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WHEAT THE MAGNIFICENT
Revisiting a Central Asian agricultural ritual

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ABSTRACT. Central Asia is one of the transitional regions in the world where wheat and rice cultures meet. Many imaginations of (national) identity, belonging, health and purity are connected to cereals. Wheat and bread have long been considered almost sacred in Central Asia. Wheat, which is often regarded as a symbol of agriculture per se, is at the root of a number of gendered rituals and foods. While pre-Soviet rituals involving wheat, flour and wheat products exist in only vestigial form today, they still inform norms of behaviour, gender-specific roles, hospitality and consumption. By examining ethnographic materials on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century agricultural rites involving wheat from eastern Tajikistan (then part of the Emirate of Bukhara), the article explores the gendered aspects of cereal rituals and discusses how norms derived from cereal potentialities are accepted, interpreted or challenged today.

May the house be prosperous, sweet [and] healthy	Manzil obod, shirin, ozod
May [God's] blessing be upon Bobo-yi Dehqon	Boboi Dehqon ba salavot
Grace to those who have borne [the food]	Ke[l]tirganlarga rahmat
Grace to those who have eaten [the food]	Yeganlarga rahmat
Amen, God is the Greatest.	Omin, Allahu akbar.

This short prayer caught my ear in a kitchen just outside the old city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan after eating a delicious melon with several members of my host family.[1] It was my first live encounter with Bobo-yi Dehqon, literally 'Grandfather Farmer', a mythical figure regarded as the patron saint of agriculture who had occupied a venerable place in pre-Soviet agricultural life, but was now largely forgotten.[2] Before that afternoon, I had only read the name in manuscripts and old ethnographic accounts, where Bobo-yi

1 This was in July 2007, and the woman who uttered it was the mother of the family and a long-time interlocutor and friend. The language switches from the original Tajik to Uzbek in the third and fourth lines. The translation of this and all other oral and written quotes from Uzbek, Tajik and Russian are mine. A similar saying in Uzbek only is quoted by Imomov *et al.* (1990:110–111): 'Sweet juice, prosperous home, blessing upon Bobo Dehqon, grace to his fathers and forefathers who have sown and tethered [the melon], Amen' ('Shirin-sharbat, mazgil obod, bobo dehqonga salavot, ekanning, tikanning oto-bobosiga rahmat, omin'). In their following explanation, the authors identify Bobo-yi Dehqon with any able farmer who sows and cultivates. This understanding, however well founded, is still, in my opinion, too narrow, as will be shown in the present article.

2 Strictly speaking, Islamic doctrines do not embrace the concept of sainthood, but call such persons 'friends of God' (in Central Asia usually 'avliya' or similar variants). The other word used is 'pir' which equates these personages with spiritual leaders in a Sufi tradition.

Dehqon is usually described as a figure connected to grain cultivation.[3] Apart from the name, perceptions of who or what Bobo-yi Dehqon was differed to a puzzling degree among my interlocutors. For some he was the patron (*pir*) of agriculture, a mythical, supernatural being who guarded the growing of cereals, especially wheat. Others equated him with the first human being and apical farmer, Adam. Still others, in fact the majority of the people I talked to, viewed the name as an eponym of any able, extraordinarily knowledgeable farmer and only incidentally understood him as a supernatural being. This was especially the case in official discourses in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where overt references to so-called past superstitions are avoided, and among 'new farmers'. By these I mean either descendants of formerly non-agrarian individuals who were encouraged or compelled to work in agriculture during Soviet times, especially in the course of land reclamation campaigns, or those who have turned to agriculture more recently as a means of sustenance during the economically dire years of independence in Central Asia and the Tajik civil war (cf. Herbers 2006:279–280). Telling in this respect are the entries for 'Bobo[iy] dehqon' in the two editions of the monolingual Uzbek dictionary, "O'zbek tilining izohli lug'ati", from 1981 and 2008 respectively. While the earlier edition explains the name as 'the pir, the master of farmers' ('dehqonlarning piri, ustozi') and only secondarily as any exceptionally able, renowned farmer ('dehqonchiliq ishi g'oyat usta, obro'li dehqon') (1981:125), the 2008 edition reverses this sequence. It also distances itself from the supernatural figure by relegating the understanding of Bobo-yi Dehqon as patron saint of agriculture to the realm of legends.[4]

The present article investigates late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century agricultural rituals in Central Asia centred around the figure of Bobo-yi Dehqon, the traditional value hierarchy of cereals that gave wheat a quasi-sacral status, the gendered dimensions of wheat and its processing, and their vestiges today. It specifically asks about the ways in which shifts between the male and female spheres of handling wheat were mediated within the socio-cosmic field (Hardenberg 2016) and what kinds of obligations the cosmic field imposed on practical agricultural labour and vice versa. I argue that, by linking the spiritual and mundane worlds, as well as male and female labour contributions, a cyclical shift between spheres of competence, responsibilities and restriction in wheat-growing becomes visible, a pattern I call the wheat cycle. Within rural communities, these shifts were marked by recurrent rites of passage. Taking up Pierre Bourdieu's (1992:80) observation that rites of passage separate those who are entitled to participate not from those who are not yet entitled, but rather from those who never

3 In the Autonomous Region of Mountainous Badakhshan in Tajikistan and adjacent areas Bobo-yi Dehqon is often called Shogun or Shogunī. See Kislīakov and Pisarchik (1966:115) and Krasnowolska (1998:121; 2011).

4 Literally, the 2008 edition says: 'According to legends among Central Asian peoples, the patron of agriculture, the patron saint […]' ('O'rta Osiyo xalqlari orasidagi rivoyatlarga ko'ra, dehqonchiliq homiysi, piri […]') (O'zbek tilining izohli lug'ati 2008:292).

will be entitled, the present article treats ritual performance as a recurrent enactment of gender roles and mediations between the mundane and the spiritual.

