Control and subversion: gender, islam, and socialism in Tajikistan

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INTRODUCTION

The Research Setting and Methodology

It is a hot and sunny afternoon in the village of Sayot. A group of women are discussing the practical difficulties of attaining their rights and how difficult it is to control their lives, when they are not able to use direct action for this. In order to get approval they have to manipulate their husbands without challenging the traditions that allow the latter unilateral rights of decision-making. Everyone is in fits of laughter as they recount story after story of the clever ways in which they managed their husbands. The story that occasioned the most laughter was told by thirty-year-old Zulfia:

My first two children were both girls. After the birth of the second one I wanted a rest from pregnancy but my husband would not agree. He told me that I would have to go on having children until I had a boy, however long this took. My third child was also a girl and I was becoming desperate.

I was pregnant for the fourth time in five years, exhausted, harried, and dreading not only the birth of this child but the likelihood of having to face a fifth and perhaps even a sixth or seventh pregnancy, if the desired boy did not come along. I tried arguing with my husband that it would do no harm to wait a few years but he was adamant. Many nights I stayed awake trying to think of a way out and eventually hit on an idea. When my labour pains started I sent for my husband to come home. He immediately offered to fetch the midwife but I refused. I insisted on his preparing hot water, clean cloths and the other necessities. Then I called him to my side, took his hand, and held on to it.

Throughout my whole labour I did not let go of my husband, no matter how bad things got. When finally it was all over and my fourth daughter had been born he turned to me and said: 'That was absolutely horrible. I can't let you go through it again. As soon as the 40 days are up you are to go to the doctor to be fitted with an IUD. It doesn't matter that we don't have a son. I can't face such a childbirth again'. Since then I have never become pregnant again and my husband never mentions having a son.

We all laughed long at the vision of that poor man being forced to endure, if only at second hand, the pain that women have to go through every time they give birth. And we congratulated Zulfia on her clever tactics.

The Sayot women had come together through their participation in the health project that I was helping to organise in their village and the neighbouring ones. I was there in my capacity as trainer of the educator but also as a researcher, using this as a golden opportunity to collect material for my work on gender identities in Tajikistan.

The memory of that afternoon and the roomful of merry women has remained with me ever since, as an image of all that the women of Tajikistan have to endure, but also of how they deal with their lives with ingenuity, imagination, strength, and above all laughter. Of
course, Zulfia was one of the lucky ones. Another husband might have just hit her until she let go, and walked away.

Reading the manuscript of this book people have said to me that it presents Tajikistan as a very sad place. I can only say that, despite the sadness, the tragedies that are seen there daily, the women at least still know how to enjoy themselves. Whenever a group of them gets together, no matter how many sorrows they have, they always manage to find something to joke about.

But indeed over the last years Tajikistan has become a seriously depressing place. A decade ago it felt very secure, very stable, part of a system that would endure for ever and where nothing much would ever change. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war that followed have put an end to even the remotest feeling of stability. It is never possible to forget the economic problems that have brought the average monthly income down to many times less than the lowest amount it is possible to live on. As of late 1999 it was less than $10, according to the government's own calculations. The threat of violence is ever present, both from internal sources and from the situation over the border in Afghanistan. Moreover, the threat of the imposition of a strict form of Islam, according to the mujahaddin model members of the opposition party brought back with them from their in exile in Afghanistan after the recent civil war, also constantly hangs over people. The knowledge that nothing will ever be the same again and the belief that the good times have gone for ever, that there is very little hope for the future, make people very dispirited.

I was quite shocked when almost all the staff of the health project related their feelings of hopelessness and pointlessness before finding employment with us. It was that more than anything else that brought home to me how very much people there have been reduced to struggling to keep going, not merely under very difficult material circumstances but with a total lack of faith in the possibility of future improvement.

But not all the problems in Tajikistan are due to the complications of the transition period. Many of the saddest and most tragic situations are the result of social pressures from within the Tajik community itself. This is in essence the subject of this book, which is an examination of how social control in Tajikistan is exerted and subverted\(^1\). In order to do this I look at power relations, especially those based on gender and age, with at their heart, control over (female) sexuality.

**The Health Project\(^2\)**

The health project, known as the Khatlon Women’s Health Project, was conceived during discussions held in 1994-96 with women from Dushanbe and Khatlon. Financed by Christian Aid of London it got off the ground in April 1997, with a small group of six staff persons. Since then, with increased support from Christian Aid and the help of a grant from the TACIS LIEN Fund of the European Union, the staff has expanded to almost 30.

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1. In this book I use the following definitions of these words:
   - To control - to exercise restraint or direction over; to dominate, command.
   - To subvert - to undermine the principles of, corrupt.
   
   *(Random House Dictionary of the English Language, second edition 1987).*

2. More detailed information on this project can be found in Harris (1998c, 1999a 1999b).
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The project works in the southern Tajik oblast of Khatlon, serving the inhabitants of villages in the Bokhtar, Khojamastan and Vakhsh regions. A team of four teachers, one each for the men, women, girls, and boys respectively, goes into each village once a week and facilitates group discussions aimed at helping participants gain an understanding of such subjects as anatomy and physiology, the chief causes of illnesses and how to prevent them, questions of reproductive health. In addition a team of midwives supplies basic gynaecological services and free contraceptives, a medic teaches traditional birth attendants the rudiments of hygiene and how to help women have safer and less painful births, a paediatrician holds under-fives’ clinics and advises mothers on how to improve their children’s health, and a cookery teacher gives classes on nutrition and healthy cooking. A strong emphasis is placed on aiding the villagers as a whole to reassess family relationships, which only too frequently tend towards considerable violence, as well as on the teaching of sex education to teenagers and on facilitating group discussions with adults on sex and sexual relations. The project also serves as a jumping off point for discussions of women’s and children’s rights. It is hoped it may eventually lead participants to develop greater self-reliance, as well as new concepts and outlooks on life, and perhaps even, albeit in a small way, to moderate the strictness of their gender norms.

