soviet period see D. Penkala-Gawęcka, "Mentally Ill or Chosen by Spirits? 'Shamanic Illness' and the Revival of Kazakh Traditional Medicine in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 32, no. 1 (2013): 37–51. Other literature has pro- vided insight into women's religious practices. See D. Kandiyoti and N. Azimova, "The Communal and the Sacred: Women's Worlds of Ritual in Uzbekistan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10, no. 2 (2004): 327–349; M. Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan. Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2006); E. A. Constantine, "Practical Consequences of Soviet Policy and Ideology for Gender in Central Asia and Contemporary Reversal," in J. Sanadeo and R. Zanca (eds), *Everyday life in Central Asia: Past and Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); M. E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2007); S. Peshkova, "Muslim Women Leaders in the Ferghana Valley: Whose Leadership Is It Anyway?" *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11 (2009): 5–24; J. Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Other literature has focused specifically on *otins/otuns*. See S. Kleinmichel, *Halpa in Chorezm and Atin Ayi in Ferghana* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2001); C. A. Wilcke, "Spiritual Bonds – Symbols of the Hereafter," in G. Rasuly-Paleczek and J. Katsching (eds), *Central Asia on Display* (Vienna: Lit, 2004), 339–354; H. Fathi, *Femmes d'autorité dans l'Asie centrale contemporaine. Quête des ancêtres et recompositions identitaires dans l'islam postsoviétique* (Paris: ifeac/Maisonneuve & Larose, 2004). On shamanic-Islamic healing rituals in Central Asia, see S. Hohmann, "Les 'médecins-*tabib*', une nouvelle catégorie d'acteurs thérapeutiques en Ouzbékistan post-soviétique?" *Autrepart*, 42 (2007): 73–90; R. Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam, and Culture in Central Asia* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Penkala-Gawęcka, "Mentally Ill or Chosen by Spirits?"

3 Fathi, *Femmes d'autorité dans l'Asie centrale contemporaine*; Peshkova, "Muslim Women Leaders in the Ferghana Valley."

In much of Central Asia, women experience a great deal of pressure to conform to social traditions that narrowly restrict the public activities in which they can engage.4 To deal with this pressure, women take recourse to various practices like visiting traditional healers, performing rituals, leaving their society, or even committing suicide. On the one hand, different political regimes— the Soviet Union as well as the Republic of Tajikistan—have directly attempted to manipulate gender relations, influencing labor practices, marriage, and education.5 On the other hand, various social responses to changing political and economic conditions have pluralized the field of female-possible activities far beyond polarizing political discourses of backward versus modern or sha- manic versus biomedical, which was the common way Russian ethnographers approached Central Asian society.

In the 1990s, the Tajik civil war disrupted social communities.6 While during the Soviet Union women had been the flagship of modernity,7 during the civil war they became the primary actors to help their family survive and were turned into victims of the Soviet Union once peace was reinstalled. As Martine argues, wars mark the gender of each person, whether they fight or not.8 This marking becomes visible in postwar societies that try to reinstall order.

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4 C. Harris, *Control and Subversion* (London: Pluto, 2004).

5 E.g., G.J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia: 1919–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1974); Ch. Hämmerle, N. Langreiter, M. Lanzinger, and E. Saurer (eds), *Gender Politics in Central Asia: Historical Perspectives and Current Living Conditions of Women* (Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2008). For a critical engagement with gender literature on Central Asia as a colonial engagement, see the author-critic forum: "De-Colonial Theory and Gender Research in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey*, 31, no. 3 (2012): 355–367, discussing the book *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* by Madina Tlostanova. For an introduction to gender politics during the Soviet period see, e.g., S. Keller, "Trapped Between State and Society: Women's Liberation and Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1926–1941," *Journal of Women's History*, 10, no. 1 (1998): 20–39; F. Heyat, "Azeri Professional Women's Life Strategies in the Soviet Context," in F. Acar and A. Günes-Ayata (eds), *Gender and Identity Construction: Women in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 177–201; S. Ashwin (ed.), *Gender, State, and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 2000); D. Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, no. 4 (2007): 601–623.

6 S. Tadjbakhsh, "Women and War in Tajikistan." *Central Asian Monitor* 1 (1994): 25–29; M. Tokhtakhodjaeva, *Between the Slogans of Communism and the Laws of Islam* (Lahore: Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, 1995); S. Roche, "Gender in Narrative Memory," *Ab Imperio*, 3 (2012): 279–307.

7 Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*.

8 E. Martine, "Is War Gendered?" in A. Rao, M. Bollig, and M. Böck (eds), *The Practice of War* (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 161–174.

Similarly to postwar Germany, post-civil war Tajikistan radicalized the role of women as victims within society and accorded them their place within society, namely as mothers and wives at home.9 Correspondingly, Islam has become the most important resource for ordering communities and ascribing clear-cut gender roles (whether these can be and actually are implemented is another question). This has reopened a moral discussion on whether good fortune and happy feelings are "made," passively "given" (through good luck), or "given as a reward" by a higher power (God). These debates on agency in good fortune and questions about who best provides help and consolation in periods of emotional isolation, such as a love that cannot be acknowledged openly, guide the analysis of the intimate relationships of the *bakhshi* Soro with the two sisters, each hoping to influence their futures.

Encounters and Impacts

This article employs a biographical approach to see the impact encounters have on the life trajectories of individuals. More precisely, I look at the very moment when two or more people meet and the impact this meeting has on the life of the participants. While social anthropologists have long investigated repeating rituals (life-cycle rituals, seasonal rituals etc.) they have paid less attention to occasional encounters that may, however, have a deeper impact than regular rituals on the life trajectories of the participants.10 Young people growing up initiate meetings with people they believe will help them to solve immediate problems, and this can affect their whole life. This desire has agency in improving their immediate and long-term lives. In this respect, methodologically the crossing of biographies requires knowing an interlocutor's history before and after an encounter in order to evaluate the role a particular encounter plays in the interlocutor's own biography.