Reconstructing this wheat cycle in pre-Soviet Central Asia, particularly in contemporary southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, areas that used to belong to the Emirate of Bukhara until its dissolution in 1920, naturally comes with certain challenges. The reverence for wheat was most pronounced in rural environments. Being neither entirely mundane nor 'properly' Islamic, cereal rituals are seldom mentioned in indigenous sources because they were considered more or less common knowledge and furthermore derived from a class that was considered uneducated. The only Central Asian indigenous source that talks at any length about the issues tackled here is the "Codex of conduct or manual for farming",[5] a title that subsumes a range of similar codices providing information about the patron saint of agriculture, the value hierarchy of cereals and other agricultural produce, the moral obligations of the farmer and basic Islamic tenets.[6] They were written to offer moral and spiritual guidance to farmers, not to provide information on agricultural rituals. Consequently the texts do not pay attention to either local climate and soil conditions or to localized beliefs and rituals.

Thus, in reconstructing the cereal rituals connected to wheat, the present article leans on Russian colonial and Soviet ethnographies. Unfortunately, a complete agricultural cycle in one concrete location, of the sort that would have been performed in the period before the socialist restructuring of agriculture, has not been recorded anywhere. Instead, there is detailed information about different seasonal work patterns and ritual proceedings. This reflects Soviet research methods where field research did not imply an anthropologist's extended sojourn in a given locality but rather an 'ethnographic expedition' that encompassed anthropologists, archaeologists and other experts trying to interview as many people as possible in a short period of time, usually elders considered knowledgeable. Information garnered in this way was then often ordered with little concern for concrete localities, which could be quite diverse in culture, microclimate, and social and geographical conditions.[7] Microclimate and geography, however, contribute to local patterns of economic activities, agricultural calendars, crops that can be grown and techniques that may be employed. Soviet ethnographies of agriculture have both advantages and disadvantages. Indispensable though they are for their wealth of detailed information, especially on material culture, they do not organize their findings into hierarchies of experience or hearsay, but try to capture as much 'traditional' knowl-

5 In Tajik "Risolayi dehqonī", in Uzbek "Dehqonchiliq risolasi". Individual copies of this text were not standardized and thus show slight differences in content. They mostly come in the form of small booklets. All the differences in style, pious admonitions and hagiographic narratives aside, all codices rely on a core of shared written and oral elements. For more details, see Gavrilov (1912, 1928) and Dağyeli (2011).

6 Many other professions had similar codices which sometimes touched upon the creation myth of agriculture as well.

7 See, for example, Shermuhammadov (1973:42–43). The legacy of this approach is also visible today, for example, in Ashirov (2007:136–139).

edge as possible. 'Exotic' information was occasionally preferred to the more ordinary data. It is not always discernible whether certain statements from interlocutors refer to something he or she has recently experienced, witnessed once in childhood, or heard from his or her own grandparents, but did not actively practise anymore. Moreover, because of political considerations and different approaches and methodologies, information concerning pre-Soviet popular beliefs does not always consider the religious backgrounds of the informants. Sometimes material from areas that were inhabited by Ismaili or that had a recent Ismaili past were mixed up with other information on predominantly Sunni localities, raising the question of if and to what degree these sectarian differences also marked differences in agricultural rituals.[8]

What the 'codices of conduct' and Soviet ethnographies have in common is that they reflect a normative view of how rituals should be conducted and how the agricultural cycle should be performed, rather than describing concrete events with actual people acting. Some of these impediments could be mitigated by my own fieldwork, but naturally not completely removed given the historical time that has passed.[9] A reconstruction of the wheat cycle and cereal rituals thus necessarily remains just that – an attempt to bring back to life and give meaning to something from the past which reaches into the present, but which probably always entails some degree of fiction or misinterpretation.

Cereals between commodity and sacralisation

Central Asia is one of the transitional regions in the world where wheat and rice cultures meet. Many imaginations of (national) identity, belonging, health and purity are connected to them. They share a history of sacralization and are the basis for a number of gendered foods and rituals. Apart from millet, which is largely neglected today, wheat was the staple food in Central Asia before the introduction of rice, especially in mountainous regions where rice could not be grown and that remained beyond reach or virtually unknown until the later decades of the Soviet period.[10] Even in lowland areas

8 The Ismaili population of eastern Tajikistan belongs to the Nizari branch of this Shiite denomination. Relationships between predominantly Ismaili and Sunni communities were manifold during their long history of cohabitation but increasingly strained by the late nineteenth century.

9 The bulk of my fieldwork that produced information on pre-Soviet agriculture was conducted as part of my research project on "The moral economy of land and water", conducted within the framework of the research group "The politics of resources", funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung and located at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, between 2014 and 2018. Supplementary material comes from my earlier work in and on Central Asia and will be indicated accordingly.

10 I heard this various times throughout stays in mountain villages or small towns more remote from urban centres. Such statements about the non-availability of rice are indirectly confirmed by a book with recipes from the Pamir region. While dwelling extensively on wheat and other grains, it men-

rice was a prestige food that was not always available to the poorer parts of the population. Bert Fragner sees this as an indicator of a culinary rift existing in spite of much culinary communality between China and India on the one hand, where cheap varieties of rice were the most basic food, and Central Asia, Iran and the Caucasus on the other, where rice remained an exclusive grain (1994:56–60). However, his conclusion that rice only entered the culinary domain in these latter regions in the post-Mongol era is Iranocentric. Unlike in Iran, rice cultivation has a long history in Central Asia, especially in the Ferghana Valley (Wulff 1966:242).