The teaching staff is very carefully chosen. They are all from local nationalities, that is either Tajik or Uzbek, and from a similar socio-cultural background to the villagers the project serves. In other words, although the staff are all professional teachers they all live under the same social constraints as the villagers so that they are perceived as insiders respecting the same norms. Nevertheless, they are just that little bit more open to variations in gender performance, which enables them to encourage the participants in their discussion groups to take a more relaxed view.

The training the teachers receive is in Freirian-type grass-roots methodology, which equips them to act as facilitators of focus group discussions rather than as the authoritarian teachers they learned to be in the Soviet education system. One of the most important segments of the training is in gender awareness. Much of this was based on exercises from the Oxfam Gender Training Manual\(^3\), which has been partly translated into Tajik under the auspices of Save the Children, UK\(^4\).

Had I not spent some eleven months in Tajikistan before starting the project I would doubtless not have been able to grasp many of the salient points that enabled me to help shape it, nor to understand the context of the participants’ experiences. On the other hand, without the project I would not have been able to gather so much rich material for my research, so that both sides have benefitted from this dual engagement. The project is structured in such a way that its participants come quickly to trust the staff and frequently turn to them, and on occasion to me, for help on very confidential issues. This has provided me with many interesting stories of the more intimate sides of these villagers’ lives, stories that very likely I would never otherwise have had access to. Thus, much of my most interesting research material came to me as a direct result of my involvement in development work.

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\(^4\)For more detailed information on the project see Harris (1998c, 1999a, 1999b).
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Why Tajikistan?

Tajikistan is a Muslim former Soviet Republic, situated in that part of Central Asia conquered by Russia in the late nineteenth century, and thence called Russian Turkestan. This was absorbed into the Soviet Union, along with most of the rest of the Tsarist Empire, after the Revolution. Throughout the Soviet period there was a struggle between Tajiks and the state over cultural values, the latter trying to inculcate Russo-Soviet ones while the former did their best to preserve their own intact. Tajikistan became a Union Republic in 1929 under Stalin, and gained its independence in 1991, along with the other Union Republics. The disastrous economic situation in this, the poorest of these Republics, helped precipitate the civil war that broke out in 1992, between the Islamic and Democratic Parties on the one hand, and the former Communist Party on the other.

Very few people outside the former Soviet Union have even heard of Tajikistan and then largely in the context of news reports of the war or other violent episodes. So I am often asked how I came to choose to study it. In fact, I hit upon it quite by chance, through a trip I made to Indonesia and China in 1993. Having first become interested in the lifestyles of Muslim women in the former country, I found myself wanting to know more about those of the Muslim women I came across in North-Western China, basically in the area known as Xinjiang.

At that point the shock of the collapse of the Soviet Union had not yet completely subsided and the subject of the benefits or otherwise of socialism was still being debated in the leftist community in the West. It seemed to me that it could prove an intriguing subject for enquiry to look at socialism through the lives of the Muslim women who had been incorporated into socialist states and I wanted to do this in the heartland of socialism, either China or the former Soviet Union.

In practical terms the former was just too difficult. But just over the border from Xinjiang was (former) Soviet Central Asia. This was an as yet barely explored area, which had become politically accessible in the last few years. I already had a grasp of Russian, which would greatly facilitate my working there. On my way home from China I spent a few days in Moscow and I made use of this opportunity to discuss with my friends there, which part of Central Asia might be the best to concentrate on. As I was particularly interested in looking at Islam and socialism, I decided that I had to choose either Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, the most religious republics. As Uzbekistan is a very strongly controlled environment I decided, despite the war situation in Tajikistan, that I would have more freedom there. Not entirely coincidentally, the Russian friend I was staying with in Moscow had actually been born in Dushanbe so that I started out with at least a few acquaintances there, even if none of them was Tajik.

Focus of research

In 1994 when I started work on the current research project, socialism and its relation to the lives of Tajik women were very much at the forefront of my mind. I diligently read through the collected works of Lenin and Stalin, dipped into Trotsky, and spent some months in libraries in Moscow, reading all the Soviet sources on Tajikistan and its women I could find. No doubt this, together with the time I spent studying life in Russia, stood me in good
stead, by providing me with a sound background against which to examine Tajikistan. However, once I actually arrived in the Republic, socialism as a topic in its own right started to seem less and less relevant and it eventually came very much to take a back seat in my work.

Therefore, this book no longer focuses on the successes and failures of Soviet socialism, nor does it just examine the lifestyles of women. It has rather become an inquiry into the way in which social control was and is exercised in Tajikistan and how this control has been turned back on itself, resisted, evaded, and suborned by both women and men.

This is not a subject that has been greatly explored, either in regard to Tajikistan itself or to other Muslim socialist communities. A considerable body of literature was produced in the Soviet Union about the great benefits socialism brought to the women of Central-Asia (cf. Gafarova 1969; Nukhrat 1930; Pal'vanova 1982; Raskreproshchenie 1971). However, theoretically this work is very weak, often falling rather into the realm of propaganda, or perhaps more correctly, disinformation, than scholarship. Ethnographic work on Tajikistan is of a far higher standard (cf. Kislyakov 1935, 1959; Kislyakov & Pisarchik 1970; Monogarova 1982, 1992; Peshchereva 1976; Sukhareva 1978; Yusufbekova 1989) but it is restricted to explorations of local customs, avoiding politically delicate questions. As for other socialist Muslim societies, such as for instance South Yemen and the Muslim areas of China, little research has been published relevant to my work. The closest is perhaps that of Molyneux on Yemen (cf. 1979, 1989) and Pang on the Muslim women of Hainan, China (cf. 1997).

