Shaping gender identity in Tajikistan: historical and contemporary contexts

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Introduction

Invisible people

I became interested in the issue of gender identity of people who are commonly called 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) in Tajikistan in the summer of 2015, when I was conducting an evaluation of the national HIV program. This program is coordinated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) since 2003. In the course of my evaluation, I had numerous meetings with the program beneficiaries from the three key populations affected by the HIV epidemic. Among these meetings were two focus groups in Kulyab and Dushanbe with people who are identified within the program as "MSM" (men who have sex with men). My attention was drawn by the fact that as the "MSM" participants started to open up during the focus groups, several of them began to talk about themselves using Russian female pronouns and grammatical forms. When we discussed their needs that the program could fulfill, people were saying how they would love to have space where "MSM" could gather, wear makeup, female clothes and dance female dances. After I heard the same thing at my second focus group in Dushanbe I have asked the participants if they considered themselves to be women, and at least half of the twelve "MSM" said that they did. I asked if they would make the transition if gender affirmation services were available in the country (they are not) and they said they would. At the same time, as it was clear from their presence in my focus group, they consent to be called "MSM" in particular settings, such as the HIV services who organized the meetings. A term 'transgender' never came up, but people used some local terms that I have not

heard before: *lak* and *degh*. As they explained to me with laughter, these terms meant "passive" and "active" sexual roles.

I was fascinated, as I have never read about these nuances during my desk review that preceded the evaluation fieldwork: except for two paragraphs in a human rights report (Equal Opportunities 2011), the literature on MSM/LGBT work in Tajikistan did not mention the existence of transgender people. During a briefing meeting with the evaluation team consisting of UNDP staff, NGO representatives, and several HIV professionals from the government institutions, the participants were shocked by my speculation that the focus group participants were probably transgender people; and were reluctant to my suggestion that the issue merits further exploration.

I came understood that the reluctance stemmed from the position of UNDP as the main mediator between the GFATM and the government. GFATM contributes the largest chunk of funding for the HIV work in the country and unequivocally requests that certain "key populations," such as MSM, are explicitly included in the prevention programs. The Government, on the other hand, would rather not acknowledge the existence of this group at all due to the exceptionally high level of public homophobia. UNDP has to maintain a tactful balance to ensure that the Program and the relevant government documents include MSM, but that the visibility of the group is yet minimal. For example, it took UNDP a significant effort to minimize the official estimated MSM population size. Measuring the population size was an unavoidable exercise aimed at producing a set of target indicators for the GFATM. The first 2008 report estimated the group size at 58 thousand (Vinogradov 2008) -- this unacceptably high figure has irritated the government officials. It took UNDP and their

international consultants seven years to arrive at the current estimate of 13400 (Kasyanchuk 2015).

Taking into consideration these challenges faced by UNDP, my suggestion to perform a needs assessment of an even more peculiar group of "MSM," who identified as women, would present an unnecessary confusion in the delicate diplomatic equilibrium. But for me, it was a fascinating issue both because I have never come across information on transgender people in Tajikistan before the focus group, and because it seemed significant for HIV work. I decided to focus my individual research within the Masters program on unpacking the term "MSM" and trying to understand the gender identities of my focus group participants.

As I started to explore the literature to prepare for the research, I came to appreciate the importance of the historical processes, especially shifts that happened during the Russian colonization, and later Sovietization, of Central Asia (CA), in shaping discourses around gender and sexuality. I decided to explore in as much depth as the terms of my research allowed, what the major shifts in gender and sexual norms and language in Tajikistan have been in this historical period and if those historical shifts have preserved their significance for the analysis of the contemporary identity projects. I read literature related to the history of Tajikistan, but also literature on trans* people elsewhere in the world. I tried to understand the interplay between the gender and national identities as well as how and why the cultural and social position of the Tajik transgender people is different from similar groups in other countries where they have a designated place within the local cultures and societies, and therefore can accomplish their national belonging through their "non-normative" gender identity. In some countries they even become a symbol of the local

cultures. For example, according to Kulick, *travesti* have a central position in the Rio carnival and a "strikingly visible place in both social space and the cultural imagery" in Brazil (1998: 6). Indonesian *warias* are recognized as the "national transvestites" (Boellstorff 2007). The Omani highly stratified gendered society recognizes *khanith* as a distinct gender position and assigns them a separate societal space. For example, the khanith can wear a particular type of clothes, makeup, and perfume; women are allowed to talk to khaniths and bare open faces before them, something that they cannot do in front of the men. The *hijras* in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and India are officially and legally recognized as a "third gender," including on the official documents and are protected by law. The gender-variant indigenous North Americans, who are described under an umbrella-term "Two-Spirit" organize into advocacy groups and run multiple public events. Their recognition both by the USA public and LGBT communities around the globe grows, to the point that the abbreviation LGBT is sometimes extended to LGBTQI2-S to include Two Spirits as a group separate from other trans* people.

Unlike those countries, no such designated cultural or social space for transgender people exist in Tajikistan. There is no local name for them; they are invisible and unknown. Individuals who do not fall within the normative gender binary find themselves in the position where they have to choose between the two poles within this binary and either perform as men in their social/public life and uptake all the men's duties, or become transsexual women and leave Tajikistan. The majority chooses the first option due to family bonds and obligations.

In my thesis, I argue that the key to understanding this difference in acceptance/non-acceptance of a gender dissent group into the national culture lies in

recognizing the differences between the Western and Soviet coloniality. The roots of cultural unacceptance can be traced back to the early Soviet period when Tajikistan was established as a national state and the Tajik national identity came forward as the primary identity project of the time. One of the specificities of the Soviet "people making" project compare to the Western colonial projects was that the peripheral national identities were conflated with the identity of a Soviet citizen - a shared identity between the center and the periphery. Hirsh (2005) describes this process as "double assimilation": the assimilation of a diverse population into nationality categories and simultaneously, the assimilation of those nationally categorized groups into the Soviet state and society. After the 1930's the shared Soviet identity came to incorporate certain strict requirements regarding the sexual morale, which excluded any gender or sexual non-conformity. The Tajik cultural history has been constructed and edited by the Soviet historians who erased any mentioning of the rich homoerotic Persian/Tajik culture from the master narrative, and gradually from the smaller local/individual narratives.

Today, many years after the Soviet project has formally ended, the local culture is still governed by the same colonial matrix of power that has reshaped the local sexual norms during the imperial colonization and Sovietization. The Tajik national identity still has a strong Soviet ingredient, which makes it incompatible with any gender or sexual non-conformity. However, my ethnography shows that while the language and spaces of some "traditional" sexualities were eradicated during the Soviet period, the forms of these sexualities have found their ways of survival and reexistence. They re-emerge today in spaces that are more open to the non-normative gender and sexual expressions. HIV prevention programs present one type of such spaces – their acceptance of non-normative sexualities makes them appealing and helpful to people

who find it challenging to fit into the rigid gender and sexual matrix of the Tajik society. Besides providing HIV prevention services per se, these programs also provide a new identity vocabulary to the people who seek to fit in.