It was perhaps because of the general availability of rice during Soviet times that the rice dish *osh-palov*, often simply called 'osh', came to be perceived as the culinary marker of Central Asian food identity up to the point that recent publications on food in Central Asia do not even mention wheat as a staple food (cf. Mack 2003:133). In the post-Soviet period, when independent Central Asian states vie with each other to nationalize the heritage of their formerly entangled histories, cereals like wheat and rice, and outstanding foods prepared from them play an important role. Even a big international organization like UNESCO, which declared both 'Oshi palav, a traditional meal and its social and cultural contexts in Tajikistan' and the 'Palov culture and tradition' of Uzbekistan intangible heritage in 2016, supports this competition by presenting the dish not as shared heritage, but as two different national traditions.[11] 'Osh-palov', the Central Asian name of the rice dish mentioned above, is worth a closer look: 'Osh' in its contemporary usage signifies this rice dish itself as well as cooked food ranked as a full meal in general. In its original form, however, 'osh'meant a kind of wheat porridge.[12]

Given the availability of the more robust millet and other cereals like barley and rice, at least in the Central Asian lowlands, the question remains how wheat could become the most desirable, spiritually laden and valued grain to the point that it almost stands as a synonym for agriculture and grain cultivation as such, especially considering the other highly valued grain rice. Wheat has long been considered an almost sacred plant in Central Asia. A once popular and widespread pre-Socialist piece of admonitory literature, the aforementioned "Codex of conduct for farming", reminded the pious farmer to address certain plants by using honorific titles when approaching them in order to ensure a rich harvest. Prominent among these ten or so plants in such booklets is wheat, which is usually mentioned first. This listing of plants in descending hierarchical order provides a rare insight into indigenous valuations of crops:

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tions rice briefly only once when giving the ingredients for a milk- and rice-type dish called 'shirbirinj', adding that this was a luxury treat because of the rice (van Oudenhoven and Haider 2015:287).

11 Https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?term[]=vocabulary_thesaurus-1563 (accessed March 5, 2018)

12 Fragner (1994:55). As attested in contemporary cookbooks on Persian cuisine, 'osh' still signifies porridge or soup dishes, which today, however, may be prepared with cereals as well as pasta or rice.

> Every farmer shall know the honorific title (*tasbeh*) of the plants.[13] He shall say these honorific titles when approaching the plants:
>
> When approaching wheat (*bug'doy*), he shall say: O magnificent (*yo azim*).
> When approaching barley (*arfa*), he shall say: O majestic (*yo jalil*).
> When approaching rice (*sholi*), he shall say: O mighty (*yo aziz*).
> When approaching sorghum (*jo'gori*), he shall say: O hider of sins (*yo sattor*).
> When approaching mung beans (*mosh*), he shall say: O laudable (*yo hamid*).
> When approaching common millet (*torig'*), he shall say: O gentle (*yo ra'uf*).
> When approaching foxtail millet (*qunoq*), he shall say: O all-eternal (*yo qadim*).
> When approaching muskmelons (*qovun*), he shall say: O you who knows the hidden (*yo olim al-g'uyub*).
> When approaching carrots (*koshur*), he shall say: O powerful (*yo qadir*).
> When approaching onions (*fiyoz*), he shall say: O ruler (*yo malik*).
> When approaching alfalfa (*yurincha*), he shall say: O lord (*yo sohib*).
>
> God the Most Exalted remembers every plant on earth […] But rich harvest will be given to every farmer who remembers the honorific titles of the plants [and] who recites their praise and says a prayer of blessing when approaching any plant.[14]

From this list one can see that not only wheat but also barley precedes rice. Today, however, barley plays only a marginal role in most areas. The cereals, legumes, fruit and vegetables listed represent an inventory of the most important food and fodder crops grown and consumed in Central Asia before the advent of the modern market economy, with its constant supply of imported goods. All the honorary titles of these plants are epithets of God that glorify God's characteristics and faculties. Another codex shows these plants as silently repeating in a human-like attitude praises of God (*zikr*),[15] in the case of wheat the epithets 'O bringer of judgement, O majestic' ('yo hasib, yo jalil') (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz MS oct. or. 1656:78). This same text places wheat at the origin of an important legume, the mung bean, which was transformed from green wheat by divine intervention. After Adam declined a wish from God, wheat began to sprout. Mistaking it as a weed, he and his sons burned it to ashes and nothing grew anymore. After Adam's prayer, God made the mung bean appear from the remains of the unripe wheat (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz MS oct. or. 1656:79). This narrative probably owes its existence to the outward similarity between these small green beans and unripe grains of wheat.

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13 Literally, 'tasbeh' means uttering short prayer in sentences or words to glorify God. Prayer beads used to keep track of their number are called by the same name. Often the so-called 99 beautiful names of God are associated with *tasbeh*. Thus, the sentence cited above makes reference to God's honorific titles.

14 Institut Vostokovedenĭa AN Respubliki Uzbekistan (IVRUz)-1 7287, fol. 359a; translated from Chaghatay, a linguistic ancestor of Uzbek

15 The term 'zikr' is the Uzbek and Tajik version of the original Arab 'dhikr'.

The fact that wheat is ranked first in the codices is no coincidence. Wheat is associated with a dual sacralizing narrative. On the one hand, its elevated status among agricultural crops in Central Asia is based on the widely known Koranic episode in which Adam's fall from grace was not caused by tasting the forbidden apple offered by Eve, as in the Bible, but by tasting the 'wheat tree' (*darakhti gandum*). Wheat is thus endowed with a paradisiac origin. Popular narratives tell that paradisiac wheat bore berries as big as musk melons. However, since Adam and Eve did not require any food in paradise, they did not know the taste of wheat. The devil, always thinking how to have Adam and Eve expelled from paradise, could not enter paradise because its entrance was guarded by a serpent and a peafowl. However, he convinced both animals by tricking them with the promise of eternal life. The serpent swallowed the devil so God would not see him entering paradise. Once there, the devil cut some wheat and tempted Adam and Eve to try it. In Central Asian folk belief the indentation of the wheat berry still bears witness to Adam's bite.[16] According to other narratives, the indentation remained from the devil cutting off the wheat (Rakhimov 1957:182). By eating, Adam and Eve defiled paradise.[17] Enraged, God expelled them. After repentance, which, according to different sources, took from forty days to many years, God had mercy on Adam and taught him agriculture through the Angel Gabriel (Jabra'il), whom he ordered to give Adam a pair of oxen, a plough and other necessary tools. Through Gabriel's help Adam obtained the seeds of several cereals.[18] Alternative versions relate that Gabriel gave two sheaves of wheat to Adam and one to Eve. Once sown, wheat sprouted from Adam's seed and barley from Eve's. Millet originated from the tears cried by the oxen that had to leave paradise to assist Adam in agriculture (Al-Rabghūzī 2015:30).