The use of biographies in social anthropology is at times controversial. Most often, narratives of individuals are used as a major resource for understand-

9 Often women in conflict and transition countries are treated as victims *per se*. Furthermore, Muslim societies are seen through patriarchal families that reduce female agency. In her book, *Control and Subversion*, Colette Harris stands in this tradition. In her conceptualization, gender behavior becomes "the centre of resistance to Sovietisation" (p. 58), while Northrop see it also as the cause of women's victimization. D.T. Northtrop, *Veiled Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2004).

10 The role of rituals in shaping women's encounter and the discussion around these rituals in Uzbekistan, have been well discussed by Kandiyoti and Azimova, "The Communal and the Sacred."

ing and displaying ethnographic material. But Vincent Crapanzano has questioned the representation and generalization in ethnographic literature and prompted a discussion that continues until today.11 Culture seemed to pre- define human agency and mainly men's biographies stood for "the culture," Nadje S. Al-Ali observed.12 Even more serious has been criticism that the auto- biographic account is a Western mode of representation13 or—assuming that culture and (mass) education (here meaning the ability to read and write) are inherently part of the process of individualization and modernization—that biographies almost become a Western imperial product.14

Against the background of such critics, the use of biographies in this article must be read as specific to a post-Soviet context. Presentations of the self and the evaluation of one's encounters with others become part of constructing one's life on the way to attaining good luck (*bakht*). While *bakht* is God-given, it is also something one can actively shape and influence; it defines the life-path of the believer. Concretely, women in rural Tajikistan invest great efforts in mastering traditional codes of behavior just as well as Soviet modes of female emancipation. Thus, the life of the *bakhshi* and the two young women very much reflects this tension not in a blunt "feminist" way, but as a process of reflecting about practices, roles, representations, and choices in life. It is in dialogue and self- reflection that these women interact and take over the control of their future.

The autobiographic narrative—the life story—of the *bakhshi* is an effort to contextualize her contemporary activity within the tension between Soviet emancipation and local traditions. Having mastered this tension, she has become central to youth who, at crucial points in their lives, come to consult her. The solution she offers are, on the one hand, traditional—in the sense that she speaks of *jinn*s (spirits)—but, on the other hand, modern—in the sense that she uses narrative (dialogue) and activates self-reflection (rather than blind belief) in her sessions with youth.

The material was collected in 2006 and 2007 in the villages of Sasik Bulak and Sari Kenja in the Jirgatol district in Tajikistan, mainly during a year of field- work during which I lived in the home of the two women. This fieldwork

11 V. Crapanzano, "Life-Histories," *American Anthropologist*, 4 (1984): 953–60.

12 N.S. Al-Ali, "Between Political Epochs and Personal Lives," in M.A. Fay (ed.), *Auto/ Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 155–176.

13 B. Röttger-Rössler, "Autobiography in Question: On Self Presentation and Life Description in an Indonesian Society," *Anthropos* 88 (1993): 365–373.

14 D. Fabre, J. Jamin, and M. Massenzio, "Jeu et enjeu ethnographiques de la biographie," *L'Homme*, 195–196 (2010): 7–20.

enabled me to live everyday life with the women, just as intensively as the exceptional events of their lives, and eventually to share the joy of the elder sister's marriage.

I will start with a biographic introduction of the three women—Fahrangiz, Gulnora, and the *bakhshi* Soro—followed by the narratives of one specific "problem" that the women solved with the *bakhshi*. I use narratives and ethno- graphic observations to work out the crossing in biography as an intimate moment. These intimate moments become the source to regain control over agency and future, and hence are important nodes in the lives of the two sisters and the *bakhshi*, whose job is to unite and disunite nodes in life.

Women, Love, and Happiness

In order to understand the background of the *bakhshi* Soro's biography, we needsome historical background on Soviet gender politics, which has left deep marks on elder generations. While the 1920s were marked by liberal approaches towomen and sexuality, the 1930s and 1940s were shaped by Stalin's politics in relation to the Great Patriotic War and thus focused more on fertility issues than ongender discussions. With Khrushchev, sexual education became the responsibility primarily of parents15 and physicians. At the same time, the notion of "women's fundamentally maternal essence" continued to shape the politics of thefamily, fertility, and maternity.16 Most literature about this topic in the Sovietperiod focused on the Slavic populations in the north, leaving the Muslim south-ern belt to be discussed in terms of gender politics and Muslim "backwardness." Gender issues were at the same time a cultural matter, an economic factor, and, since the 1960s, increasingly a demographic issue. With the gender politicsthat favored, on the one hand, privacy in the home (among married couples only,however) and, on the other, personal life in collectives (in dormitories, apartment blocks, communal flats *kommunalka*, and so on),17 the aim was to intro-duce a "communist morality." Much of what Field writes about Moscow's suburbsapplies to Central Asia. "One moralist explained that Soviet citizens 'possess thesecret of happiness, which they don't know in capitalist countries. This secret

15 The writings of the influential theorist about education Anton Semyonovich Makarenko (1888–1939) illustrate this point for the early Soviet period.