As yet no significant new theoretical trends have emerged from research into specifically post-Soviet Muslim societies, despite the fast growth of scholarship on women in this region. See, for instance, the work of Tohidi (1996, 1997) on Azerbaijan, Mandel (1998) and Medeubekova (1999) on Kazakhstan, Kuehnast (1998) on Kyrgyzstan, Tadjbakhsh (1995) and Tett (1994, 1995) on Tajikistan, Abraeva (1999), Fathi (1997), Kamp (1999) and Kandiyotti (1998) on Uzbekistan. However, the direction of my research and its main theoretical focus have been influenced by recent research into other Muslim societies. The most important concepts here have been:

1) the regulatory principle of the honour-and-shame system, where masculine gender identity is defined as control over women and most specifically over their sexual conduct (Kandiyotti 1987; Abu-Odeh 1996: 179), with mothers and mothers-in-law reinforcing male control over younger females (Al-Khayyat 1990: 7);

2) the importance of examining men's variant identities (Lindisfarne 1994; Kandiyotti 1994) and their own reactions to the constraints of the honour-and-shame system (Abu-Odeh 1996: 179);

3) the importance of appearance or image for the honour-and-shame system (Warnock 1990) and the use of the veil as symbol of conformity to female gender ideals (Macleod 1991).

This book is about the way power functions in intra- and inter-familial domination and repression. It is about the endeavours of the representatives of the state to control its Tajik citizens through inculcation of Russo-Soviet gender norms. It deals with the oppression of women and still more of youth. But it is also about the secret subversion of the state by the Tajik people and their refusal of the gender identities the regime wished to impose on them,
as well as about the subversion and resistance on the part of the (younger) members of the community to the strong social controls imposed on them.

My inquiry into how such control and subversion function within Tajik society centres round three inter-related points:

The first concerns the nature of the (gendered) power relations that produce and enable domination and their function within the various layers of social relations. Here I have found the work of Michel Foucault, especially his work on power and on sexuality (1980a, 1990), to be invaluable in explaining the dynamics of communal power at the lowest levels of social interaction.

The second point concerns the formation of human identity, that is the psychological development of the subject, the struggles around parental subjugation of children and the latters’ attempts to separate from their parents and attain agency. For this I have drawn on the work of Judith Butler (1997b).

Lastly I examine how subjects form their (gender) identities and the significance of these for social control in Tajikistan. Once again my theoretical basis is the work of Butler, this time her writing on gender and sexuality (1990, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1997a, 1999), most particularly her theory of performativity5.

My exploration starts at the level of state politics and ends at the marriage bed. Linking the two can be found that major institution of social organisation, the family. At each level I examine who exercises control, how this is done, and how far and in what way subversion and/or resistance follow. It may seem incongruous that an inquiry into the internal processes of Tajik society should start with an examination of the relations of the Tajik community at large with the state. However, this is particularly important in the case of Tajikistan. The Soviet government’s cultural engineering project was crucial in the development of communal controls and gender identities here.

It may seem equally incongruous that a discussion of social control should end up in the marriage bed. However, the centre of gender power relations is control over female sexuality. Moreover, sex is at the heart of the marital relationship, which is the foundational relationship of the family. This in turn situates sex at the centre of social control.

The Researcher in the Field

I first arrived in Tajikistan in December 1994. Early on the following day I visited Dushanbe’s Barakat market. Looking at the dress of the people and the wares they were selling I was strongly reminded of the historical accounts of life in Tajikistan I had been reading before leaving the Netherlands (cf. Harris 1996a). It seemed to me that the scenes described in those books were coming to life in front of me, almost more vividly than the background of apartment buildings, cars, electrical wiring and telephone poles. Here men as well as women were wearing traditional dress. I saw the same typical cradles, the same sorts

5 Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names (Butler 1993: 13). The term "performativity" in [Butler's] usage is taken from J. L. Austin's How to Do Things with Words and read through Derrida's "Signature, Event, Context" in Limited, Inc. as well as Paul de Man's notion of "metalepsis" articulated throughout his essays on Nietzsche in Allegories of Reading (Butler 1995b: 134.)
of rich dress materials, the same vegetables and fruits, the same national dishes I had read about. I felt as if I had suddenly been sucked back into history.

Since that first day I have learned the local language, got to know the people, and made many friends there. Because most of my acquaintances had never met anyone from beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, and the negative propaganda of Soviet years had left them thinking of 'foreigners' as some sort of monsters from outer space, they usually found it easier to conceptualise me as a sort of honorary Russian. This, of course, meant that I was then imbued with the prejudices and basic viewpoints of the average Russian, negative as well as positive. I managed to overcome the worst imputations of Russian chauvinism by learning the Tajik language as quickly as I could, something few Russians, in Dushanbe at least, ever bothered to do.

This notional identity made my life in Tajikistan quite different from what it might otherwise have been. Although, of course, all those with whom I had any real contact knew where I was from, I have been able on the whole to walk around the streets, shop, and carry on the business of daily life without exciting comment because I was accepted as a member of the Russian community. Indeed, this has even at times led to some very interesting situations.

For instance, at one point the health project was informed by a local midwife that the monitors for the international aid agency supplying drugs to her village medical centre were keeping most of them for themselves, handing on less than half to her. It appeared that the monitors assumed that she would sell these to the villagers, thus participating in the felony and making her unlikely to expose their transgressions. However, this all backfired when the health project started working in the village, since we knew what drugs they should have received. When we found out how much was missing I informed the monitors' boss, who called them in for questioning. At this point they rushed to see the midwife to find out what was going on. By chance I was sitting in her office when they arrived. They saw me as a Russian, assumed I was on the village medical staff, and apparently decided to try to make me the scapegoat for their wrongdoing. Quickly improvising a cover story to account for the missing drugs they started shouting at me about the irresponsibility of my handing out the entire shipment of drugs to the villagers within one week instead of the six months they were supposed to last.

At first I did not understand what was going on. I had not realised they did not know who I was and was completely bewildered to find myself sworn at, threatened, and generally maltreated in a very alarming manner. The threats only stopped when someone else appeared in the medical centre and gave the game away by revealing my identity, whereupon my tormenters vanished at the speed of light. So intimidated were they by their realisation of what they had given away to me that they immediately confessed and led their boss to a whole house crammed full of stolen drugs. This incident really brought home to me just how dangerous and unpleasant things can be for the inhabitants of post-Soviet, post-war, Tajikistan and just how protected we international workers are.