One very original narrative tells of Gabriel giving oxen and a plough to Adam after his expulsion from paradise and of Adam refusing to accept them. Gabriel then asked the giants (*dev*) to plough, which they started immediately. Seeing this, Adam plucked up courage and started to plough with such force that the beginning of the furrow was in the East (*mashriq*) and the end in the West (*maghrib*) of the earth (Rakhimov 1957:182). Humankind sequentially learned from Adam how to sow, cultivate and harvest grain. The original plant of agriculture in these narratives is again wheat. Moreover, a dish based on wheat and meat (*halim osh*) is presented as the first dish prepared by heavenly assistance to provide Adam and his offspring with the bodily strength they needed to cultivate the land.[19]

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16 Rakhimov (1957:182), Sukhareva (1984:208–209), Krasnowolska (1998:124–125)

17 This defilement is described discreetly, and it is not entirely clear what is meant. Since Adam and Eve did not eat before tasting the wheat, the defilement of paradise probably refers to their excrement. See Rakhimov (1957:182).

18 Rakhimov (1957:182). See also Mukhiddinov (1975:91–92) for a variation of this narrative which does not describe Eve as present during the fall from grace. In this version Adam was by himself in paradise, since Eve had not yet been created.

19 Codex of conduct for weaving (MS IVRUz-1 4120, fols. 58b–59a), Codex of conduct of butchery (LIT 93/18:53–54). With some variations the same narrative can also be found in other *risola* texts. *Halim*

Besides these narratives, which lean, sometimes loosely, on the Koranic story of Adam, wheat is also conceived as being under the protection of the mythical figure of Bobo-yi Dehqon, introduced earlier as the archetype of the cultivator. In some narratives, this personage is even elevated to the rank of an angel (*farishta*), half-unicorn, half-bull, who, on the day of the spring equinox (Navruz), descended to earth showing humans how to prepare the fields by using his horn to create a furrow (van Oudenhoven and Haider 2015:69). He was also seen as the first to harness the trek ox. Bobo-yi Dehqon is a maverick among the patron saints of professions. Unlike most other *pir*, there are no hagiographies of Bobo-yi Dehqon. In all the corresponding narratives he appears more like an iconic figure than an actor with the traits of an individual.

The origins of Bobo-yi Dehqon are obscure. Although the name is Persian, the figure most probably predates the advent of Islam, which brought the Persian language to the Central Asian region. A seventh-century pre-Islamic mural from the house of a landowner and grain merchant discovered during an excavation in 1982 in western Tajikistan is interpreted as showing Bobo-yi Dehqon in human shape in the attire of a local deity invested with all attributes of a King-God (Naymark 2001:357–358). Aleksandr Naymark found several layers of cultural and religious history and assumed that, even at that time, wealthy farmers were perceived as incorporations of Bobo-yi Dehqon, their positions probably being largely hereditary (Marshak and Raspopova 1987, Naymark 2001:Chapter 6). In Badakhshan, these representatives of Bobo-yi Dehqon were often recruited from the religious elite.

The status of wheat also becomes visible in everyday attitudes towards bread, which is highly valued throughout Central Asia. As elsewhere,[20] bread simply has to be present. A meal without bread is not a proper meal, and some Central Asians I know would rather not eat soup at all if there were no bread with it. According to widely shared norms of behaviour, bread should not be treated disrespectfully or put on the table top down. If a piece falls on to the ground, it is picked up, kissed and put back on the table. Even if nothing else is offered or time is scarce, a visitor can expect to be offered a piece of bread and is in turn expected to taste it. If it has gone off, bread should not be thrown into the garbage, but disposed of separately. People with private garden plots will often leave it there 'for the birds' (although other animals might eat it, too). Even at large garbage dumps for multi-storey apartment blocks there is often a wall where left-over bread is left. Indeed some people, including those who are not in straitened financial circumstances, prefer to eat mouldy bread rather than throw it away.

Pre-Soviet Central Asia was apparently rich in wheat varieties, some of which were probably indigenous, others introduced at various times.[21] Some 153 varieties of durum

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osh is actually rather a porridge, thus staying closer to the original meaning of the word 'osh'.

20 See the contributions by Anja Bohnenberger and Katharina Graf in this collection.

21 Nikolaī Vavilov (1964) saw Central Asia as one of the global centres of the origins of plants, among them common wheat (Triticum aestivum).

wheat have been discovered in Badakhshan alone.[22] Wheat varieties are usually not distinguished semantically, with the exception of the general distinction between so-called white wheat (Tajik: *gandumi safed*) and red wheat (Tajik: *gandumi surkhak*), the latter possibly a variety of spelt.[23] Red wheat yields a better seed to harvest ratio, but only if cultivated in a warm climate. A complete survey of field-crop varieties in Central Asia is still lacking.[24] In Badakhshan many of these wheat varieties disappeared during the early 1990s, when, in the midst of the Tajik civil war, aid workers persuaded local farmers to sow a high-yielding variety of wheat, an experiment that failed tragically because the new wheat was not fit for the climate and rotted in the fields. When the farmers finally gave up the experiment, virtually no seeds from local varieties were left. Luckily they were still in circulation on the Afghan side of the border, and farmers managed to reintroduce them from there into Tajikistan (van Oudenhoven and Haider 2015:71).

This is not to suggest that no new varieties had been introduced or bred earlier. Exchange and experimentation always took place, as Abdul Nazarov, a farmer from a village in Badakhshan, illustrates. During the early twentieth century, before the sealing off of the border between the USSR and Afghanistan, Nazarov had learnt from his wife, who originated from the Afghan side of Badakhshan, about a wheat variety grown in the Kabul region. This wheat matured early and thus seemed ideal for the harsh Pamirian climate, with its short growing seasons. He managed to obtain seeds, and when the grain indeed ripened early and proved profitable, the variety spread throughout the region by the name of 'jindam-jaldak' ('fast maturing wheat') (Vavilov 1962:28). Vavilov was greatly impressed by this farmer, who grew several varieties of wheat on his fields and could discuss their characteristics, for example, regarding the quality of its flour or the yield ratio.[25] Given the geographical and climatic conditions in this and other mountainous parts of Central Asia, even early maturing wheat cannot be cultivated successfully everywhere. Vavilov set the altitudinal limit for wheat, naked barley and rye at 3,250 metres above sea level, and at 2,670 metres for millet (1962:22).