16 D.A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

17 Y. Slezkine, "The USSR as Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promotes Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review*, 53, no. 2 (1994): 434–453.

lies in the harmonious coordination of personal and social happiness, in work for the good of society, in the fact that for us the joys of social labor and personal life are indivisible.'"18 This view that the Soviet Union produced satisfaction for women is common among the elderly in Tajikistan. Thus it was perfectly possible to claim Muslim women's liberation from traditions like the bride price and forced marriage and at the same time allow people to keep sexual discourses of feelings and reproduction within the family and untouched by government involvement.19

Statistical research has shown that the life-course of a Soviet youth was rather similar throughout the Soviet Union, with early marriage (around 17 years for girls) and the first child soon after, being standard.20 In general, this female life-course changed at the end of the Soviet period, yet in the village where I conducted research the optimum ages for marriage remained within this frame. Fahrangiz, who went to consult the *bakhshi*, had several "affairs"21 with boys from the region who wrote her letters or tried to talk to her at the market. She had even been short-listed to be "stolen" (bride abduction) in a neighboring village. Many women in Tajikistan admitted that before marriage they had "lovers" with whom they exchanged love letters, received poems, dreamed about life, but then married another man because "parents know best which partner is reliable for a functioning future family." It goes without saying that such a disconnection between love and sexual relations for reproduction may also have turned some men "crazy with love" as numerous stories—recalled with admiration—in each village testify. What matters here is that Soviet modernity at the periphery did not pass through a sexual

18 Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia*, 14.

19 Claims that youth had no way to inquire about sexual life may only partly be true. While in Central Asia young men would never ask their parents about intimate subjects, they often did ask the youngest uncle from either the mother's or the father's side (*taghoī or amak*). Further, young people speak with their peer groups about their experiences and today receive much of their sexual education via DVDs and television. Fewer options exist for girls who can, however, talk to a *yanga* (female in-law) if they trust them. Whereas in this way they may not know how children are conceived, as Harris observed in *Control and Subversion*, they do have ideas about sexuality.

20 S. Roche, and S. Hohmann, "Wedding Rituals and the Struggle over National Identities," *Central Asian Survey*, 30, no. 1 (2011): 113–128.

21 By "affairs" people in the village mean that a woman has responded to men who have tried to contact them and agreed to meet them, even if only for the exchange of few words. Affair hardly ever means sexual intercourse that results in the social death of a woman and her family. In the village, everyone knows which girls have had premarital inter- course, and, in one case, a girl's brother committed suicide to escape the shame rather than having to kill his sister.

revolution like in the West.22 Instead, communist morality restricted women from breaking fully out of their family traditions but turned them into multi- tasking and multi-identity citizens who skillfully negotiated the different role expectations placed on them. Although love was promoted and propagated as an important human value during the Soviet period, legal discussions neglected this issue in the literature on women.23

Official policies have changed little vis-à-vis women in independent Tajikistan. The state has redefined the woman as a symbol of national authenticity and, at the same time, security forces fight against sexual liberation.24 In this matter government policies support popular views, especially widespread among young men, that encourage women's seclusion.

Issues of social order and happiness were not only the concern of Soviet ideology; a repertoire of local terms refers to love and happiness, on the one hand, and good fortune and luck, on the other. In Persian culture, for instance, love and madness are an old motif best represented in the story of Layli and Majnun.25 Love is seen as driving people insane if it is not consummated. Ibn Sina even treated it as a disease: "To treat such an illness, various therapeutic suggestions were offered by physicians. The most famous of these, which also occurs in love poetry, belongs to Ibn Sīnā. He suggested a diagnosis by feeling the patient's pulse."26 The *bakhshi*, as discussed below, engages in this world of desire and love, and treats young people whose path to happiness is restrained or who are sick from love. *Bakht* refers to this path to happiness that can be restrained (*bastagi*) or unrestrained (*kushodagi*). The *bakhshi* can also actively harm (*ziyon dodan*—damage, injury, loss, harm) a person, and she can help to bind two people together. She uses the help of *paris*, which are spirits with a mainly positive power, or *jinn*s and *ajina*s, which are spirits with negative,

22 The proof is that abortion remained the most important means of fertility control throughout the Soviet period and little discussion of birth control and health took place in schools or public.

23 V. Shlapentokh, *Love, Marriage, and Friendship in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

24 Even today the police employ a special unit (the 4th *adel*) to patrol Dushanbe's streets at night in order to arrest prostitutes and catch unmarried couples *in flagrante delicto*, in order to fine them for "criminal behavior." This, however, does not prevent men from visiting prostitutes or engaging in a "sponsor" role by paying for the studies of a young female student in return for using her for their private pleasure. It is difficult to measure how common this practice is, but it seems uncontested that the main actors are well-off men with political protection.

25 A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūun* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

26 Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūun*, 7.

dangerous, and even destructive power. Hence, as an emotion, love exists separately from married life, which is a planned event for the future; girls like Fahrangiz and her sister, however, wish to merge both into one status of happiness.

How do women in the environment of communist morality, traditions, and the re-Islamization of society shape their future luck? How do they produce and shape *bakht*? The paradox of female life between different moralities and between public representation and the wish to maintain agency in different situations is well expressed in *bakhshi* Soro's life narrative. It follows what Saba Mahmood has suggested, namely "to think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create."27 Similarly to the *bakhshi*, but with a different view of femaleness, the sisters conceptualized their lives as a search for happiness and well-being. It is at this stage that the sisters and their mother turned to the *bakhshi* as a specialist in making the good fortune seen as prerequisite for a happy life.

The *Bakhshi* Soro

Soro was born in Jirgatol, a place that during the Emirate of Bukhara was referred to as "Kirgizia." It was incorporated into Tajikistan in 1929, but remained one of the many places in Central Asia in which different populations, languages, and cultures existed. In different waves, Tajiks moved to this "safe place" because they were persecuted either by the Emir in Bukhara or later by the Bolsheviks. Thus, more and more Tajiks came to live side-by-side with Kyrgyz people, and some intermarried to overcome ethnic labels, calling themselves *avlodi chalish* (mixed lineage). While the Kyrgyz remained the majority population, the Tajiks increasingly claimed resources. Soro was born in the 1960s and raised in this context. She attended a Kyrgyz-language school and played with Kyrgyz and Tajik children in the street. While Kyrgyz is her mother tongue, she also speaks Russian and a local dialect of Tajik.