My identity was often confusing to people in Tajikistan. I am British Jewish, work out of a Dutch University, and look like a Russian Jew, this last a result of my paternal heritage, my father being from Königsberg (Kaliningrad). After a few months of acquaintance I discovered that one woman to whom I was becoming close, Karomat, had not taken in her niece's introduction of me as a foreign scholar and had decided I must really be Russian, being unable to conceive of anything else. When I finally managed to convince her that in fact I
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came from beyond the borders of the FSU she looked at me doubtfully and said that she thought all 'foreigners' would be stuck-up, stiff, and incapable of displaying emotion. She found it hard to reconcile this image with the living person sitting in her house.

It was even harder for her to grasp why I, a British citizen, was living in the Netherlands, a place where I had no family. Nobody in Tajikistan could imagine people voluntarily living away from their family. Indeed at first Karomat kept telling me I should go home because she was sure it was not good for me to be away from my family for so long. When I told her I lived far away from my family anyway and rarely saw them she decided the best thing for me would be to settle in Tajikistan permanently and build myself a new family there.

Research and Sex

I found that one benefit from the Russian identity that was being imputed to me was the fact that it made it easier for the local population to accept me. It was additionally useful in that it accounted for my not behaving exactly like Tajiks. It could perhaps have also plausibly covered up other aberrations, such as a sexual relationship with someone in the field. It is not unknown for ethnographers to have sexual relations with local people while carrying out their fieldwork (Caplan 1993: 23). However, considering the disapproval of precisely this aspect of Russian womanhood on the part of most of my older Tajik friends at least, it was just as well I did not have any wish to do this. It would definitely have made my rapport with people in Tajikistan much more difficult had I been known to have been engaged in a relationship of this kind.

In any case nothing I saw of the relations between Tajik men and women made me think it would be likely to prove personally rewarding for me to have a sexual relationship with someone there, however interesting it might have proved from a research point of view. Abramson (1993) suggests that ethnographers cannot write convincingly about the sexual practices of a community without having participated themselves. On the other hand he also says that his own involvement in a sexual relationship during his fieldwork taught him little he had not already suspected (Abramson 1993: 75). I am not sure how much a personal involvement in sex would really tell one about practices between local people but I am sure of one thing and that is that, as a woman, I should very much prefer not to have my strong suspicions about Tajik sex life confirmed on my own person. Moreover, I am convinced that it was precisely my image as a single woman not personally interested in men that brought so many Tajik women to open up to me about the more intimate aspects of their lives.

This has been the more important to me since sex has been an important aspect of my research. Situated as it is at the very core of human life it has long seemed to me something that social scientists could hardly ignore. Its relevance to my present field of inquiry is owing to its importance in relation both to gendered and age-based power relations. Not only does sex play an important part in marital power relations, but parental control over their daughters' virginity is a major factor in their control over them.

When I was starting my research for the present book I had a conversation on the matter of the desirability of including sex in my inquiry with several elite women from Dushanbe who had had contact with Western women's organisations. They clearly disapproved of the emphasis these women had put on sexuality and they told me in no uncertain terms that I should not be addressing the question of sex in Tajikistan, since it was not a proper subject
for intellectual inquiry. 'Why do all [you feminists] find sex so important? Don't you think that there are far better things to concentrate on?' they asked. My answer could only be a resounding 'no'. As I hope to demonstrate, sex is the linchpin of correct gender performance in Tajikistan. Furthermore, surely everyone would agree that it is essential to marital relations. In addition, as Foucault points out, sex is a vital part of power relations at all levels of society and heavily regulated by public discourse (1990: 103, 143). How then could I inquire into gender power relations and omit sex?

As I discovered from those I talked to, ignorance of sexual matters has to be one of the greatest causes of pain and suffering in the country. According to official statistics many divorces occurred because of young couples' ignorance of sexual matters (Monogarova 1982: II, 61). How many girls could avoid unwanted pregnancies, how much personal unhappiness and even despair could be averted, how many fewer people would suffer from sexually transmitted diseases, if only there were proper sex education for all. Certainly in earlier times Muslims believed in the importance of this. In the Middle Ages they produced the most frank and open sex manuals (cf. chapter 7), very different from the Christian position of the time that sexual pleasure was a sin, even within marriage (cf. Musalla 1983). According to many mediaeval Islamic jurists sex was a vital and wonderful part of life and it was men's duty in their sexual practices to satisfy their female partners (Mernissi 1987: 41).

The prudish attitude to sex on the part of the more educated Tajiks today is presumably in large part due to the influence of the former Soviet Union, which was one of the most strait-laced places on earth. Since the mid 1920's all public mention of anything to do with sex was banned. It was considered that for all practical purposes, presumably meaning for procreation, people knew what to do, so there was no point in wasting time and energy on discussions of the matter. The tremendous suffering caused by the resultant silence and consequent widespread ignorance was a purely private matter, which the Soviet regime always preferred to ignore (Gray 1991; Kon 1995; Shlapentoch 1984, 1989). The attitude that was fostered by this has for me long been typified by an incident from the live US-USSR television debates of 1986, when a middle-aged Russian woman stood up and said with the utmost resolution: 'We have no sex here in the Soviet Union' and I thought, 'That's very interesting. I wonder how they produce children' (cf. Kon 1995: 1).

It is a strange phenomenon that in Tajikistan two young and frequently completely unacquainted people are placed in a room on their wedding night and forced to have sex, without their having had the possibility of developing any sort of personal relationship and without knowing much, if anything, about the process of the sex act, and especially about female sexuality. Although it seems that before the Revolution sex education was given to boys prior to marriage (Pahlen 1964: 42) I have found no evidence that this still happens. The ignorance of men today takes much of the potential joy for them out of the marital relation. The ignorance that girls are kept in, first so as to prevent their becoming interested in sex before marriage and later to prevent their running away petrified on their wedding night, is highly conducive to making even their tolerance of the sexual relation difficult and in some cases impossible.