Invisible country

As I started to discuss my research proposal within the University, I began to realize how very few people are aware of the existence of Tajikistan, let alone its geographical location. Most people I talked to could hardly pronounce its name and would typically refer to it as "oh, one of the Stans". When a person responsible for students reimbursements came to our class to present the system of the fieldwork travel subsidies based on the regional division, Central Asia was not even on her slide of the regions. I asked which region would Central Asia be considered to be (not South-East Asia, but not Europe either!) she found the question difficult, saying that nobody has probably done anthropological fieldwork in the region before and a Commission will have to decide on my specific request. That was, of course, surprising for me as a Russian (former Soviet) citizen, for whom this part of the world appears much better defined, but through those conversations, I realized how little Tajikistan among other Central Asian countries was visible to the western public. In their review of anthropological work in CA, Ibañez-Tirado and Marsden vividly illustrate this blurriness of the Western vision of the region with a couple of media anecdotes:

> During a speech in February 2013, the USA Secretary of State John Kerry applauded American diplomats working in Kyrzakhstan for their efforts in

> supporting democratic institutions. Two years later, in January 2015, the New York Times referred to Kyrzbekistan in an article about Tom Caldwell, a mountaineer kidnapped by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Soon afterwards, the New York Times clarified that Kyrzbekistan had been 'misidentified' and the paper apologised because of the error. Blog and twitter users soon picked up the New York Times' mistake and claimed Kyrzbekistan's right to exist: a national anthem was created and posted on Youtube, the country was described as an 'authoritarian democracy' and the first travel guide to Kyrzbekistan was published online (2016: 50).

However funny the situation, it demonstrates what a publicist Leonid Bershidsky (2015) calls the «stan» stigma and describes as a "manifestation of our strange indifference to, or even contempt for, countries that appear remote, small or unimportant".

These countries are also almost invisible on the anthropological map. The ethnographic research in medical anthropology is virtually absent in Tajikistan and very limited in the whole region. The same goes for anthropological research on sexuality. For example, a comprehensive 2007 review of queer studies in English language (Boellstorff 2007a) mentions only one study from Russia and none from any other country of the former Soviet Union. In the historical writing on the USSR, the problem of sexual and gender dissent has also remained restricted (Healey 2001: 18). While some gender-related anthropological work in Tajikistan has been done (See Harris 2004 on gender hierarchies and performativity; Roche 2012 on the gender aspect of shaping narrative war memories; Roche 2016 on changing status of motherhood in society and politics), there were no ethnographic studies in the

country and the region that would shed light on the issues of non-normative sexualities. A 2015 literature review on MSM in Tajikistan (Kasyanchuk 2015) did not identify any ethnographic or qualitative studies about the group.

Given the lack of common knowledge and anthropological insight on the region, I feel the need to provide some basic information about my country of interest. Tajikistan is the smallest state in Central Asia. It borders Afghanistan, China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The population of the country is 8,354 million people (Government of Tajikistan 2015) with almost 36% living in the capital - Dushanbe. Tajikistan started to shape as a national state in the 1920's within the wider Bolsheviks project of the territorial division of what was formerly known as Russian Turkestan, which was part of the Russian Empire since 1864. In 1924 Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) was created within Uzbekistan, and later in 1929 it gained the status of an independent SSR. Tajikistan used to be one of the poorest Republics. After the Union collapse in 1991 Tajikistan declared its independence. Shortly after that, the nation fell into a long and exhausting civil war (1992-97) fuelled by the conflict of ethnic and religious groups. The war has further undermined the economy and human resources. Within five years, more than 50,000 people were killed, and more than 500,000 became refugees inside and outside the country (Roche 2012: 280). In the years to follow, poverty became one of the most pressing problems – according to the government report, in 2001, 83% of the population lived below the poverty level (Government of Tajikistan 2002). The main income comes from external labor migration, mostly to Russia or Kazakhstan – the migrants' earnings amount to almost 50% of the national GDP, which according to the World Bank is the largest proportion in the world (Kasyanchuk 2015). Tajikistan has the highest religious population in the region with 90% being Muslim - 85% Sunni

and 5% Shia (Dyner et al. 2015).

The HIV epidemic in Tajikistan is in the early stages with an estimated 14000 people living with HIV by the end of 2014 (Ministry of Health, Tajikistan 2015). The international donors and local organizations consider MSM to be one of the key affected populations with only 14,4% of the group accessing the prevention services (Kasyanchuk 2015). The epidemiological literature indicates that a key structural driver of the epidemic is a high level of homophobia, stigma, marginalization and de-facto criminalization of MSM (Latypov et al. 2013). The National AIDS Program acknowledges that "stigma towards homosexuality in Tajikistan makes this population inaccessible for the health and social services. Because of taboo for MSM, they are rarely willing to seek help from health providers on specific issues related to their sexuality." (Government of Tajikistan 2010). Apart from being mentioned in the National AIDS Program, the group is hardly visible or discussed in public or official arena.

Methods

Data collection

For my study of the current and historical gender and sexuality related processes I employed ethnographic methods in combination with historical analysis. The historical analysis included a review of the literature in English and Russian related to gender and sexuality during various historical periods with the focus on the period of Russian colonization and Sovietization of CA. During the ethnographic fieldwork, I collected data through participant observations, several individual and group interviews and a focus group.

Initially, I planned to conduct my fieldwork in two of the 2 NGOs that work with MSM in Dushanbe: NGO "Legal support" and NGO "Equal opportunities." But as I soon learned, the way the NGOs provide HIV services were different from my expectations, based on my own NGO work. Not much activity was happening in the premises of the organizations, and the outreach work was less structured – its schedule depended on the personal plans of the outreach workers and was often unpredictable. The offices serve mostly as administrative bases. I still visited the NGOs, mostly the NGO "Legal Support" which helped me to organize meetings with people for the interviews and informal chats.

Since there were no fixed locations where things 'happen' I did my observations mostly while spending time with my LGBT friends and various friends of theirs. We met every day and spent a lot of time socializing, chatting, visiting friends at home, sitting in the bars and cafes, going to parties and social events, visiting friends relatives, babysitting their kids, talking to parents and so on.

In addition to the participant observations I conducted interviews with 17 people (some were individual interviews and some group interviews of 2-3 people) in the premises of the NGOs or in private spaces (my apartment, or interviewees' apartment or office). The NGO "Legal support" helped me to invite eight people who participated in the focus group. We decided to have the focus group at the end of my fieldwork to discuss questions that were not resolved by then. The NGO invited the MSM that they work with, mostly their outreach workers and their close friends.

I coded the audio-recording of the interviews and the focus group as well as my extensive field notes using the MaxQDA11 software. I transcribed and translated only select quotes that I wanted to include into the thesis.