I went to visit the *bakhshi* Soro (S) with Fahrangiz (F), who was supposed to inquire about her sister Gulnora's future. Soro has a controversial position within the village today, with some rejecting her activities as non-Islamic, others as shamanic, and yet others believe in her capacity to influence people's futures. In this sense, the narratives testify less blind belief in supernatural

27 S. Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections onthe Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology*, 16, no. 2 (2001): 203.

power than to a conversation between educated women about their personal problems in the context of a contested religious field. At times Fahrangiz tested Soro, but she never openly discussed or questioned her skills. On the contrary, when Fahrangiz was deeply in love she was a regular visitor of Soro and happy to have somebody she could share her feelings with who was able to bring order into her emotional world through concrete actions. On the way to and from visiting Soro, Fahrangiz shared her doubts and amazement for the *bakh- shi* with me. Fahrangiz was skeptical about Soro's power to influence other people's lives, but at the same time Fahrangiz admitted that Soro was right in all her comments—many of them touching intimate feelings—and hence concluded that Soro's power must be real.

The bakhshi *Soro's Life*

S: I used to beat the boys. I was strong. I listened to nobody and beat up everybody. I was like a *pari* (powerful spirit), I was powerful. … One day I got up and two shadows appeared. But before that, one of my brothers had a small child that had been left to him after his wife died. His child was small and I was looking after it. I had put it in the shadow under a tree and fell asleep myself. I suddenly woke up when the child was crying. I got up and took the child. When I got up—beside me was a tree—an eye appeared, one eye, a big eye. I was scared and looked at this eye but nothing happened and I left. When I entered the house, the two shadows appeared and then voices came from somewhere and said: your sister-in-law (*yanga*) has said all kind of things about you; her mother said all kinds of things about you; this *kaysingil* (sisters of husbands) said many things—they do not respect you, like this. They discredited you and caused a fight among us. I myself started to fight with them (the relatives) …
I did not have any seizure. Only these two shadows were talking … After the eye had appeared when I got up—after that, the shadowsappeared and were provoking a fight: your sister said this, your brothersaid that, this person said that—kill yourself. From this day on, they(the shadows) said people were speaking this way about you.

F: Oh, oh.

S: Then they (the shadows) said all kinds of things and I believed: kill yourself, and I went and hanged myself. I went many times, but held the cord and one day I went and hanged myself, but they (her brothers) came and took me down.

F: How did that happen?

S: At this time I did not see my brother, I did not hear what he said… I only listened to these shadows. … I remained in Kyrgyzstan for one month and ate only raisins.

[…]

S: Yes, they (the shadows) back me … for instance, if somebody hassles me, they appear in his or her dream and scare him or her. I have an earlier story: After completing school, I was at the final celebration and performed.28 One boy loved me. He did not tell me, but had told somebody else and I had not believed it and I walked and walked. He could not tell me himself, so I walked and walked. One day something happened: this boy—I was on my way to a festival and fighting performance (*gushtin*)—I met this boy who was wearing a coat with embroidery (*juma zarduzi*) showing that he had just married. He was walking with his embroidered coat, and I told my friend that he must have just married. I was angry; they had told me that he loved me, but he did not take me and did not tell me; he did not make any efforts for me and this is why he had now married—this anger, we were six people,29 and one went to place harm (*ziyon*) in the womb—the place where they bear children … the one that should be born from this man was dried; they call this the *jinn* of Simiyon. Then this boy never had children; to this day he has no children—ten years he lived with his wife but never had children. …

The wedding [of the boy she loved] had just taken place. One person went to help me; we held each other and the mullah could not read, his power was not enough—this, I said, was my answer for not marrying me.

[When Soro was in Kyrgyzstan,] the boy came and I sat him down and told him: you said "no" to me, and this and that. Something happened to you and this is why you cannot father children. Come to me and I will cure you. I will take away this thing that harmed you (*ziyon*); for instance I will cut something over you and you will have children. Otherwise you

28 On the last school day in May, pupils meet in front of the school, and those who are graduating prepare little skits and plays for the others.

29 These six people come up in her account many times, but seem to be not real people, as they can move through space and time.

> will have to ask me: take me, then I will answer you and you will have children.
>
> He did not understand, he sat and sat and did not believe and left. After one year I saw him again – now ill. They (the *pari*) had said that once the boy becomes ill he will come to you and you will open his way, but by this time you both will already be old and it will be late for children.30

People in the village playfully told me that Soro had been an unusual girl who did not want to fulfill the local expectations placed on women. She was an excel- lent horse rider (winning races) and even drove motorbikes.31 She broke with all norms that shape a girl's life in her village. When she reached marriageable age, no one proposed to her. No family wanted to have such a strong woman as an in-law. Her narrative shows a very strong personality that does not want to be caught in traditions; but at the same time, she does want to live as a (married) woman. The voices of the in-laws telling her that she would never be able to marry and to live a life as expected from decent women in the village were certainly right, as gossip surrounds any girl who fails to attract a boy or a boy's family.

What is unusual in her story, is her suicide attempt. Most suicides happen when girls are forced to marry a man they do not want, or of whom they are afraid, not when they remain unmarried. Her description of the combination of caring for the child while realizing that she will never be able to marry, but still being in love, sounds as if she had suddenly realized that gender is something that society makes, and thus almost impossible to change. Gender, she realizes, is not a choice but the place one is accorded by society, it has a set of markers to which one need to conform. The fact that she agrees to tell her story in front of Fahrangiz shows how she uses her story to shake young women when they risk losing control over their emotions and become easy prey for community gossip. Today, Soro lives in a rented house with her son while her husband lives far away in another village.32 She is under the protection of her elder brother, who sends one of his sons to stay with her overnight as a woman never lives on her own in this village. "My brother is responsible for me if something happens," she explained to me, and hence accepted patronage by her family. This is not a

30 Interview July 9, 2006.

31 Even riding a bike has often been seen as inappropriate for Muslim women in Tajikistan; driving a motorbike is considered a masculine behavior.