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22 Vavilov and Bukinich (1929), Vavilov (1964). For a short summary in English, see also van Oudenhoven and Haider (2015:69).

23 The term 'white wheat' was probably only a reference to the crop's colour, not its species, although Makhmadnaim Rakhimov (1957:49) identified it as 'triticum aestivum var. graecum', which was apparently the dominant variety in his area of research, the basin of the river Khingou in Tajikistan. The term 'red wheat' is encountered in many places between Turkey and Central Asia, but to my knowledge it has not yet been determined whether it is always the same species that is meant. In Turkish 'kızıl' or 'kavuzlu buğday' means 'spelt'. Rakhimov (1957:49) takes red wheat in the Khingou region to be 'triticum aestivum var. erythrospermun'.

24 For surveys of wheat and for an assessment of Khorasan wheat (Triticum turanicum), see Grausgruber *et al.* (2005). Khorasan wheat has lately become fashionable in the West, but it owes its survival largely to subsistence farming in Central Asia and the Near East (Grausgruber *et al.* 2005). Morgounov *et al.* (2010) also explore wheat breeding for varieties adapted to short growing seasons in the Soviet Union.

25 Vavilov (1962:28). For a short summary in English, see van Oudenhoven and Haider (2015:69).

Barley, sorghum and other millet varieties were important grains besides wheat, but they have now lost all of their relevance. Into the nineteenth century, sorghum was still cultivated widely, being used as a grain by nomads, as a famine food by agriculturalists and as fodder by both. Today the plant is virtually forgotten.[26] Its name, 'cho'gori', is now used for maize, which has replaced sorghum as a fodder crop.[27] There were apparently practical reasons for the transition from millet, as maize was less prone to be eaten up by birds before it could be harvested, it produced larger cobs and more starch, and its kernels would not drop if the harvest was delayed.[28] Millet seems to have been replaced easily because the new crop took over all its characteristics, mundane, spiritual and symbolic. However, the ousting of millet in favour of other cereals is not specific to Central Asia, but, as Roland Hardenberg (this collection) reports, can also be found in many places throughout Asia and Africa.

Labour and the gendered dimensions of the wheat cycle

Physical, mundane labour processes and the beliefs associated with cultivation belonged together. They were two potentialities operating in two different frames that bore on the same activity. By linking mundane agricultural labour to the supernatural world, a flow of divine grace (*barakat*) was ensured. Simultaneously, the strenuous physical work was re-evaluated in an environment that regarded this kind of labour as inferior to less onorous occupations.[29] The cultivated field becomes a chronotrope inseparably linked to the original achievements of Adam or Bobo-yi Dehqon in the primordial time that paved the way for agriculture. The many ritual practices that accompanied the agricultural cycle all operate in a socio-cosmic field that relates humans and non-humans.[30]

It is impossible to present an overview in a non-generic form for all the different shapes the agricultural cycle and corresponding rituals may take in the various former Bukharan regions of Central Asia. While some spiritual aspects and rituals, as well as labour practices, were disseminated widely even beyond the geographical limits set by the present article, they often incorporated local characteristics. In performing agricul-

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26 In summer 2018, I came across a dish called 'go'cha osh' (from Uzbek: 'ko'cha', 'street') in the Uzbek town of Kokand considered a specialty of Kokand made of sorghum. It was traditionally not prepared at home but served in teahouses or bought from street vendors, hence the name. Its consistency resembles more a thin porridge than an 'osh-palov'-type of rice dish, again recalling the Persian 'osh'.

27 The shift has probably been facilitated by the resemblance between growing sorghum and growing maize. Together with the name, maize seems to have inherited millet's prime classification as a fodder crop. In a conversation with several women from the rural Bukhara region one of them called the plant 'alapi gou' (literally, 'cow plant'), the general word for maize in her dialect.

28 Oral information from my friend and colleague Sharifa Tosheva

29 Centlivres (1972:157), Dağyeli (2011:235–247), Strathmann (1980:141–142). For similar evaluations of work types in the wider Islamic world, see Brunschvig (1962) and Bonner (2001).

30 Cf. Hardenberg (2016, this collection).

tural labour, rituals and spirituality alike, individual actors, with their personal circumstances and current moods, as well as the weather, soils and microclimate, the state of crops and animals, and local politics, all played a part. In my description of the wheat cycle that follows, I will concentrate on ethnographies published between the 1930s and 1970s that describe the wheat cycle of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in mountainous regions of contemporary eastern Tajikistan, more precisely the Tavildara, Darvoz and Shughnan districts (Fig. 1).[31]

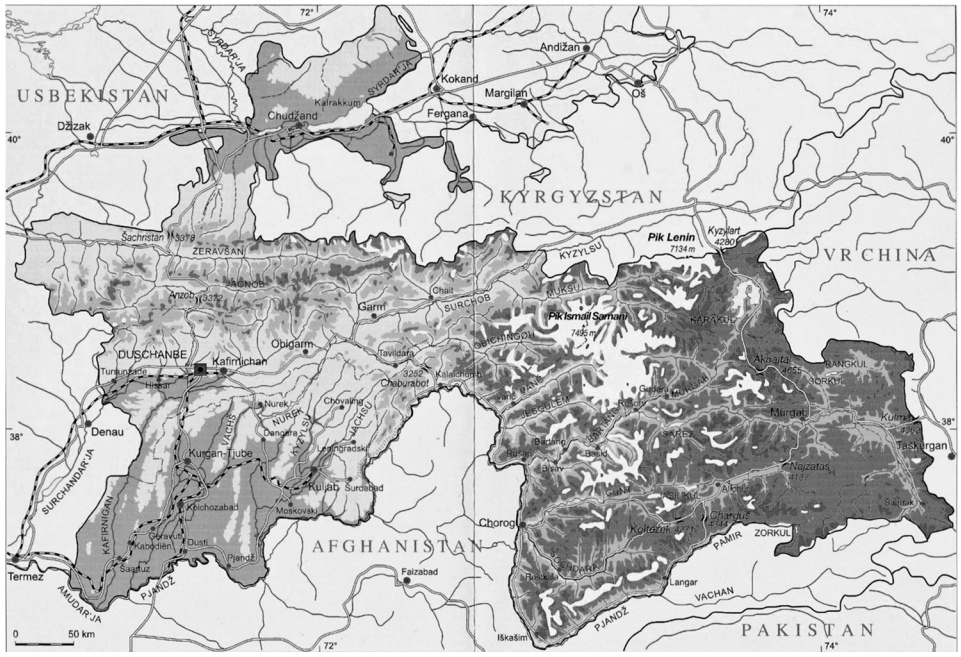

Figure 1: Map of Tajikistan (Akademiïa Nauk Tadzhikskoï SSR, Soviet po izuchniïa Proizvoditel'nykh Sil 1968:48–49)