Ethics

MSM in Tajikistan face enormous stigma, and while there is no formal anti-homosexual legislation they also face a lot of police harassment. There are no "open" LGBT in the country, and people hide their sexuality from their relatives and colleagues. Therefore, the issues of ethics and protection of privacy were my primary concern. I tried to align my research with the principles in the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (1998). According to these principles, the ethical obligations to the research participants supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge and "anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities"

(ibid: 2). I tried to ensure maximum anonymity and confidentiality of my interlocutors. For example, I never recorded their names, including in my field notes and personal files. Naturally, all the names in this report are fictional, most often suggested by the participants themselves. All my interviews were confidential. The group discussions were of more concern for me, as I could not ensure confidentiality of the information shared in a group. So I warned people about my concern and asked them to share only information they felt comfortable about sharing.

To ensure more protection for people who agreed to talk to me, I received an official letter approving my research from the Republican Committee on Medical Ethics of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population of Tajikistan. Besides ethical clearance, this letter was supposed to "legitimize" my study in the case of possible police interference. I deleted all the digital recordings of the interviews from the portable recorder that I carried around, as soon as possible and saved them securely on my computer.

Limitations and positionality

One of the significant limitations is a short period of ethnographic fieldwork and historical review, which may have affected the depth of the findings and understanding of the processes and relations in the field. Because I don't speak Tajik, the discussions were carried out in Russian, which is fluently spoken by the majority, especially in Dushanbe. However, a lot of conversations in my presence were made in Tajik, and I was not able to follow them. Particular local notions, including gender and sexuality terms are normally used in Tajik, even in the middle of a Russian

sentence. I tried to understand these notions better through the discussions; however, certain language nuances and subtleties may have been lost in translation.

Another major limitation that I was aware of all the time was that I am very different from the people I studied. I'm a white woman, self-identifying as a Russian, privileged in many ways, including that I study in a European University. I do not self-identify with the LGBT community and have very limited personal and academic experience in gender issues and tensions. My knowledge of stigma and discrimination is mostly theoretical; I do not have personal experience of being marginalized and ostracized. Epistemologically, I'm grounded within the Eurocentric understanding of gender and sexuality, and its not only the particular linguistics that I struggled to understand – I had to learn to look at the world from a completely new standpoint. This positionality of an outsider may have affected the information and my relations with the people I learned from in various ways. I did not deny this difference, and I fully realized that I couldn't merge with my interlocutors, eliminate the subject/object divisions and fully see things from their perspective. I could only try my best to understand their perceptions and experiences with as much respect and attentiveness as I could.

Acknowledging these differences between us made me a more mindful and humble observer. I was in the position of a learner, a listener, which I sometimes abused, asking the same question over and over again. My interlocutors were kind enough to patiently explain the things that I found confusing. On the other hand, because of this difference, some nuances may have gone unnoticed by me or may have been omitted by the participants. In general, I felt that people were overwhelmingly open and willing to share even very intimate information and

sentiments. They were much more generous in their time and openness than I could have hoped and I was profoundly grateful for that. I also realized that our discussions often provided them a rare opportunity to reflect on their intimate experiences, on frustrations and joys related to the personal journeys in understanding their gender and sexuality. It also sometimes provided them an opportunity to share their struggles and the pain caused by societal stigma and negative attitudes, as well as in some cases, the rejection of their family. I often felt that our interest was mutual – it was not just a one-way process of getting the information I needed, but a mutually fulfilling exchange.

Theoretical framework

Modernity, coloniality and gender

In his book "Modernity and self-identity" Giddens suggests that it is important to place the analysis of self-identity within a context of broader historical and societal processes (Giddens 1991). He advances our understanding of how the analysis of the broader context of institutions and powers of modernity and their historical shifts can inform the analysis of everyday processes, tensions, and reactions of shaping the self. Applying such approach to a particular empirical investigation assumes two directions of query: understanding of the broader historical and current processes on the macro-level and capturing dynamics and specific narratives within identity projects on the micro-level. My research project is trying to accomplish this task by placing and analyzing the personal gender identity projects in Tajikistan within a broader historical and contemporary global context.

A decolonial thinker Walter Mignolo calls coloniality the "darker side of modernity" (2009) and points out that while placing the individual identity processes within the context of historical and global shifts is important, it is equally important to change the Eurocentric lens of this analysis and look at the processes from the perspective of the 'cultural margins', where modernity adapted to the context of local cultural norms and epistemic traditions. Another decolonial theorist Anibal Quijano (2007) describes how the main driving force of knowledge production in modernity – an urge to rationalize, organize and systematize has led to the racialization of the world. As the Europeans encountered the new societies through the colonization endeavor, this epistemological need to systematize and organize resulted in

formation and fixation of categories of race and ethnicity. These new categories and the relevant hierarchies shortly became naturalized by the colonial subjects and became a foundation on which the imperial power was established and reinforced. Quijano suggests a concept of "coloniality of power" to highlight that even after the formal economic and political liberation of the former colonies, the hierarchies and orders established by the modernity and colonialism still hold power in the current structures and discourses that prescribe value to certain groups and identities while disenfranchising others (Quijano 2007).

Building on Quijano's work, Maria Lugones (2007) develops a concept of "coloniality of gender." She explores how modernity and coloniality are grounded in patriarchy which she defines as "a binary, hierarchical, oppressive gender formation that rests on male supremacy" (2007: 187) and calls to historicize gender. Historical perspective helps to make visible the links between heterosexuality, capitalism, and racialization and analyzing how they establish and reinforce each other. She provides several examples of how with the advance of the global Eurocentered capitalism through colonization, gender differentials were introduced and reinforced in the localities, where previously the binary gender system was not central to the societal organization. Lugones fosters the logic of intersectionality of race and gender and indicates the importance of placing the analysis of identity projects within this intersectionality (2007: 192). The historical lens suggested by Lugones provides the new tool for understanding the current dispositions of gender and sexual norms in a given society which I use in my work.

To complete the analysis of interrelation between macro and micro processes in constructing the gendered self, it is necessary to understand which processes play out

on the individual level at the present. Stoler discusses the importance of self and the intimate as a 'strategic site of colonial governance' and a 'charged space of colonial tensions' (2001: 893). This line of inquiry invites us to look at what language is used for defining and narrating the self and where does this language come from. Understanding this is important to unveil the mechanisms of naturalization of gender and sexuality-related stigma and normative requirements put forward by the society.

Russian colonization, Sovietization and "double assimilation."

The issue whether the Russian imperial colonization and especially the consequent Sovietization can and should be understood as or analyzed with the same theories as Western European colonization has become an important debate for scholars focusing on the countries of the Former USSR, including Central Asia. The researchers underline certain similarities between the processes. The main similarity, which most scholars agree upon, is that Russian and later Soviet discourses like those in the West, relied on tropes of progress, civilization, and modernization; these were defined through the value system of the colonizing culture (Northrop 2004; Annus 2016).

Douglas Northrop, one of the first contemporary western historians of the early Soviet period in Central Asia reviewed the Russian-language materials on the period of hujum - the Soviet unveiling campaign in Uzbekistan. He views the Bolsheviks effort to unveil the Uzbek women as a typical colonial enterprise – an act of the violent 'modernization' of the soon-to-be-civilized nation, against their will. He views the Uzbek people as colonial subjects, who resisted, albeit in a passive manner, the new rule, and used veils as a symbol of anticolonial response. Another feature that

makes the Soviet rule similar to the Western colonization is the persistence of the orientalists tropes in the Bolsheviks discourse about the Central Asia. This moral separation from the subaltern region as "the Other, a land both attractive and repellent, seductive, but at root primitive and despotic" (Northrop 2004: 39) is a typical strategy of western colonialism reproduced in the Russian and later Soviet attitude.