32 She claims that she married a man many years later but threatened him several times—or rather her *pari*s forced her to threaten him. Whether she is still married or not was not clear and did not interest her surroundings.

sign of resignation, but a way to claim protection while maintaining her space of freedom and agency.

Her entire biographical narrative centers on love and emotions and a way to deal with them. While she went crazy from love, her social role as a woman constantly returned in the voices of her female relatives. Although, she claims that she was treated for insanity, she does not directly link this to her love story. When she was in Kyrgyzstan with another *bakhshi*, she started to see things that were going to happen and people started to consult her. It is with these skills that she returned to her native village. While she knows about the rituals of *mushkil kusho*, usually organized by elderly women,33 these rituals are not widespread among the young people in Jirgatol who consult her.

Once it gets dark, young boys queue at her door. They usually inquire about a girl they love, about her character, her family, and whether they can trust her. If they have chosen a girl but are unable to marry immediately, they ask Soro to bind their beloved's path so that she cannot marry until they come to marry. In other words, Soro actively interferes in the realm of future and love; she binds and unbinds, closes and opens paths to happiness or to a good future. It goes without saying that this is a powerful position.

What questions concern youth? What methods does Soro use to help youth order their emotional lives and create a good future? And, most important, what happens when Soro's life trajectory meets the one of young women? These questions are part of a modern discourse that acknowledges that people not only reflect about their lives, but also actively try to shape their future and liberate themselves from those things that restrict them.

While the young Soro may nicely fit Western expectations of gender equality, as a youth she found herself confronted with community expectations and social norms that rejected such feminist concepts as gender equality. The shadows tell her exactly the same thing that any girl in her place would have heard from society, namely that she was not reliable as a woman, that she was mad (*jinni*), that she mixed genders; that she used her feminine power for confrontation rather than for skillful manipulation; that she might not be able to man- age a household if she married; that she might not be able to have children and

33 *Mushkil kusho* is a ritual found in Uzbekistan and the Ferghana Valley in which women help with "opening (easing) the difficulties" (*mushkil kusho*) related to the family of individuals. The ritual leader *bibiotun* recites special texts and the Qur'an. For an in-depth analysis of the literature used by the *otun*, including *mushkil kusho*, see A. Krämer, *Geistliche Autorität und islamische Gesellschaft im Wandel* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2002) and Fathi, *Femmes d'autorité dans l'Asie centrale contemporaine*.

educate them; that she might not be able to listen to her in-laws; and that she might openly control her husband.

Many young women today are desperate when they reach marriageable age, a window of opportunity that is not wider than a few years. A woman has to wait until the family of a man comes to ask for her; then she depends on her parents to agree on the match. Throughout this process, she is expected to behave passively, as if she did not want to leave her parents. Even during marriage, she is not supposed to show affection to her husband or even happiness. But this performance says little about how women feel and to what degree they have been involved in their fate. Despite seclusion, the dynamics among young people in rural villages are intense and stories often so subtle that it remains invisible to guests. Cross-biographical methods allow one to work out the intimate strategies young women employ to maintain agency, even in situations where they feel they have lost all control over their future lives. While the narrative is one way to make these intimate relationships visible, the ethnographic observation over a long period contextualizes the narrative and gives it the place inside the larger continuum that a life-course provides.

Two Women in Love

As mentioned earlier, during my research in 2006 and 2007, I lived in a family with two women of marriageable age. The eldest sister, Gulnora, was mostly at home helping the mother, and her younger sister, Fahrangiz, decided to study at university. People came to ask to marry the younger sister, but nobody came for the elder sister. But sisters (and brothers) marry in their birth order, and a younger sister cannot marry before her elder sister unless the latter gives per- mission. If the elder sister does not marry first, she becomes socially stigmatized, marginalized—in short, she does not fit the expected social standard for a woman, and it becomes more difficult for her to find someone to marry.

As Fahrangiz was in love with a young man, she was interested in having Gulnora marry soon. Their parents worried, as well. Fahrangiz's father came from a respected religious *avlod* (lineage) and was well educated. He rejected, or had to reject, the *bakhshi* from the point of view of Islam. A local mullah (a relative of the father) made his position on the *bakhshi* unequivocal:

> Islam does not have *bakhshis*—the *bakhshis* are *judogaro* (sourcer), they do not exist in the Shariat, and we Muslims do not believe in their talk. They are all liars, and one should not believe in them. […] I don't [want to] know [if there are any in this village]; I don't go to see them, but we try

> to make the people understand that these are all ways of cheating—don't believe them—if you go to a *bakhshi*, 40 days of your worship will be cancelled.34

The mother took a different stand and agreed to have Fahrangiz inquire about the future of her eldest daughter. The mother believed that her husband's first wife must have restricted Gulnora's path to good luck—an assumption that arises from the competition and jealousy two women may have when a husband takes another wife (whether as a second wife or after divorcing the first, as in this case). What the mother did not know was that Fahrangiz had her own love story to settle with Soro. I went with Fahrangiz to Soro's compound, and I was with the family until the eldest sister was married. Below, I use passages from Fahrangiz's conversation with Soro, who agreed to free Gulnora's path to good luck, bind Fahrangiz to her lover, and thereby produce happiness for the family.35

Fahrangiz and I walked to the compound of Soro on the main road, talking about whether a *bakhshi*'s work is in line with Islam or not, whether it was good or harmful to visit her. We did not arrive at any clear judgment, but Fahrangiz thought it worth a try. Rather than to just believe rumors, she "needed to get information about a boy" and that made it worth an effort.