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* At least this is not accompanied by violence on the part of others, such as happens in Iran, where young girls may be held down to be forcibly deflowered by their bridegrooms (Heise 1997).
Although I had been interested in research into women in the South for some time before my first trip to Tajikistan and had interviewed women about their lives and experiences in various other parts of Asia and in Latin America (cf. Harris 1995a, 1995b), I had never before tackled a research project of this length and breadth. I felt myself very raw and inexperienced when I first arrived in Tajikistan, armed with only the very vaguest concept of how to go about my task, fluent Russian, thanks to several long stays in Russia, but only very rudimentary Tajik.

Due to my linguistic shortcomings I was unable to start my research in a village, where the women would have spoken only Tajik. This left me in the amorphous surroundings of a capital city with the ensuing difficulties of having to figure out how to find a group of women to interview. I could not cope with the idea of living in a family so I decided the next best would be to rent a flat somewhere where my neighbours could form my research family. I wanted to concentrate on the most disadvantaged women, those from the lowest social groups, and so I found myself a place in what outside the FSU might be regarded as a working-class neighbourhood. However, my aims of finding a coherent group of women there were foiled and in the end I managed to build up close relations with only three families. When I bewailed this, a friend took me to the outskirts of Dushanbe and introduced me to another group of families, some of whom I thereafter visited weekly for the rest of my stay and for much of the following two trips. The stories of several of them appear in this book.

At first I was unsure how best to carry out my interviews. In the end I could not face the idea of doing structured interviews, nor of taping and then transcribing all my sessions, so I opted for an informal approach and for writing up my notes from memory after each interview. My policy was to let people know when we first became acquainted what my purpose was in talking to them and then for conversations to take place during the course of our social interactions without making formal appointments.

My information gathering took the form of interviews with the members of my chosen families, their neighbours and friends, participant observation, and interviews with scholars and with officials concerned with women’s affairs, both those working now and those who had been active during Soviet times. I also spent considerable amounts of time in the library of the Academy of Sciences. By the end of my first six months in the field I had some 500 pages of diaries and interviews, and was ready to go home and start to analyse what I had learned. Since then I have been back to Tajikistan for four more trips of two to six months duration, and have spent a total of twenty-one months there, over a period of four and a half years. During the first eleven months I stayed mostly in Dushanbe, but as my Tajik gradually improved I was able to go further afield. For the first three months of the health project’s existence I accompanied our teacher into the village every day, participating with her in the group discussions, and I have since spent considerable amounts of time in the villages of Khatlon in connection with the project.

Like other researchers in the field I experienced doubts about how much and what to reveal about myself to the subjects of my research (cf. Wolf 1996a: 11). I tried to stick to the truth, although I have to admit that at times I dealt with this selectively. For instance, I was constantly being asked why I had no children. I was in my late forties at the time and my husband, from whom I had been divorced, was now dead. To casual inquirers it seemed
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easiest to explain my lack of children by referring to my husband’s death. Bringing this up usually had the effect of turning them from being sympathetic about my probable infertility towards scheming how to find me a new husband quickly, so as to rectify my childlessness. However, if pressed, I would admit that my husband had died only a few years earlier, which, of course, made it clear that I had not been telling the whole story. In that case I would openly confess that my childlessness was deliberate, which would generally lead to a discussion on the pros and cons of having children.

As has happened to other unmarried researchers in the field (cf. Karim 1993) I received many offers to find me a husband. ‘You must marry a Tajik’, was the constant refrain for the first few months, until I hit upon a useful strategy to deflect this. I would ask these women, who had usually been bitterly complaining about the shortcomings of their own husbands and of Tajik men in general, to list the potential benefits to me of a Tajik husband. They would think and think but find it very hard to come up with anything. One woman said that I would get a house from it but when I pointed out that that house would no doubt come equipped with a mother-in-law and/or with children from an earlier marriage they quickly saw the downside. Eventually this had the desired result and my acquaintances stopped raising the question. However, each successive class of participants in the health project could be heard quietly muttering, ‘have just one child any way’, despite my pointing out that at getting on for fifty this was likely to be neither safe nor indeed easy.

When I first conceived this research project my intention had been to interview only women but I soon came to realise that in order to be able to understand gender relations I needed to include men as well. I was not sure exactly how to go about this, however. I was rather nervous about trying to conduct in-depth interviews with men, being uncertain of the wisdom of even being on my own with a man, never mind trying to discuss intimate topics with him. Nevertheless, when one day I accidentally found myself alone with the 23-year-old son of one of the women I had been interviewing, I decided to take advantage of the situation to talk to him. All went smoothly until he suddenly broke off what he was saying and asked me whether I didn’t want a lover. At first I could not believe my ears. He was exactly half my age; his mother is not that much older than I am, and so I had naively assumed he would see me as someone of her generation rather than as a potential lover. I suppose he probably did not have much scope for finding sexual partners in Dushanbe and thought that a foreign/Russian woman might be easier than a Tajik. At any rate when I informed him that no, I was not actually looking for a lover right then, but thank you very much for the offer anyway, he took it very calmly and never referred to the matter again.

This incident made me realise I had been justified in taking care not to be alone with men in Tajikistan and that I had been lucky to have got out of the situation without awkwardness (cf. Stack 1996: 97-8). All the same I still needed somehow to get male input. Eventually I did meet one man, to whom I have given the name Rustam. He was desperate for someone in whom to confide his problems. When he realised I was interested in listening to him sympathetically rather than jeering at him as had been the reaction of his Tajik ‘friends’ he started to pour out his life history and was quite willing to discuss the more intimate side. Subsequently, with the help of the male educators from the health project I was able to collect further stories of men and boys.
Control and Subversion

The Subjects of my Fieldwork

A question that frequently arises when one presents a body of ethnographic work is how far the researcher herself has influenced those whom she researched. It seems to me inevitable that the flow of information cannot be uni-directional but must to some extent represent an exchange. With most of the subjects of my book I had relatively little discussion of my own points of view, although I am sure they must have sensed my basically feminist standpoint and this must doubtless bear some responsibility for the ways in which they framed their stories.