While Northrop bases his analysis on the Russian-language sources, Kamp (2006) attempts to look at the history of the same period from a different perspective. She studied the Uzbek-language print sources such as newspapers and local journals of the period preceding and during the hujum. She finds Uzbeks and especially Uzbek women to be more cooperating and engaged agents, and the primary actors in a multisided struggle in which women became symbols of both modernist transformation and tradition (ibid: 6). Edgar who studied the history of Turkmenistan agrees that in their "transparent attempt to undermine patriarchal control by interfering in family structures while spreading a belief in the superiority of European culture over "barbaric" customs" (2004: 258) the Soviet effort may seem very similar to the Western strategies. At the same time, it was different, especially in its approach to women. While the British and French colonizers opposed feminism at home while promoting the emancipation of the Muslim women, the Russians supported women's liberation and emancipation both in Russia and in Central Asia and pursued gender reform as an essential part of the modernizing project (2004: 257-8).

While the forms and many strategies of colonization may appear similar, some scholars point to the importance of considering differences between the value systems

that drove the Western and the Soviet efforts. The Soviet rule promoted the communist ideals of the society and governance, as well as Marxist rejection of capitalism and nationalism. The ideology has influenced the relations between the center and the peripheries. Francine Hirsch (2005) explores how European ideas have changed in the Soviet context with its Marxist vision of the historical development. She believes that to understanding the Soviet approach to the nationality question and the principles of the Soviet rule one must remember that in the Marxian framework social order depends on the underlying economic structures and the level of development of "productive forces". While the societies evolve from their primeval origins through the stages of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism before making the transition to communism, it is also possible to seize control of history and push the population through those stages of development (ibid: 6).

Based on this understanding, the Soviets formulated a unique approach to transforming the populations, which Hirsch calls "state-sponsored evolutionism" – a Soviet version of the civilizing mission with a unique spin on the national idea. This approach was underlying the Soviet effort of nation formation in the regions "where clan and tribal identities prevailed and where local populations seemed to lack national consciousness" (ibid: 8). Granted that the clans and tribes were "feudal-era" social forms, their consolidation into nationalities was the requisite next step on the road to socialism. It had to be done along with the systematic eliminating the vestiges of the past – the backward traditions and customs. The state-sponsored evolutionism also maintained that all people and nations could evolve and thrive in the new Soviet conditions. Hirsch argued that European colonial empires used cultural technologies to strengthen the oppositions between the colonizers and the colonized. Meanwhile, the Soviets aimed to eliminate these oppositions and "transform all the lands and

peoples of the former Russian Empire and bring them into the Soviet whole" (2005: 13). Therefore, people of the new national republics went through a process of what she calls "double assimilation": the assimilation of diverse ethnic groups into new nationality categories and simultaneously, the assimilation of those nationally categorized groups into the Soviet state and society.

While Hirsh has been criticized for her idealistic presentation of the Soviet national policies and underestimating the difference between the rhetoric and the real racial practices (Tlostanova 2010: 122), her explanation is helpful for my thesis in two ways. First, the state-evolutionist premises of nation-making helps to explain the vigorous determination of the Soviets to eliminate certain traits (in the case of my work, the traditional forms of male sexuality) that in their opinion pulled the nations "backward" and why in this determination they surpassed the European colonizers as well as their Russian predecessors. Second, Hirsch's idea of "double assimilation" explains how the Soviet subject formation unfolded simultaneously in two ways: by reinforcing the differences through bringing the new national identities in the forefront of subject configuration; and establishing similarities between the citizens of the new national states and those living in the center by molding a collective identity of a Soviet citizen.

While acknowledging the differences between the different types of colonialism is important, understanding of the USSR as a particular type of a colonial endeavor helps my analysis by illuminating the similar strategies of knowledge production leading to naturalization of ethnic and gender hierarchies. Those strategies used by different types of colonial powers succeeded in silencing the local gender epistemologies and replace them with a new matrix, strong enough to hold power

long after the political and economic domination over the colonies has formally ended. This understanding is in line with the decolonial approach which suggests to shift the focus from different shapes of colonialism to similar strategies of coloniality (Tlostanova 2010; Annus 2016). Tlostanova (2008; 2010) emphasizes the intersectionalities of production of race and gender in the Russian and Soviet colonies and points out that the collapse of the USSR and formal decolonization of the Central Asian countries did not result in the revival of indigenous epistemologies and gender discourses. In her view, the coloniality of power and gender have played out in the preservation and even enhancement of the dichotomies established during the Russian and Soviet rule and imposition of enhanced neo-liberal and ethnic-nationalist values by the ethnic elites (2008: 7).

At the same time, another useful concept within the decolonial option helps to elucidate that the colonial power is not omnipotent. That is the concept of "reexistence" (Alban Achinte 2006 cited in Tlostanova 2010: 29) that emphasizes that against all the odds, certain local epistemologies and forms of expression have found their narrow paths to survive through the colonization and coloniality. They re-emerge today as a reminder of the resilience of the local cultures and of an ever-present option to start decolonizing and liberating our thinking, including our concepts of gender and sexuality.

Historical overview

Tajik culture

When discussing the historical formation currently referred to as "Tajik culture" it is important to bear in mind that this notion is less than a century old. The process of re-organization of Central Asia in the early 20th century was based on the new ethnic taxonomies developed by the Russian and Soviet ethnographers (Tlostanova 2010). In the 1920's the Bolsheviks intensified the process of ethnic classification and consolidation of discrete ethnicities into the nation states. This process established and reinforced nationality as a central category of societal identity and citizenship. The territorial division of Central Asia based on national distinctions was not easy, as, in reality, these distinctions were never solid. Edgar (2004) notes, that the boundaries between the ethnic groups in Central Asia were very blurred and porous; the languages were intermixed, as many people were bilingual in Turkic and Persian. Nationality never appeared as a significant identity category to the point that many Central Asians were unable to say whether they were Tajiks or Uzbeks when queried in population surveys in late-imperial and early-Soviet periods (ibid: 20).

When the Bolsheviks defined Tajikistan's national borders and intensified the process of nation-making, the need to shape a distinct national culture became pressing. Besides the geographical borders, it was necessary to set out the cultural ones - the new State required its distinguishable history and tradition that would insulate it from the other ethnicities that for centuries have coexisted and intermingled on the territory of the newly established Tajikistan. The construction of the national State was a complex endeavor, which among other efforts required an

investment into historical reconstruction based on the notion of a distinct history and culture that could be traced back deep into the past. The Tajik historical cultural space was constructed along the Persian language lines, as opposed to the Turkic language of the surrounding ethnic groups. Historically, the disposition of the Persian-speaking group of the Central Asian population has always been fluid; it was tightly intermixed and often indistinguishable from other languages and cultures. The Persian-speaking group has been part of various cultural conglomerates. For example, according to one version, the Persian word "tāzīk" meaning "arab" was used by the Turks of Central Asia to describe the Persians who accepted Islam and along with the Arabs participated in the Muslim armies that invaded Transoxiana in the 8th century (Bartold 1964). In the 15-19 centuries, the nomadic groups (Kyrgyz and Kazakhs) used a name Sarts to refer to their sedentary neighbors -- lowland Tajiks and Uzbeks. The power dispositions in the region were ever fluid; the "Tajik" population was always part of different larger empires and regional powers and had absorbed the elements of many other cultures.