After we entered the room and greeted each other, Fahrangiz sat on a mat- tress (*kurpacha*) and Soro sat opposite to her client (as she calls them). Soro unwrapped a bundle that contained a broken mirror, a *tasbeh* (beads), a stone, and two little books (one was the *mushkil kusho*, the other contained verses of the Qur'an). Fahrangiz gave her two somoni and Soro started her inquiry. Then she gave Fahrangiz the stone. Fahrangiz kissed it, moved it over both eyebrows, and then held it in her hand throughout the session. Fahrangiz first inquired about herself and her lover; only afterward did she ask about her elder sister. She had brought a photograph of her elder sister because Gulnora did not want to come herself. Soro positioned the photograph so that it could be seen in the mirror; while threading the *tasbeh* beads through her hand, she looked into the mirror and spoke.

Conversation at the first meeting:

S: What is your name?

F: Fahrangiz.

S: Is his village far from school? His place of work?

34 Eshon Mansur, Interview, July 2006.

35 The sessions with the *bakhshi* that I had attended were fully videotaped.

F: He is from here, near the school.
S: A message went to you, why didn't you give an answer? F:
What message?
S: One message went … This is not the work of this boy—you understand—your own brother talks a lot, his talk goes … He himself is at home and heard this talk … this is how the talk went.
F: I know.
S: You know this boy is thinking a bit about you, this is why gossip circulates.
F: The boy is thinking of me? Right now? (She smiles happily.) … So the talking went—what might this be?
S: This boy has been told gossips by somebody (*khabarkash* somebodywho talks and spreads information about another person).
F: He has a *khabarkash*? (She looks aghast.)S:
Did you talk about this boy to anyone?
F: No.
S: The girl who was promised to him: from their side somebody talks. F:
And the boy is now angry with me?
S: No, the boy doesn't believe the talks [gossip]. You see each other, but you do not talk together.
F: Yes, it is not possible.
S: He doesn't care about wealth and money … Because he won't make your future. He will not take you because of the gossip; you will feel low with him.
F: Apa,36 what can be done that this boy doesn't receive rumors?
S: I told you, we will write a letter; and this needs to be put into the fire or we hang it up, so that it may stay in his heart. You can also sew it into your dress.
[…]
F: Can't you call [via the spirits] him and talk to him? Isn't there any other way?
S: He will come himself; I will not call him.F:
Can you do that for my boy? By when?
S: Within the next one or two months—faster than that is difficult.F:
Will you write letters? Why did gossip spread?
[…]
F: Can you look at my elder sister?

36 *Apa* (lit. elder sister) is a term of reference for a woman older than oneself. *Bakhshi* is nota notion of address but a designation for a qualification.

S: I can. Did you bring a picture?S:
What is her name?
F: Gulnora.
S: … is there anyone in Sasik Bulak?F:
Not really.
S: From the road that way?F:
Maybe—yes, yes, yes.
S: You know?
F: Yes.
S: His voice is raising little by little (he is increasingly interested in her)—is there any one? …
F: We don't like any of these suitors. S:
What doesn't please you?
F: What is he like?
S: It is a young boy, he is thin … He has a big *avlod* (lineage), but they fight each other. He did not say much, but was behind her and did *mullogi* [visited a *bakhshi* who did something]. Does she have some ideas?37

Conversation at the second meeting:38S:

What is your name?
F: Fahrangiz.
S: And hers? (Soro looks at the picture)F:
Gulnora.39
S: As I said yesterday, she is bound from two sides—kin do this. …F:
Can you do anything? For good fortune (*bakht*)?
S: What I am saying is for *bakht*, there is somebody. …F:
If her *bakht* is bound (*bastagi*), what will happen? S: It is only a little bound.
F: Who did this?
S: The reason I am telling is, she didn't do it herself—you understand … do you have a paternal aunt (*amma*), one that used to look after your sister, with whom you grew up?

37 Interview, July 6, 2006.

38 For the second session, Fahrangiz brought 25 somoni, which then was one-quarter of a teacher's monthly salary and that her mother had given her. Soro had asked for that amount to give the reason, and by whom, the path of her elder sister had been restricted, and treatment to clear the path.

39 There follows a short *fotiha* (blessing prayer).

F: The one who died whose *bakht* was bound—

S: She did it, she affected (*ta'sir rasondan*) her, it mainly comes from her. F: Uhuhuh—ah, she had her *bakht* bound for so long.

S: Anyone who brought fear … I have to sleep on the bones, and then I will understand which kind of *pari* or *ajina* were involved and at what moment she became scared (*tarsidagi*)—then we can do this [a treatment].

F: Now what boy shall we take, this one or that one? … S: One boy who is light-colored.

F: Light-colored—yes, a boy and friend, he is light and medium–sized; his eyebrows are light. He was after her for a long time. If we take him, does he love her (*dil dorad*)?

S: He loves her but something is not enough. F: Are you saying we will not give her to him?

S: No, he himself, your father sees him as low, or for other reasons he sees himself as low … he cannot run well. … Maybe you will receive guests from Dushanbe, guests that come and go—they think of her. … They are dealing with your father; they are thinking of asking for her.

F: Shall we accept?

S: The boy saw her only once.

F: Does this boy love (*dil dorad*) her?

S: He has some intentions, but he says nothing; he doesn't say anything,just "that's fine." …

F: What about me? (She gives the *bakhshi* another 2 somoni.)

S: Shall I look for you? What is the boy's name? … He is not very tall. … He has a light face and dark eyebrows, you understand, and a lot of hair, thick hair.

F: I don't know.

S: How can you say you don't know? [She raises her head, which had been looking into the mirror throughout speaking, and almost shouts this at her.]