I cannot know how much I influenced the people whom I got to know during my time in Tajikistan but my contacts with them certainly profoundly influenced the direction of my research. It was getting to know the women, especially the younger women, that first inspired me to change the focus of my work from an inquiry into the benefits of socialism to an exploration of the inner workings of the Tajik community. It was seeing the constraints they lived under, especially the strong pressures from their families, that convinced me that this was the major factor influencing the course of their lives. Later my friendship with Rustam greatly enriched my understanding of masculine gender identities in Tajikistan, enabling me to view issues of the relationships between the sexes from a very different angle, not just to see women's oppression, but to realise that (younger) Tajik men are highly constrained in their potentiality for autonomy as well.

Despite its Asian background Tajikistan is not a Southern country in the pure sense of that term. Its colonisation under the Soviet Union exposed its citizens to prolonged attempts at indoctrination in Russo-Soviet culture. Most of my subjects, and certainly all those living in Dushanbe, had undergone this during their school days. Even if they paid little attention this has inevitably left traces. The fact that at home people were taught that communism was bad and Islam good while at school they were told the opposite, means that people were early on exposed to other cultural practices and were aware that nothing about their culture, not even their own religion, could be taken for granted. It also means that they were conscious of the pressures to come down firmly on the Tajik side in the struggles between the two cultures.

The most Russianised of all the actors in this book is Rustam. It is not entirely coincidental that he was the one Tajik man I was able to develop a close friendship with. His father was a Party official and atheist. The son went to school with Russians, read a great deal of Russian literature, and had intense emotional relationships with a series of Russian girlfriends. As a result his outlook on male/female relationships is very similar to that of Europeans. Even so, he has not been able to escape the constraints of Tajik society, particularly in his interactions with his own family, and all this makes his story particularly pertinent to this book.

In general, in order to understand the dynamics involved I tried to interact with as many family members as much as possible, although I usually only had close contact with one or two people from each family. I must confess I find it almost impossible to interview people in depth if I do not feel drawn to them. I developed emotional relationships with all those people whose stories I tell at length in this book, and even with some I met only once or twice. This may in part account for the fact that so many of them have been open with me about such intimate moments in their lives.
Introduction

Perhaps the strongest relationship I developed was with Karomat Isaeva, who was introduced to me very soon after my arrival in Tajikistan. She was a very determined lady, almost 70 years of age. When I first knew her she had her nearly 94-year-old father living with her but unfortunately he died a few hours before I arrived back for my second visit, so that I walked right into the mourning ceremonies when I came to say hello to her. My first flat in Dushanbe was across the road from hers and while I lived there we saw each other sometimes several times a day. We became so close that Karomat adopted me as her sister and would even introduce me as such to her friends. In fact, I was often actually taken to be her real sister, at least by Russians.

I owe a very great deal of my understanding of Tajik life and society to Karomat, who devoted considerable time and effort to explaining every aspect she could think of to me. She would also try to make me conform to her idea of the image I should present. For instance, she was very adverse to my wearing leggings when I went into town because she said the men would look at my legs. The fact that I dressed very modestly compared with many Russian women apparently did not count.

Another debt I owe Karomat is my fluency in Tajik. Although she was prepared to talk Russian with me when I first came to Tajikistan, she was delighted I was learning her language and did all she could to encourage me. As soon as I was able to make myself understood she refused to talk Russian any more, even when I was unable to follow the conversation in Tajik. This gave me invaluable practice, which was hard to get in Dushanbe just because it was so much easier all round for people to talk Russian with me.

Karomat was the one person who actually wanted me to use her real name in my work. She could not bear the idea that after her death she would just vanish from the face of the earth as if she had never been. As she had neither children of her own nor, as she expressed it, had produced any significant works in the shape of films, books, paintings, or other similar achievements, that would keep her name alive, the solution she had chosen was to get her life story published. She had been thinking about this for some time before I met her and when she realised what I was doing in Tajikistan she decided to ask me to be the vehicle for this undertaking (cf. Harris 1998a).

I have done my best to conceal the identities of the remaining subjects of this book and to this end have given them assumed names, as well as changing many details of their lives. It is not too difficult to conceal the identity of people in urban areas but villages are too small for this. For this reason and also to avoid other complications, I have set the stories of the villagers from Bokhtar and Vakhsh, who all come from very similar surroundings, not in their real villages but rather in the invented village of Sayot, which I locate somewhere on the boundary line between the two regions. I conceive it as typical of the larger villages in the area in being comprised of a number of different segments that function almost like separate villages.

One important question I have been faced with is how to reconcile the diverse subjects of my ethnographic inquiry. As noted in the history section (cf. chapter 1) there are well-demarcated regional groups within the Tajik majority and less clear shades of difference also exist between small units such as villages, or even sections of villages. Such differences are noted by Tajiks themselves when they say they have different customs from ours', although 'they' may live half a kilometre or less away.
Control and Subversion

My problem is that each of the main group of families with whom I have had close links originated in different places, although they all ended up settled in Dushanbe, and some of the children were brought up entirely there. My second group of families, those with whom the health project deals or whose stories are related by health-project staff, live in Khatlon. But most of their families are not originally from that area. They came from Gharom or nearby regions and today they still maintain strong cultural as well as social ties with their places of origin.

The extent of the regional difference might be considered to preclude these families being regarded as belonging to the same cultural group. The question then arises whether it is even legitimate to put these persons all together in one book and deal with them as if they were culturally homogenous. Can these people simply be lumped together as Tajiks?