A lot of writers, poets, scientists and historical figures were therefore ascribed Tajik identity many centuries after they lived based on the fact that they wrote in Persian and lived on the territory of the modern-day Tajikistan, Uzbekistan or the nearby areas. I use the notion “Tajik culture/tradition” in the same sense as it was constructed within the Soviet national identity building enterprise. Based on my ethnographic work, I believe that this notion has been naturalized and became an inseparable part of the national identity of the modern Tajiks. However, it is important to remember that historically there was no such distinct and monolithic entity. What is now called "Tajik culture and tradition" is a multi-century encrustation of scientific, cultural, religious, linguistic layers and interconnections that included

inflows from the Arian culture and Zoroastrism, Greco-Buddhism, Hellenistic, Iranian/Persian, Arabic cultures and Islam, Osmani and Turkic influences, the Russian and the Soviet. Tlostanova compares the multi-layered arrangement of local epistemologies in Central Asia to an onion bulb, "where the newer layers never completely pushed out the previous ones, but rather counterimposed upon them" (2010: 162). The understanding that Tajik culture is a notion that includes all these influences is essential for the analysis of gender and sexuality. While Rudaki or Omar Khayyam would not call themselves Tajik poets, the modern Tajiks consider their poetry as an inseparable part of their national cultural inheritance. While it is important to remember that Tajik culture is a historical construct, it is equally important to appreciate how much this construct is embedded into the national identity of the modern Tajiks.

The pre-modern Persian/Tajik homoerotic tradition

While my historical review focuses on the period of the Russian colonization and early Sovietization, I felt important to sketch a picture of the pre-modern understanding of gender and sexuality within the Persian/Tajik tradition. That could help the reader to put the shifts that happened during the late 19th - early 20th century into perspective and appreciate the radical scale of the cultural transformation that happened in less than 50 years of colonization and early Sovietization.

The literature on the Persian homoerotic tradition is scarce, but several historical sources indicate that sexual relations between males were customary in the Persian

culture since at least the 5th century BC. Ancient Greek historians have debated the origins and aspects of Persian boy love. Herodotus claimed that Persians had learned it from the Greeks: "they learn and then acquire the habit of all kinds of divertissements from various parts of the world, including the practice of having sex with boys, which they learnt from the Greeks." (Herodotus 1998: 62). Plutarch disagrees, arguing that they had this practice long "before they ever saw the Greek sea" (Plutarch 1965: 25). Speakers at Plato's Symposium believed that the Persians prohibited love between men in their conquered territories (Plato 1993: 183) since this kind of relations could only be attributed to nobler people.

Scholars suggest that sexual relations between men remained normalized in the Persian lands after the Arabic conquest in the 7th century AD when Islam started to spread. The theme of same-sex romantic and sexual affection was endemic to the Persian literature since its dawn. According to Andrews, the tradition of writing verses in Persian about attractive craftsmen that later became popular in Ottoman literature goes back to at least Rudaki and the Samanid court of the early tenth century (2005: 40). Khayyam, Rumi, Hafez are celebrated as ingenious contributors of the Persian/Tajik literary tradition and have written about their affection for men. The presence of a beloved male object in their poetry was often obliterated or obscured in translation. Due to the ambiguity of gender grammar in Persian, the later European interpreters often felt the freedom to change or neutralize the gender of the beloved to better suit their audience (Najmabadi 2005). For example, Edward FitzGerald who made Khayyam's Rubaiyat known to the Western world has deliberately obscured the gender of the beloved in some of Khayyam's Rubai. "In the original both a woman, or houri, and a youth, are addressed in the love poetry, as was the custom of Omar and his contemporaries" (Martin 1985: 208), FitzGerald

leaves the sex an open question as he presents the Rubaiyat to his Victorian audience.

Sexual union between two men played an important role in mystical philosophy and epistemology, in particular among Sufis. Rumi and other mystics used it as a metaphor for ecstatic union with God (Murray and Roscoe I997: 309). They recognized gazing at beautiful youths as "witnesses to God's highest creations of beauty", and reflected it in mystical poetry, practices of meditations and ceremonies (Shay 2006: 142). A Persian philosopher of the 17th century Mullā Sadrā considered the love of boys as noble and sublime love, while the love of women as an animalistic need to perpetuate the species (El-Rouayheb 2005: 93). Najmabadi argues that in pre-modern Iran and much of the Islamic world, sexual practices were not considered fixed into lifelong patterns of sexual orientation. Men engaged in vaginal intercourse with their wives to "fulfill procreative obligations while other acts were linked to the pleasures of power, gender, age, class, and rank" (2005: 20). As long as men fulfilled their procreative obligations and continued their family life, the rest of their sex life was not a matter of concern for the larger community (Murray 1997: 16).

Khaled El-Rouayheb believes that the concept of homosexuality did not exist in the pre-modern Islamic world – no native concept would distinguish men who are attracted to men rather than to women (2005: 153). Other differences were more significant, such as between the active and the passive partners who were gendered not according to their assigned sex, but according to their sexual role. Najmabadi agrees that in the Persian and Arab worlds before their contact with the Europeans in the 19th century, there were more nuanced gender positionalities, other forms of maleness that were distinct from manhood (2005: 3).

El-Rouayheb (2005) contemplates how practices that were supposedly prohibited

by Islam could be so prevalent. In his view, there was a differentiation between the practices that were forbidden (such as anal sex) and same-sex practices such as intercrural intercourse, passionate kissing, caressing which were considered less grave than certain acts of heterosexual intercourse. Another strategy was not to make these practices public. Murray points out that the mode of dealing with certain sexual behaviors in some Islamic societies was not to talk about it. He calls it "the will not to know" which he illustrates by quoting a German Islamicist Arno Schmitt who explains this trans-Islamic norm:

> "The man should not allow others to bugger him. Otherwise, he loses his name, his honor, that is, if others know and are known to know. The decisive line is not between the act kept secret and the act known by many, but between only talking behind one's back and saying it in your presence, between rumors and public knowledge"(cited in Murray 1997: 17).