Wheat in this region was sown as either a winter (*tiramohī*) or a spring (*bahorī*) crop and cultivated on irrigated as well as rain-fed fields. White wheat was the dominant variety, but red wheat was also a common sight in this area (Rakhimov 1957:49). Although the winter crop yielded a better return, since it was better supplied with humidity during its growing season, it was little grown.[32] New Year's Day, fixed at Navruz, the vernal equinox, was usually considered the start of the growing season. In fact, work, both

31 Lentz (1939), Rakhimov (1957), Andreev (1958), Kislïakov and Pisarchik (1966), Mukhiddinov (1975)

32 Kislïakov and Pisarchik (1966:113). Apparently, the authors were slightly irritated by this seemingly 'irrational' behaviour and added that during the first Soviet decades the winter crop had almost replaced the spring crop. Given the prevaling land shortages, poor soils and the need for a subsistence

ritual and mundane, started about a month earlier in the preceding Zodiac month of Hut (Pisces), which starts on 18 February.[33] By the beginning of Hut, the fields had been prepared. Snow was carried to the fields and spread there (*khokzanī*) in order to moisten the soil when it melted. If available, manure was spread on the fields (*porukashī*), and seeds, ploughs, yokes and other implements were examined. Hut was perceived as a liminal period and implied a number of rituals and taboos. For example, visitors from outside the village were not welcome during this period. It was feared that the visitor, especially if poor, would bring failing harvests and thus poverty with him. The ban on visiting is a remarkable reversal of usual patterns of behaviour which give an important place to hospitality. The restriction on sociability was only lifted at Navruz when, after ritual first-footing, the normal host-guest relationship was restored.[34] Although the date of Navruz is officially fixed on the day of the solar equinox, in practice it is very flexible in mountainous regions, where formerly it was locally determined by the melting of snow, the day when the sun-rays first reached a certain hilltop in the immediate environment or other phenological signs. Today, with fixed calendars and with Navruz being an official holiday in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, mountain communities often celebrate not only the official holiday, but also their local Navruz on a date determined by their natural environment.

Ritual preparations for the new agricultural year were intricately linked to wheat and flour, and separated according to gender. Women cleaned their houses with brooms that had been sprinkled with wheat flour and adorned the ceiling with patterns made of flour to drive out the evil spirits. *Kochī*, a type of porridge made from flour, butter and milk that typified several facets of the Navruz rituals, was cooked early in the morning. During the cooking and cleaning, men had to leave the house. When they returned they offered a greeting, called the greeting of Bobo-yi Dehqon. Bobo-yi Dehqon played a vital, spiritual role during the agricultural cycle, especially during the spring preparation of fields and the sowing, and then again during the harvest and the further processing of wheat. An elderly man, accepted by the community as a representative of the mythical Bobo-yi Dehqon, led the rituals. Only after a male congregation had assembled in the mosque to offer prayers and share bread was it considered permissible to start agricultural work.

On the morning of Navruz (or the day fixed as the beginning of the agricultural year), the drought oxen present in the community were offered a greeting, invited into the house and offered human food, mostly a type of flat-bread or deep-fried dough

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economy, however, the farmers' decision to grow a spring crop first, followed by another crop that could be harvested quickly (e.g. alfalfa) on the same field, was quite rational.

33 Wolfgang Lentz (1939:55) remarked that, according to farmers' almanacs of this region, the month of Hut deviated from the Zodiac month preceding it by around ten days. It cannot be verified anymore which time calculation is referred to in the ethnographic literature on which this description is based.

34 Rakhimov (1957:187–188). 'First-footing' refers to a ritual by which an elected individual enters a house, for example on New Year's Eve and is regarded as the bearer of glad tidings.

balls (*borsuq*). The wife of the Bobo-yi Dehqon representative rubbed the horns and necks of the oxen with fat left over from frying while saying: 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, O oxen, we eat the bread of your necks' labour, we coat your neck with fat so it will not hurt, we coat your horn with fat so the world may eat its fill and there may be abundant bread'. The horns were then floured, and one flatbread was spiked on each horn. The boys and men gathered separately in the field, bringing with them the *kochī* porridge from the previous day, some of which was put on the muzzle of the oxen. Only then would the men sit down and start to eat. The food should be finished, however, the leftovers again being offered to the oxen. What the oxen did not finish was taken, and people smeared it into one another's faces. Accompanied by prayers and invocations of Bobo-yi Dehqon, an old man would scatter some seeds on the ground. It was regarded as important that there was still snow on the ground because when it melted it would take the prayers and blessings into the ground. A pair of oxen were tied to the yoke and made the first furrows. Only after the ritual ploughing were others allowed to plough their fields. Transgressors were punished by disciplinary measures, their plough being confiscated and burned by the mosque. Especially if they themselves and their ancestors were poor, they were said to cause a bad harvest and consequent hunger through their violation of this rule (Rakhimov 1957:187).