I think the answer to this is both yes and no. It all depends what exactly is under investigation and which groups of Tajiks. While there are many small differences in the rituals of daily life and domestic practices, for the basically plains Tajiks I deal with regional variations in gender norms, the major cultural element explored in this book, are very minor. Indeed they themselves suggest this when they preface every discussion of the elements pertaining to gender identity with the phrase ‘We Tajiks ...’. This is not something that is heard the rest of the time, when each group tends to relish the distinctions between them. Therefore, I believe I am justified in grouping these families together under the single rubric ‘Tajik’, although perhaps this should be preceded by the adjective ‘plains’, since mountain Tajiks have somewhat freer gender identities (cf. Tett 1994, 1995).

Reflections on Ethnography

I am not an anthropologist by training and I consider what I write closer to political science, especially since the focus of my work is power. Nevertheless, what I present in this book was collected using ethnographic methodology and I agonised over many of the same dilemmas as those that have come under discussion in recent years by ethnographers, particularly by feminist ones (cf. Bell 1993a; Wolf 1996a). My scruples about the legitimacy of subsuming the members of such a diverse group of people under the single term Tajik is one of these. Another was the question of power differentials.

Feminist ethnographers go far beyond merely using gender as an analytical category, to take a distinctive position both on the subjects of the ethnographical work and the knowledge produced. They believe that there is no such thing as value-neutral science and that all work is ultimately subjective (Bell op. cit.). A scholar should take into consideration the power relations between the ethnographer and the subjects of her research, such as those resulting from the respective backgrounds of the researcher and researched, those that come into play during fieldwork and those that derive from writing about and representing others (Wolf 1996a: 2). This is closely related to the issue of authority, in particular, who has the authority to speak for whom and how, and the issue of ‘othering’ (Lal 1996; Nencel & Pels 1991). It seems to me that the important point here is for the researcher to be aware of her responsibility for the knowledge she produces and to take a standpoint of support for those with the least power, which in my case has meant supporting women and young people in their struggles for autonomy.
A further question I gave considerable thought to was whether it was valid for me as an outsider to study this society at all, and also on the implications of my studying a group of people educationally and socially in a lower position from mine (cf. Schrijvers 1991; Wolf 1996b: 217ff). After much deliberation I came to the conclusion that the important point was not so much to decide which of these positions is superior, as to acknowledge that each type of relationship has something to recommend it and it is likely that each will reveal different facets of research subjects. The truth of this was interestingly demonstrated by an experiment carried out by a Chicana, Tixier y Vigil, and an Anglo-American, Elsasser, during a research project in the USA. Each put the same questions to a group of Chicana women but received very different answers. In this case the women were able to be more open on intimate subjects, such as sex, with the outsider (Wolf 1996a: 15).

It seems to me that I was able to take advantage of this phenomenon in my own fieldwork. One Russian woman, originally from Dushanbe but now living in Moscow, said that she would not have dared to tell her friends the things about her intimate marital problems she confided to me, because she felt sure they would store the information up to use against her later. Given the similar situation within Tajik society I very much doubt that most of those who entrusted me with their more intimate stories have ever spoken to anyone else about them.

In the end I decided that it was important to be aware of the power relations inherent in this type of work and use them to understand the dynamic involved, rather than feeling guilty about the fact that I am a middle-class, Western academic, relating to people from a lower social group in Eurasia. Any writers who, like ethnographers, represent others, run the danger of presenting themselves rather than their subjects. I am sure my protagonists would have said quite different things to another researcher and that their perceptions of me, as well as our personal interaction, inevitably influenced the outcome of my interviews. In my writing up I have tried to respect the viewpoints and ideas of those whose stories I recount. I believe I have a further responsibility to ensure no-one is hurt by my work and if possible to see that the lives of people in Tajikistan are actually improved by my presence. It was for this reason that I helped start the health project, in order to return something to the people of Tajikistan, not just to take from them in order to further my own career.

_Tajikistan and the West_7

When I arrived back in the West after my first visit to Tajikistan I spent a great deal of time trying to assimilate the impressions I had brought back with me, and to make sense of them. The most difficult points for me to grasp were the strong pressures towards conformity, the almost symbiotic, highly controlling parent/child relationships, and the lack of emotional ties between spouses.

I knew that in some Western countries there were considerable pressures towards conformity, especially in Central Europe and the American Mid-West and South. I also knew that people often rely on their families when they make major decisions, but I had simply taken it for granted that in the West, or at least in North-Western Europe and the USA,

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7 I use the term West/Western in this book as a synonym for North-Western Europe and the white English-speaking countries. However, most of my examples are drawn from the two countries I know best, Britain and the United States.
children leave home around the age of eighteen, having already gained a certain amount of psychological independence from their parents, and that subsequently they see them with gradually increasing infrequency. I had believed that people in the West usually married people with whom they had a psychologically close relationship, although the destructive endings of relationships and the vituperative divorces had often made me wonder whether this was really true.

Looking at the West with eyes fresh from Tajikistan I found to my shock how very many of the things I had found most difficult to grasp in Tajikistan also existed there and how much greater are the constraints that many Westerners live under than I had previously realised. A friend of mine from the American Midwest told me how when she had become pregnant in the early 1960's, at age seventeen, her parents had sent her off to a hostel for single mothers-to-be, whose staff treated her as a criminal and removed her baby forcibly at birth. While she was away her parents made up some tale of her helping a sick aunt, in order for her 'wrongdoing' not to be made public and thus disgrace the entire family. The exact same thing happened with many middle-class families in England around the same time. In the 1960's the mother of a young pregnant woman actually told her daughter she would rather she had been a murderer than that she had become pregnant out of wedlock.

With regard to young people in the West today I realised that the relative economic independence of some of them did not necessarily mean they were psychologically independent, and that many people had symbiotic relationships with their parents long after they were grown-up. Moreover, many young people nowadays simply cannot afford to leave home at age eighteen.