Dancing boys

A tradition of dancing boys was known throughout Middle East, North Africa, Turkey, Afghanistan and Central Asia. A dance historian Anthony Shay (2006) observes this tradition through this large geographical zone and broad historical period – from pre-Islamic period to our times. He argues that while there were no categories similar to our understanding of "homosexual", distinguishing men by their sexual preference for men or women, other social and sexual categories, such as a category of a male dancer was fairly consistent through different regions and time periods. The dancing boys had different names in different countries. For example,

they were called *khawal* in Egypt (Boone 2014: 188), or *köçek* in Turkey, where they performed in taverns and cafes, in wedding processions, and at religious festivals. Their "unmanly attire and feminine mannerisms", explicitly sexual details of their performance, as well as the fact that they were commonly assumed to be sexually available for pay, was shocking for the European travelers who amply described the custom in the 19th century (Boone 2014: 102).

In Central Asia and Afghanistan, the dancing boys were known as *bacha* ("boys," "dancing boys," "love boys"). The men who enjoyed their company were called *bachaboz*, together they played the *bachabozi* (Tajik) or *bachabozlik* (Uzbek) ("boy game") (Latypov et al., 2013). The boys would dress up in female clothes and dance for men in public spaces, such as certain gardens or tea-houses. There are several accounts of the 19th-century travelers that describe the performances and even everyday life of bachas (e.g. Karazin 1874; Schuyler 1877; Arandarenko 1889; Ostroumov 1908; Lykoshin 1916; Pahlen 1964; Vereshagin 2014). Count Pahlen, who traveled in Turkestan in 1908-1909, described their appearance:

> "The bachehs are young men specially trained to perform a particular set of dances. Barefoot, and dressed like women in long, brightly colored silk smocks reaching below their knees and narrow trousers fastened tightly round their ankles, their arms and hands sparkle with rings and bracelets. They wear their hair long, reaching below the shoulders, though the front part of the head is clean shaven. The nails of the hands and feet are painted red, the eyebrows are jet black and meet over the bridge of the nose" (1964: 170).

Eugene Schuyler, who traveled to CA in 1867, describes that the "dancing-boys, are a recognized institution throughout the whole of the settled portions of Central Asia,

though they are most in vogue in Bokhara and the neighboring Samarkand" (1877: 132). He says that bachas were numerous and it was a "custom for a Bokhariot gentleman to keep one... In fact, no establishment of a man of rank or position would be complete without one; and men of small means club together to keep one among them, to amuse them in their hours of rest and recreation" (ibid: 133). He describes their public performances and the game itself:

> "The natives seem most pleased with those dances where batcha is dressed as a girl, with long braids of false hair and tinkling anklets and bracelets. Usually but one or two in a troop can dance the women's dance, and the female attire once donned is retained for the remainder of the feast, and the batchas is much besought to sit here and there among the spectators to receive their caresses" (ibid: 134).

A Russian artist Vereshagin who lived in Central Asia between 1867-1870 describes the popularity of bachas' public performances known as Tamashas:

> "Tamasha is given almost every day in this or another house in town and sometimes in many simultaneously; before the fast of the main holiday bairam when there are especially many weddings, which these performances usually accompany. At these times in all the ends of the town, one can hear the beat of tambourine and drum, shouts and rhythmed clapping in time with singing and dancing of bachas" (Vereshagin 2014: 84).

Schuyler describes a failed attempt to prohibit the performances in Tashkent in 1872 when a severe epidemic of cholera influenced the Mullahs to declare that dancing was against the precepts of the Koran. The Russian authorities forbade public

dances during that summer on the account of "the vast crowds, which they always drew together". The ban didn't last long as according to Schuyler, the "pleasure-loving Sarts " could not "hold out in their abstinence for more than one year". "The mere rumor that there would be a bazem, or dance, was sufficient to draw great crowds to the garden where it was expected to take place" (1877: 133).

Scholars point to bachas flexible sexuality – while they provided sexual services for their male adorers, as they grew out of their profession they would move on to a new masculine societal role: "like the vast majority of men, male dancers were expected to marry and have children" (Shay 2006). Schuyler (1877) says that after their dancing careers ended bacha would frequently be "set up as a keeper of a tea-house by his admirers, where he will always have a good clientele, and sometimes he is started as a small merchant." However, Kushelevsky (1891) points out that some remained in the preference for sex with men even after the marriage: "Some sarts, who used to be bachas in their youth, acquire such a taste to this vice, that even after they reach maturity and get married they keep performing the passive role in pederasty." In his ethnographic book about sarts Ostroumov (1908: 75), quotes an 1884 newspaper article: "among bachas, some are real sodomites (*khizalyak*)". This distinction between males who practice sex with other males and those who actively prefer this type of sex leads one to assume a possibly that this was a known phenomenon and even an identity category in the late 19th century Turkestan. It is the only mention of the word in the literature that I have been able to assess, so it is difficult to speculate on the origin and history of this word. In the modern Tajik, *khez* means "impotent," a male who is unable to penetrate. And *lak* is used as a self-identity category of people who prefer to be penetrated. The word khezalak (хезалак) is not commonly used nowadays, but can be used as a derogatory term towards feminine

men. It is unclear if there was a distinctive social status of those "khizalyaks" in the late 19th century, for example, were they exempt from the obligation to get married and other social duties of the sart males.

Kushelevsky (1891) notes that male-to-male sex was not limited to relations with bachas but was rather common:

> "It is obvious that only wealthy people can keep a bacha, but the appetency to unnatural copulation is also common among the poor, including arbakeshes [draymen], mardakers [odd-jobbers] etc. These people satisfy such needs between each others, owing to the impossibility to have a young, beautiful boy".

Latypov et al. believe that in Central Asia, similarly to other Muslim countries before their encounter with the European /Russian culture in the 19th century, there was "little, if any, shame attached to same-sex relationships in the context of 'bachabozi'" (2013: 53). Similar to other travelers' accounts, a U.S diplomat Schuyler's notes of 1872-73 demonstrate that bachas were respected and even publically honored:

> "These batchas are as much respected as the greatest singers and artistes are us… Even when a batcha passes through the bazaar all who know him rise to salute him with hands upon their hearts, and the exclamation or 'Kulluk!' [I'm your slave] and should he deign to stop and rest in any shop, it is thought a great honor" (1877: 133).

This account, as well as similar ones, illustrate that even under the Russian rule in the pre-revolutionary Turkmenistan, bachas were not stigmatized, but treated with dignity and respect. That of course does not mean that they had an equal societal

position with the men they entertained, as most of the bachas were poor and underprivileged and got involved in the field not because of their love of art but because of the economic hardship of their families. But it seems from the historical accounts, that affiliation as a bacha per se with all the sexual implications did not bring about negative social attitudes, but the contrary: as performers, they had a culturally distinguished and valued position and a certain socially recognized function.

There were designated spaces, both physical (tea-houses, certain gardens, etc), and cultural (weddings, other important events) where the same-sex sexuality was actualized. Except for certain reported cases of over indulgence, when men would spend too much money on their enamourment with bachas, this activity did not interrupt their main course of societal duty. Men, including the bachabozs and bachas themselves, after reaching the age of "maturity", were still expected to support their families, procreate and carry out their societal duties. Therefore the form of sexuality in itself was not interruptive of the social function unless there were other factors, such as poverty or opium addiction, that made it difficult to fulfill certain obligations.