F: Maybe he has a lot of hair; I did not see him fully…

S: Yes, it says that he thinks only of you … how shall I say…?

F: Does he think of me?

S: Hm, he thinks of you but he doesn't find a way, he does, but not really—if he wants to keep track of you—but there are many others disrupting his path. He wants to test you. For three or four years he is going to test you—you understand. He needs to test how you walk, how you behave, whether you respect him, this he wants. … Any other questions?

F: I need to know everything about him!… [The conversation continues…] Okay, I know a lot about this boy now.40

The talk between Fahrangiz and *bakhshi* Soro continues in this style. Fahrangiz inquires about the boy's opinion of her; about his social surrounding and his parents; what her own parents think of her; about the gossip; and how she can bind this boy. Soro gives answers as best she can and tries to relativize her emotions by telling her that the boy she loves may test her seriously, so if she wants his attraction she is advised to hide her emotions. At the same time, Soro offers to bind him to her. Then Soro tells Fahrangiz about her character and what she should be careful about in this character. Her advice is exactly what this young woman needs to balance the expectations of society and her own wishes and desires. Unlike her quiet sister, Fahrangiz is powerful and straightforward. Physically, she is "white" skinned (which is seen as beautiful) and rather strong (which also counts as beautiful). However, her energy and power sometimes put off people around her. Soro therefore advises her to be more modest, control her curiosity, and perform submission.

At the end of this meeting, Soro took a thread and made seven knots in it. Then she wrapped the thread in a piece of paper and gave it to Fahrangiz, together with dry black tea. Soro told Fahrangiz to put the tea, together with sugar and yogurt, beside the thread in the room the elder sister sleeps in, for three nights in a row, and then come back with the thread. This would enable Soro to identify whether there was something in the house blocking the path to good fortune for Gulnora. The following three nights we slept in one room with tea, sugar, and yoghurt in bowls (*piola*) on a little cloth and the thread with the knots.

After three days, we again went to meet the *bakhshi*. Fahrangiz brought the string, where three of its knots were now undone. The *bakhshi* began by inquiring about who had been sleeping in the same room. Eventually, after looking into the mirror for a long time, she said she found the place where somebody had buried something that affected Gulnora's path to good fortune.

Conversations from the third meeting:

S: Your old room that you only sparsely repaired.F:
The old house?
S: There it hangs—40 meters away from the old house it was buried.F: If we don't take it out, will *ziyon* go around? Must it be removed?

40 Interview, July 9, 2006.

S: There are hairs that somebody dug out, nails, threads that have beentorn apart.
F: Has somebody gone to search for something? …S:
Do you have elder and younger brothers?
F: Both, elder and younger brothers.41S:
They will have to be treated as well.
F: What can you say about good fortune (*bakht*)?
S: About *bakht*—they say that she (Gulnora) had no desire to find good fortune. Her good fortune is bound; it is possible to open it, it is necessary to do the *qaytarma*,42 to take the string. The longest it can take is six months [until she will be able to marry].43

By the end of the year, Gulnora had married. She had received love letters from a teacher, but favored a poor neighbor, Bakhtiyor, who was a friend of her brother. As the only son of his mother, Bakhtiyor had a compound to inherit and thus could offer Gulnora closeness to her parents as well as material security. They met secretly in another neighbor's house before Bakhtiyor sent relatives to ask for her. Bakhtiyor was poor and had considered abducting her. He considered himself a religious person, rejecting fortune-tellers generally. His father did not give him his blessing, but Bakhtiyor believed that a Muslim man was free to choose his future partner on the basis of love. However, for the wed- ding procedure Bakhtiyor obeyed the traditional customs of the village.44

While the mother saw the wedding as a successful treatment by Soro, the father was skeptical: Gulnora was his eldest daughter and at her wedding he was expected "to pay back the debts to the neighbors," as he explained, yet he was not able to do so. Further, his religious descent would not allow him to acknowledge that the *bakhshi* had power over good fortune (*bakht*). At the same time, he was afraid of the negative influence of his former wife. Instead of confronting his current wife, he looked for another explanation. The proposal for marriage came when the president of Tajikistan had just called for

41 The eldest brother of Fahrangiz and Gulnora (from a family of seven children) was a frequent visitor of the *bakhshis* in the region and rather active in binding girls and inventing himself as ladies' man.

42 *Qaytarma* refers to "de-witching" and includes a ritual in which a (religious) authority blesses water that is then drunk and/or washed with. H. Fathi, "Gender, Islam, and Social Changing Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 25, 3 (2006): 303–317.

43 Interview, July 12, 2006.

44 Each village has its own sets of rituals, bride wealth, bride price, etc. that are part of a wedding.

"modest wedding expenses," and so Bakhtiyor, who claimed a religious identity, was just the right man to perform an exemplary modest wedding, in the spirit of pure Islam.45 Hence, Gulnora was given to a man she had fallen in love with half a year after Soro's treatment. Her marriage was simultaneously the fulfillment of the *bakhshi*'s treatment; the result of her father's duty to act as community leader while displaying local traditions and political loyalty; proof of a "proper" religious wedding that went beyond traditions (in which the parents choose the partner); and a relief for the mother before the women's com- munity who judge young girls through their gossips like the gossip that had affected Soro in her youth.

Fahrangiz, however, went to university and married another man from Gharm in 2012. In a conversation in 2011 she said that the boy about whom she had sought Soro's help was not what she had expected, and she did not like him anymore. She wanted to marry an educated man. According to Fahrangiz, Soro's treatment was successful as it satisfied her and her family's needs. The treatment by Soro was considered a success based not on whether or not Fahrangiz married, but because she overcame her momentous emotional dis- tress and her elder sister agreed to marry.