Yet again, observing the often violent relationships between married couples and at the lack of trust and communication between them, I started to wonder whether marriage in the West was based significantly more on open, honest relationships, or even on romantic love, than in Tajikistan. Also, considering the propensity of Westerners, especially but not only, men, for promiscuous behaviour I began to wonder how often Westerners were able to focus strongly on one specific person as the sole object of their passion (cf. chapter 7).

During the course of a BBC television inquiry into the orgasm, one young English woman recounted how a few years ago when she was seventeen, she and a group of women of her age and a little older, together with a few men, were discussing the existence of the female orgasm. Not one of the women had ever experienced one but they had all heard about it and were desperate to know if it were real. Several of the men, including one of forty years of age, maintained that women could not experience orgasm, that this was something limited to men. This all sounded so much like discussions in Tajikistan that listening to it I felt as if these two worlds had suddenly been conflated and this, more than anything else, brought home to me how very many similarities there are between Britain and other Western countries, and Tajikistan. Why this should be was a question I kept asking myself throughout this research.

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8 According to a BBC 2 television broadcast on 14/6/99 produced by the Community Programme Unit.
9 Broadcast as part of the BBC learning zone on 8th September 1999.
The Trajectory of the Book

This introduction and chapter 1 provide the conceptual basis for the book. They discuss the research approach and the theoretical framework, and also provide the conceptual and historical background to Tajikistan and its social institutions. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with relations between the Soviet state and the Tajik people. With the exception of the material from Karomat, they are almost entirely based on secondary sources. Chapter 2 discusses the political institutions used by the Soviet government to conquer the minds and bodies of its citizens. Next, chapter 3 deals with the turning back of Soviet discourse on the government, as the Tajiks forged a weapon of resistance in the shape of those very same traditions it was attempting to destroy. Together these two chapters demonstrate how the performance of gender identity was at the centre of the struggles for political control in Central Asia.

Chapters 4 through 7 deal with the internal policing of Tajik society and are based almost exclusively on fieldwork. They show how the success of the Tajik people in resisting Sovietisation became the site of oppression for members of the Tajik community and how this in turn gave rise to new forms of resistance within Tajik society.

Chapter 4 examines how the micro-mechanisms of power function within the Tajik community. Chapter 5 shows how parents wield control over their children's lives, particularly in their choice of marital partner. Chapter 6 deals with young people's own desires and hopes for the future, and chapter 7 explores the marital relationship itself.

Each chapter draws on the theoretical framework as a whole. At the same time in each chapter one particular aspect comes to the fore. Chapter 2 explores institutional power, how this is applied by the state and how gender identities, which may appear irrelevant at the macro level, are in fact vital to the (re)construction of ethnic identity. Chapter 3 shows the way discourse can harden hitherto relatively flexible practices. Chapter 4 shows how the resistance of Tajiks to Soviet encroachment helped produce the mechanisms for the repression of its own members and how gender identities form the backbone of these mechanisms. Chapter 5 explores the family. It looks at the way that gender identity is generation dependent and the meaning of this for family power relations. Chapter 6 discusses the way people enact multiple gender performances, and how they manipulate these for their own ends, and chapter 7 explores the necessary prerequisites for passionate love and the tensions between individualism and community interests through a discussion of married life and sexual relations.

Chapter 8 is by way of conclusion. It summarises the results of my analyses and situates them in relevant theories derived from feminist research. It discusses the vital importance of gender norms for (cultural) identity, and the similarity of these norms over the apparently impregnable boundaries between West and Muslim East. Finally, it suggests directions for future research.
Control and Subversion

Zora, herself raised in an urban culture, thought her husband was overreacting and that his attitude reflected his village upbringing. Why should Dila be different from any other female student, she wanted to know. Finally, as a result of Zora's most vehement insistence that she would watch over her daughter all the time and ensure she did not step out of line, Dila was allowed to wear Russian clothes after all, but Fayziddin kept strict reins on her throughout her student days.

When Ali started college he found himself unable to concentrate or to do much work. As a result his parents ended up paying for him to pass the exams he could not manage on his own. Ali has now finished college but he cannot find a job, so he spends most of his time at home. Dila is also at home much of the time and the two of them bicker constantly. Their parents, however, demand total obedience from the two of them, just as they did when they were little. Fayziddin no longer beats his son, who is now stronger than his father, but he will brook no opposition from him, any more than from Dila. Ali can sulk, but, like his sister he does not dare answer his father back or refuse to obey him. He knows that it would be a serious offence to confront him directly.

Dila and Ali are neither materially or psychologically able to free themselves from their parents. Ali, in particular, resents their authority over him but for the time being he is unable to relinquish his dependence on them. Without their help he could not have got through college and he is unlikely to obtain a job or be able to marry except through his parents' intervention. Dila too knows she has no option but to accept parental authority until such time as control over her is passed to her future husband and his family.

In the following chapters I will present more about Zora and Fayziddin and their children, along with stories of other families and individuals. These will address my research questions in greater detail. Meanwhile, this story provides a context for the presentation of my theoretical framework, illustrating some dynamics of Tajik family relationships and how these are affected by interaction with the wider community.

As the male head of the family control is largely Fayziddin's responsibility, while Zora's main task is to keep the household running on a daily basis, and Dila and Ali as they grow up are expected to assimilate the appropriate behaviour for their respective genders, at times coercively inculcated. The latters' resentment of their parents' dominion over them is tempered by their material and psychological inability to break away. However, Fayziddin's dominant stance does not mean that he holds all the power within the family and that the other members meekly assume positions of subordination. Even Dila, who, as a young woman holds a very low position in the family, is able to exert a certain degree of power. Moreover, it is notable that she behaves quite differently in front of the different members of her family. That is to say, she varies the way she performs her gender depending on which family member she is with and their expectations of her. With her father she is the most submissive, living up to the prescribed behaviour for young girls. However, she exhibits less docility with her mother, while behaving anything but submissively with her younger brother. Thus, power circulates between the members of this family in such a way that each person is able to exert power on the others. So Dila, for instance, can put pressure on her father, but only through her mother, not by directly standing up to him.