Russian colonization and sovietization as a historic disruption

The late nineteenth century became a turning point when the gender and sexual norms of the countries of the Middle East and Central Asia were significantly reconfigured within colonization/modernization projects. The encounter with the European/Russian cultures has placed the traditional homoeroticism and normalcy of male-to-male sexual relations under the new cultural lens: seen by the eyes of the

European/Russian travelers and rulers, they came to mark the local cultures as backward and uncivilized (Latypov et al. 2013). Heteronormalization of eros and sex became an important part of colonial modernization agendas, as in the case of the Persian Islamic culture on the territory of the modern Iran described by Najmabadi (2005: 54) – a "condition of "achieving modernity," a project that called for heterosocialization of public space and a reconfiguration of family life". The cultures of the Middle East and Central Asia were undergoing massive conceptual transformations not only in the sphere of sexuality per se but in related wider cultural spheres and aesthetics. According to Najmabadi, the colonial encounter has radically changed the Persian concepts of beauty and love. In the Sufi epistemology, love and desire were intimately linked with beauty and were not distinguished by gender - they could be generated by a man as well as by a woman. This concept prevailed for centuries until the end of the 19th century, when a "highly gender-differentiated portrayal of beauty emerged, along with a concept of love that assumed heterosexuality as natural" (Najmabadi 2005: 4). The colonial powers including Britain, France and Russia applied immense pressure on the local Muslim populations to conform to the European gender and sexual standards (Fisher 2008).

From the beginning of the conquest of Central Asia by Tsarist Russia in 1867 bachabozi came under the scrutiny of ethnographers and travelers for whom this tradition was unknown, alien and repulsive. Most of the 19th-century accounts of the American, European and Russian travelers to Central Asia are imbued with strong moral judgment. The common words to describe bachabozi were "not normal" (Vereshagin 2014) "unnatural vice" (Kushelevsky 1891) a "heinous vice" (Lykoshin 1916). Latypov et al. refer to numerous books and newspaper articles published by Russian authors that describe bachabozi "as 'sodomy', 'prostitution' and 'pederasty';

as ‘sinful’, ‘depraved’ and ‘disgraceful’ and ‘backward’” (2013: 53).

In Russia, under the Tsarist law, sodomy (defined as anal intercourse between men) was a criminal offense since 1845. Article 995 penalized ‘‘sodomy, the vice contrary to nature’’ with the loss of civil rights and a term of penal servitude of four to five years (Engelstein 1995). However, according to the late 19th century travelers, this law was not imposed in the Central Asian colonies:

> When we [the Russians] came to the region, we found sodomy, but not only did not take any measures against the heinous vice but even granted it an indulgence, so the natives were granted an exception from the common law: in the native precincts the sodomy was considered by the people's court which limited itself, compare to our Criminal Code to very light punishments (Lykoshin 1916: 358).

Several attempts to limit bachabozi were not effective:

> In 1890, the head of Tashkent had asked qazis[1] for their opinion about “bachabazstvo” and have received their rivoyat[2] against bachas; he gave an order prohibiting chaikhanas[3] from having bachas. The prohibition entered into force and was greeted with appreciation, but in 1896 bacha dances were included into the program of charitable walks and bachas have spread again, legally (Lykoshin 1916: 358).

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[1] Local judges

[2] An extract from sharia ruling

[3] Tea houses

The elimination of such "archaic" and "barbaric" practices became an important task of the Russian civilizing mission. It merged with other important issues on the modernization agenda, among them, the anti-clergy stance (as the practice of bachabozi was often associated with the mullahs); social reform and women liberation:

> Pederasty captures many victims and the struggle with it is hard!.. As long as a Sart woman remains in the atmosphere of coarse cynicism, of the closed living; until she takes upon herself the moral guidance of her children; and as long as she gives them to the care of the hypocrite (and often pederast) mullahs, and until the Holy Russian enlightenment touches with its pure wing upon the dark corners of the men's Sart society, the struggle with pederasty will not be possible! (Andreev 1910).

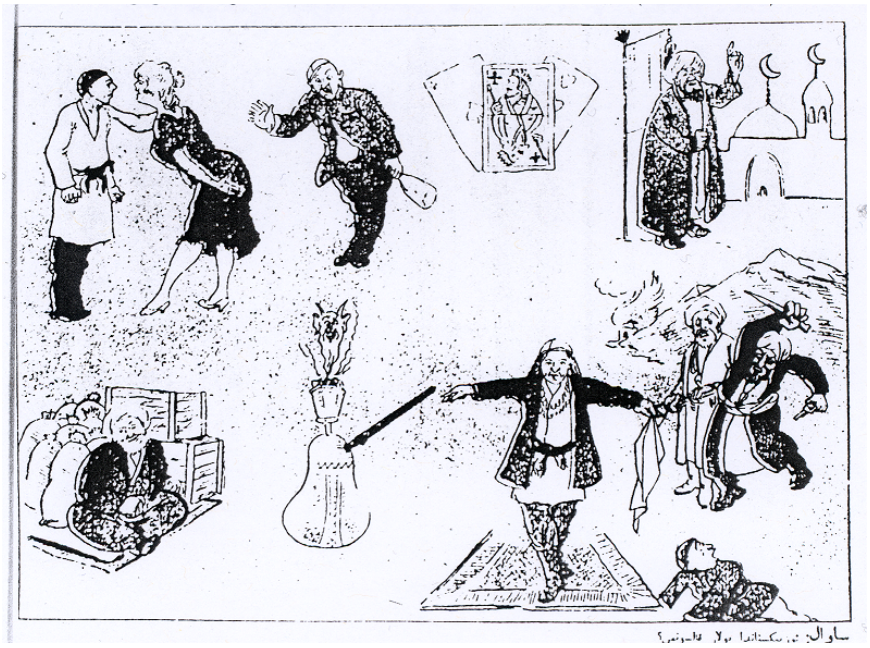
The representatives of local Muslim modernist Jadid movement who also held the issues of women liberation, social and religious reform high on their progressivist agenda, took an active stand against bachabozi. In his 1906 analysis of the decline of Central Asia, the leading Jadid figure in Tashkent Munawwar Qari says: "Forbidden acts such as drinking, gambling, pederasty, feasting, turning men into women and women into men… became common among us. We now think of these acts as part of our ancestral traditions" (cited in: Khalid 1997: 193). A series of articles in Jadid magazine Ojna, published in 1913-15 touched upon the issue. More calls were made both by the local Jadids and by the Russians to regulate the phenomenon by the Russian law and extirpate it completely:

> We should fully eliminate bachas, make sure that they do not appear, that the parents do not trade their beautiful boys and not condemn their children to a

shameful role of a prostitute and later to the emploi of a thief and parasite. For that, qazi rivoyats are not enough: it is necessary to withdraw the sodomy cases from the jurisdiction of people's judges and set the same punishment for all, according to Russian criminal laws (Lykoshin 1916: 358).