After this ceremonial first ploughing the women joined in, bringing *sumalak,* a sweet pastry dish made from flour, wheat sprouts and water, and the festivities continued with dancing, jokes and entertainment. When the men and boys returned from the field after the first symbolic ploughing and sowing, they again ate some of the *kochī* porridge, though the women did not.[35] The (re-)bonding between humans, animals and cereals that characterizes this episode intimately linked the farmers to their draft animals and wheat. Like the first bonding to millet described by Peter Berger (this collection) for the Gadaba of central India, the porridge established or refreshed the relationship, ties the person to the grain and at the same time conveys the blessings this cereal is believed to incorporate. The two ritual foods, *kochī* (prepared from flour of the last harvest) and *sumalak* (prepared from fresh wheat sprouts), at the same time represent the male and female spheres of the ritual. While both dishes are cooked by women in the absence of men, only the latter is also consumed by women.

Especially during this spring ritual, the mythical Bobo-yi Dehqon was not an absent, invisible spirit helper of wheat cultivation and agriculture in general but embodied by a wealthy, knowledgeable, experienced, elderly and healthy farmer with his own land. Ideally, this farmer should also be the father and grand-father of numerous children. He acted as the representative of the spirit throughout agricultural rituals and was himself called Bobo-yi Dehqon. The wealth required to fulfil this position surely had a figurative, magical component. Wealth was a mundane sign of divine blessing, and by leading the rituals this blessing could be transferred to the whole community. There was,

[35] Andreev and Polovcev (1911:22), Rakhimov (1957:186)

however, another, economic side to it as well. The office of Bobo-yi Dehqon demanded a series of expenditures, especially for food shared at the mosque, which a less affluent household might not have been able to shoulder. In an environment where wealth often consisted in material, yet perishable items and where luxury goods that could be bought with money were scarce, cereal and other rituals were a way of redistributing wealth within the community while at the same time of investing in the social ties that might be needed in the next harvest season, when the demand for agricultural labour peaked.

During the harvest rituals, it was less the human embodiment of Bobo-yi Dehqon than the invisible presence of the spirit itself that mattered. Harvest demanded a lot of hands at the same time, and besides family members and labour drawn together from solidarity networks or previous obligations, hired cradlers were employed if financial means were sufficient (Fig. 2). When mowing, the cradlers spared one small part of the field taken as the head of the field, where the spikes of two or three sheaves were left. Only at the very end were these sheaves cut, signalling that Bobo-yi Dehqon had withdrawn from the field but remained close to the harvested grain (Mukhiddinov 1975:103).

Figure 2: Harvest on rain-fed wheat fields above Kushkiya village (Tajikistan). May 2016 (photo: J.D.)

After the harvest, the grain was brought to the threshing floor (*khirmon*) (Fig. 3). As even now few farmers in these peripheral mountain areas have access to threshing machines, threshing was usually done by the help of oxen or other animals. The threshing

floor was a specific, socio-cosmic place where mundane labour met spiritual meaning. Accordingly, it was called the tablecloth (*dasturkhon*) of Bobo-yi Dehqon. It was regarded as a pure and sacred place which was not to be desecrated by stepping on it in shoes, by making noise or by the presence of young women, who might be menstruating. The threshed grain was piled on a heap which was said to represent Bobo-yi Dehqon. Sometimes the heap was adorned with patterns, an item was placed on the top of it to represent Bobo-yi Dehqon's cap, or the position of his eyes was marked. Before the grain was brought to the granary, a portion called the 'share of Bobo-yi Dehqon' ('haqq-i Bobo-yi Dehqon') was set apart for distribution to beggars. The set-aside wheat can be seen as a return of divine grace through the redistribution of wealth within the community, which would count as a meritorious deed for the giver and hopefully secure future grace from God (cf. Pitt-Rivers 1992).

Figure 3: Threshing. Turkestan, end of nineteenth century (Turkestan Album, LC-DIG-ppmsca-09955–00157 [digital file from Part 3, pl. 34, no. 157]. Courtesy Library of Congress)

The specific taboos and apotropaic measures applied to the cutting of the last sheaves and grain on the threshing floor were not only a feature of this region but could be met in similar forms in other Central Asian regions and beyond. In the Ferghana Valley, it was less the field than the wheat itself that seems to have been personified, in this case as 'Mother Wheat' (*ona bug'doy*). If this is to be taken literally from the scant ethno-

graphic evidence, it would be a striking parallel to the anthropomorphic image of corn discussed by Bohnenberger (this collection). The grain from the last sheaves of the year's harvest was stored until the following spring, when some of the wheat was ground and baked into bread. This bread was taken to the field by the men, who, while eating it, asked for a plentiful harvest and addressed Mother Wheat and Bobo-yi Dehqon (Ashirov 2001:11). The remaining wheat berries were used as seed. Malcolm Lyall Darling, a member of the British Indian Civil Service, recorded apotropaic measures connected to the threshing floor from the Punjab: when the grain heaps were piled on the threshing floor after the harvest, a paper bearing the name of God was put into a split piece of wood and stuck into each heap to keep evil spirits away. In central India Darling witnessed the same procedure but using iron hand-sickles instead of wood (1930:283, 1934:63–64). A circle was drawn around the threshing floor; men were not allowed to step inside this line with shod feet and women not at all. According to Darling, the reason given for the exclusion of women was either that they were unclean (though whether they were generally regarded as such or only while menstruating is not recorded) or that potentially evil-minded spirits like *jinns* could not resist their attractions and would consequently come close to the grain as well. According to Darling, the magical guarding of the grain was less evident during his time in the early 1930s than earlier, a change he blamed on a weakening of faith (1934:63).

Sowing, growing and threshing wheat were male-dominated or even male-only tasks modelled on the performance of Bobo-yi Dehqon in his double sense as a spirit and a representative of humanity. After the harvest, however, this role and with it male dominance in handling the grain, passed into the female domain. Traditionally in this area wheat and other cereals were not stored as grain but as flour. In the mountainous villages, the water mills used for milling could not operate during the winter because the small streams which drove them froze. Therefore the milling had to be done throughout the autumn and into early winter. When the men carrying the grain to the local mill and taking the flour back home arrived at their house, the female head of the household took some flour from their bags and sprinkled it on their shoulders. This mark, called 'bun', was considered a blessing and expressed a wish for sufficient flour to see the family through the winter. The giving of *bun* can be conceived as the point at which the hitherto predominantly male involvement with wheat shifts into the female sphere. The flour was stored in storage rooms. Only women, often only the female head of the household, had the key, which the latter carried around with her. When the flour was put into storage, she said a short prayer that the flour would remain ritually pure (*halol*). It was the women who determined how much flour should be taken out and when. The woman responsible for portioning out the flour and thus for seeing the family through the winter did so with the help of special measuring vessels.[36]

[36] This is based on my own fieldwork in Bartang and Qal'ai Khumb, in 2007.