Conclusion

That Soro and the two sisters' life courses crossed one another was not haphazard, but the initiative of Fahrangiz and her mother to seek external advice in a period in which two unmarried young women were at the center of the family's concern. This is a very critical situation in a Tajik family, as it directly affects the future and *bakht* of all the family members. I have abstained from using medical terms to describe the events because in this process, illness was not considered for either of the girls, though in local terms, love is at times seen something that needs to be cured. Through engaging with the life stories of those involved, we see the directedness and intentionality with which Fahrangiz met Soro in order to reorder emotions and bring clarity to decisions, doubts, and jealousy. That is, Fahrangiz sought to bring social balance and control over her future and good luck. In this article we have two stories that differ

45 Fahrangiz and Gulnora's father headed all the projects run by international organizations and was thus among the few people who provided jobs to others. He was considered rich, although he constantly had financial problems. But his status demanded that he set an example to the community, in terms of financial expenses for life celebrations religious obligations, and state loyalty.

in character: one is the story of Fahrangiz, which she deals with individually; the other is the story of Gulnora, which is the story of the family and society. Both unfold at the same time, but never fully merge.

Soro received Fahrangiz without any comment on her behavior or outlook. Fahrangiz came with her individual emotions of love for a man she hardly knew and on behalf of her elder sister whose path to good fortune was bound and, with it, the good fortune of the whole family. Soro's narratives (or rather the narratives of her spirits) interpret relations and evaluate them against the background of the family, the young person, and the sociopolitical circumstances in which all lived. Soro linked private, public, real, and spiritual predicaments and in this way created spaces similar to what Caroline Humphrey has observed in Buriatia.46 Earlier forms of collective healing in which the audience and the social context are crucial in validating shamans (or in Central Asia, the *otun* in the ritual of *mushkil kusho*) have disappeared into the private urban flat. "Perhaps this can again be related to post-Soviet sensibilities," Humphrey suggests.47

Typically, *bakhshi*s are visited by grown-up women, not unmarried boys and girls, yet the intense Islamic discourse in Fahrangiz's village led women to be afraid to visit Soro. Instead, young people have become Soro's main target group, some coming in the name of their mothers and others on their own accord. Unlike *mushkil kusho*, the *bakhshi*'s session is intimate, private, and based less on the power of an audience than on individual moments and bio- graphic specificities.

Even if Fahrangiz never married the boy she had fallen in love with and never had the opportunity to spend time with him, after consulting Soro, Fahrangiz had the feeling of knowing him and felt able to evaluate her own feelings. If she had talked to anyone else, the whole village would have known and her reputation would soon have been spoiled. In this stage of desperate emotional isolation, the *bakhshi* offered a way for Fahrangiz to evaluate herself. Either Soro would try to bind the boy or Fahrangiz would draw his attention to her by positive behavior, that is, by meeting his expectations of femininity, which are modesty and patience.

The *bakhshi* helped produce female agency by offering interpretations and demanding self-reflection. Much of the narrative among Soro, the sisters, and the mother turned around how to manage the future best on the basis of little information and considerable suspicion (vis-à-vis the former wife, neighbors, and the community). Individual *bakht* is tied to the family's *bakht* and hence the *bakhshi*'s

46 C. Humphrey, *The Making of Soviet Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).
47 Ibid., 213.

suggestion to treat also the brothers (for neither the mother nor the father would agree to treatment on their own accord) appears obvious. The elder brother did go to Soro, but less for treatment than to have his own love stories ordered.48

The *bakhshi* seems most in demand for male and female clients in the period that marked her own biography, namely when arriving at a marriageable age. In Tajikistan, this is the most critical period in a woman's life, because it is the time when her community will evaluate her according community gender norms. Upon reaching the age of marriage, social gender becomes irreversibly fixed. As we have seen earlier, this is not a purely traditional cultural experience, but also the result of a Soviet policy that reinforced this period as a key event in creating happy citizens and a harmonious society. However, Muslim actors increasingly claim *bakht* to be solely in the hands of God, actively fighting people like Soro. In other words, Islam is said to produce happiness and good fortune, independently of kinship restraints, politics, and mediators.

Unlike the observation of Habiba Fathi in Uzbekistan, who says much of the diagnosis takes place in silence, *bakhshi* Soro engages in verbal communication with her clients.49 The spirits she relates with are powerful through her, but seem to support her in taking rational decisions to settle emotions—there is no standard response or solution, not even for the same person coming several times. Fathi has emphasized that, whenever she visited them, *otuns*, *fol- bins*, or *bakhshis* all found "problems" that they decided to treat, even without knowing anything about the patient. These "problems" were identified through silent concentration and inner conversation with the healer's spirits in Uzbekistan or in ecstasy in Buriatia. The *bakhshi* Soro, however, uses verbal narrative and appears to adapt to her clients' level of engagement and interest, engaging in a conversation during the session.

To conclude, the story of the *bakhshi* and her healing narratives that reorder emotions and open paths to happiness, good fortune, and luck reflects much about the different roles assigned to and taken on by women in Tajikistan.50 Neither the *bakhshi* nor the two sisters are a linear "result" of anything. Instead, their biographies show how they construct themselves as actors in society and create power through engaging with the *bakhshi* and skilfully manipulating their emotions.

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48 My assistant accompanied him for this session and brought back several interesting stories, for instance, that he had bound the sister of a friend of his through the help of another *bakhshi* and the friend's sister had turned mad since. Now he wanted to unbind her because he was scared that she would die or anything else could happen and instead wanted another girl to be bound. Like many of the boys in his age (after accomplishing school) girl-watching, was his main hobby.

49 Fathi, "Gender, Islam, and Social Changing Uzbekistan," 218–230.

50 Penkala-Gawęcka, "Mentally Ill or Chosen by Spirits?"