This description reveals several shifts between the social and the cosmic, as well as between the male and female spheres. The transition points are the germination and the milling of wheat. Before Navruz, women allowed some wheat berries to sprout inside the house. These were later used in the preparation of the Navruz dish *sumalak* (Fig. 4), which is cooked in a large pot overnight. Its preparation, if done properly, is time-consuming. The paste has to be stirred regularly throughout the night. Its preparation was an exclusively female task which took place in a festive mood, with music and other entertainment.[37] After the *sumalak* is ready, it was (and still is) distributed to everyone. If one takes germination as an anticipation of the growth of cereals in the field, of the transformation of food into a plant, its counterpart is threshing and milling, a transformation of the plant into food. The wheat substance oscillates between its plant phase, the male sphere, and its food phase, the female sphere, throughout the wheat cycle.

Figure 4: Preparing *sumalak*. Dushanbe (Tajikistan), March 2002 (photo: J.D.)

Interestingly, these lines have recently become blurred again, this time because of professionalization. In the official, identity-generating discourse centred on an allegedly time-honoured tradition, the preparation of *sumalak* is still clearly situated in the female

37 Nowadays men sometimes join in to take turns with the stirring, but the organization of the work is left to experienced elderly women.

domain. More recently, however, male cooks in hotel restaurants have taken over its preparation. In public presentations, their professional cooking is highlighted over the domestic, putatively less professional preparation of *sumalak* by women.[38] The cautious shift of *sumalak* as the dish connected most explicitly with the female ritual domain is also interesting in comparison with other dishes made from flour, which are still almost exclusively prepared by women. The gendered domains of cereals cross-cut equally gendered notions of public and private. Like the rice dish *osh palov*, which is either exclusively or at least preferably cooked by men, especially if offered publicly, the entry of *sumalak* into the restaurant and thus into the public domain marks its transition from the female to the male sphere of competence.[39]

Conclusion

Central Asian wheat rituals, deeply rooted in rural society and widely shared as they may have been, throve predominantly in small-scale communities. These rituals, which re-enacted the primordial time, asked for divine grace, transmitted knowledge and enforced norms of behaviour, segregation and redistribution, were dependent on communal participation. Not surprisingly they hardly exist anymore, except for the more festive, family-oriented elements. Often Soviet rule, with its hostility towards religion, is cited as the reason for the rapid disappearance of agricultural and other labour-related rituals. There is surely a measure of truth in this, but political opposition can hardly be the only or even the main cause.

As has been shown amply over almost the last thirty years, Central Asians have proved quite inventive in keeping alive religious traditions they considered important and performing them sometimes clandestinely, sometimes more or less openly. It was rather the rapidly changing sphere of labour itself, the restructuring of work places, labour relations and the mechanization of work that rendered many rituals meaningless in a short time. Adhamjon Ashirov gives a telling example from a village in the Ferghana Valley: the ritual of first ploughing, with all its elaborate donating and sharing of food with humans and animals, prayers and invocations, no longer existed there. At the same time, however, the farm workers were not just mundanely starting their agricultural work for the new season. Since they apparently considered themselves less peasants than tractor-drivers, they had adopted the patron saint of metal work, the prophet David (Davud), as their patron. Before the first work of the new season, they gathered in the tractor yard, slaughtered a cock in honour of the prophet and shared a meal together (Ashirov 2007:131).

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38 These remarks stem from random observations and deserve more thorough research.

39 This is not to suggest that there are no female professional cooks in Central Asia. The public representation of professional cooking is still, however, that it is male-dominated.

Norms derived from these potentialities of cereals are enacted, interpreted or challenged in a number of ways today. Central Asian governments, modernist Muslim dignitaries and people with Salafist leanings alike are trying to 'purify' Islam as lived in Central Asia from all supposedly 'pagan' elements, though sometimes from very different vantage points and with different desired future outcomes.[40] These attempts at 'purification' have a share in a development by which Bobo-yi Dehqon is increasingly understood as a knowledgeable, even economically successful farmer and less as the patron saint of agriculture. This role is assigned rather to the more canonical Adam, in so far as it is not abolished altogether. The Navruz celebration, on the other hand, is not only observed, but has even been elevated to the rank of a national holiday. The respect shown towards wheat, flour and bread is also very much alive. Even though ready-made flour from milling plants is available in shops today, local milling is still often preferred where local mills have survived. The flour is said to taste better, and the large milling plants are blamed for somehow altering the wheat's quality for the worse. Like in case of Morocco described by Graf (this collection), there is a deep-seated distrust of industrially processed goods which is imbricated with notions of belonging, nostalgia, identity and food scandals.

It is notable that it is mostly those rituals in the wheat cycle that belonged to the male sphere that have been given up. Here one indeed sees a result of Soviet religious policy. Given the traditional role of men as representatives of the family outside the domestic domain, the pressure to comply with political dictates was easier to exert and monitor. A core constituent of traditional Central Asian Islam was what Adeeb Khalid calls 'proxy religiosity', a representative religious practice whereby the morality and piety of elderly family members is also effective for the rest of the family, or even for a larger community (Khalid 2007:103). The elderly and women were scrutinized less, and thus age- and gender-specific expressions of piety, rituals and religious teaching survived, while those rituals that explicitly belonged to male-dominated working lives largely disappeared. Although these rifts in expressions of religiosity did not have any direct impact on gender relations as such, everyday Soviet religious policy, which often turned a blind eye to ritual practices considered 'female', fostered a public perception of these practices as being the genuine ritual.

40 Salafi is a heterogeneous revivalist Sunni ideological movement which has roots in the Wahhabi movement of the Arabian Peninsula. In Central Asia, different strands of Salafism only became popular from the 1980's onwards.

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