However, despite the frenzied rhetoric, no active measures were taken against bachaboz during the Tsarist rule. Similarly, there were no strong regulations for the first several years after the Bolsheviks came to power. While in the neighboring Afghanistan the boygame became illegal since the 1920's (Baldauf 1990) the Soviets didn't hurry to apply the criminal punishment neither in Russia nor the new Soviet territories. In fact, the attitude to homosexuality in the early Soviet Russia was not straightforwardly negative. The first Soviet Criminal Code of 1922 aimed to break with tsarist justice and omitted sodomy from the list of crimes. In the decade between 1920-1930 the official conceptualization of homosexuality was based on medical and psychological perspectives. In the 1930 edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, the homosexual inclinations were explained as resulting from psychological anomalies, which bore no implication of guilt or criminal responsibility. The prerevolutionary criminal punishment was denounced as ''absurd,'' ineffective, and psychologically damaging to the homosexuals themselves (Engelstein 1995: 168). Engelstein characterizes the early Soviet stand towards homosexuality as "scientifically informed toleration" (ibid: 169). Along with the changing attitude in Russia, the tone of the Central Asian press during these years also changes

from the pathos of furious condemnation of bachabozi to the tone of satiric derision. Baldauf's (1990) analysis of the Uzbek press (Tajikistan was part of Uzbekistan until 1929) shows that it became mostly silent about the issue after the October Revolution. Infrequent commentary could be found in the satirical magazines. One of such caricatures humorously depicts bachabozi among other societal vices such as gambling, alcoholism, opium smoking and religious corruption.



***Should This All Continue in Uzbekistan?* (*Muštum* 19, 1924). From: Baldauf 1988.**

Baldauf notes that while the issue became very marginal in the press, the boygame itself did not cease to exist. To prove her point, she cites the satirical poems of Abduhamid Magidi in whose work *bacabozlik* plays an important role as a character trait of all undesired elements of the society and the enemies of the progress (Baldauf 1990: 29).

Ideologically, homosexuality did not fit the Bolsheviks value system and was viewed as a relic of the past soon to be overcome. If in Tsarist Russia, homosexuality appears as an orientalist racial marker designating the backwardness of the Central Asian ethnicities as opposed to the progressive Russian culture, in the early Soviet

Russia it also becomes a class marker. Regarding sexual values, the Marxists did not differ from other intelligentsia radicals who believed that ''sexual perversion'' was the province of aristocratic roués and petty bourgeois degenerates" (Engelstein 1995: 160). The image of bachabozs in Central Asia correlated with two classes alien to the Soviets: the torpid Islamic clergymen and feudal lords. Another 1928 satire depicts three bachabozs: a capitalist, a clergyman and a spiritual leader (eson) are punished by the fury of a proletarian land-laborer, whose son they want to use as a bacha (Baldauf 1990: 29). Baldauf asserts that the aim of those literary attacks was not to eliminate the boygame, but to advance other political agendas.

During the Tsarist rule and early Soviet years the Criminal punishment for sodomy was not established in central Asian colonies, while being enforced in Russia, but the situation swung round in mid 1920-s. In the "modern" parts of the USSR, such as Russia, male homosexuality was not re-criminalized until 1934, but the Criminal Code of the Uzbek SSR enclosed the most elaborate prohibitions against *muzhelozhestvo* (male same-sex relations) already in 1926 (Healey 2001). Three articles of the Uzbek Criminal Code were dedicated specifically to *bachi*. For example, Article 280 punished the "maintenance of persons of the male sex (*bachi*) for sodomy, and also the preparation and education of them for this" with the maximum sentence of eight years if the victims were minors (ibid: 161). In line with what Hirsch (2005) calls "state-sponsored evolutionism" – the Soviets' understanding that the societies could be pushed along the Marxist historical hierarchies from the primitive towards civilized, the Bolshevik legislators who drafted the criminal codes in the new Republics of Central Asia were committed to help eradicate the male prostitution along with other "crimes constituting survivals of primitive custom" such as bride price and polygamy (Healey 2001: 159). The discrepancy between the 'vanguard'

attitude towards same-sex relations in Russia and the harsh policies in Central Asia was quite outstanding, but, as explained in a letter from the People's Commissariat of Justice, justified by the need to eliminate the backward practices "in particular republics where pederasty is especially common" (ibid: 162).

The attitude to homosexuality radically changed in the Soviet Russia around 1930's – shortly after Tajikistan became the separate Soviet Socialist Republic. The explanation of this change is still debated by the scholars, but several studies relate it to the Soviets foreign policy, particularly to the rupture in Soviet-German relations and intensified propaganda war between Fascism and Communism in which accusations of homosexuality became a significant new feature (Healey 2001: 182). According to Healey, the 1933 initiative to recriminalize "pederasty" in Russia came from the political police, who framed it as a matter of the state security (ibid: 184). The political motives of recriminalization become clearer from the speech of a popular Soviet writer Maxim Gorky, who linked homosexuality and the emergence of fascism in Germany and explained the need for the new legislation: ''Destroy homosexuality and fascism will disappear.'' (Cited in Engelstein 2010: 170).

The prohibition in Russia came into power in 1934. Unlike other republics of the USSR, in Uzbek and Tajik Criminal codes the prohibition figured among local customary offenses instead of sex crimes (ibid: 186). The anti-homosexual campaign intensified all over the Soviet Union, and soon the official rhetoric changed from neutral to downright homophobic, warlike and intimidating. The homosexuals were added to the list of class enemies and criminal elements, who "in secret filthy hiding places and dens" were frequently engaged in "counterrevolutionary activity" (ibid: 196). The new requirements were therefore added to the Moral code of a Soviet

citizen, and the new regime of state-sponsored compulsory heterosexuality was established throughout the USSR.

The issue of bachaboz starts to disappear from the public discussions in Central Asia even before this radical change in the Soviet attitude. Baldauf observes that public mention of *bacabozlik* fades away around 1930s. She cites a 1932 speech by the chairman of the Central Committee of the Uzbek Communist party, Akmal Ikromov, who denounces the "great Russian chauvinism" on the basis of Stalinistic nationality politics and unmasks a "chauvinist" who insinuated that the Uzbeks have an inclination to the boygame and thus had defamed and offended the whole nation. According to Baldauf, since this speech, the taboo of mentioning bachabozi was unbreachable. By the time she carried out her research in Uzbekistan in the late 1970's, people of older age were not aware of what bachabozi was. She believes that by mid 1930's both the phenomenon and any mentions of it have been completely eliminated in Central Asia.

This short historical overview roughly dots through an extended period. From the early days in the Tajik/Persian culture when sexual relations between men were more woven into the texture of social and cultural life, to the 1930s when the Soviet rule succeeded to establish the strict heterosexual regime in Central Asia and the rest of the USSR. The new national identities that emerged within the Soviet national states had to become clean of the 'degenerative practices of the past' with the aspiration for a socialistic future devoid of feudal relic traits such was bachabozi. In my next chapter, I skip over 80 years to present my ethnographical findings from the fieldwork in Tajikistan. These findings incite a discussion whether the 'traditional' forms of sexuality have been fully eradicated by the Soviet regime, or have found

their ways of survival, expression, and reexistence in the new settings of the post-Soviet Tajikistan.

Invisible gender

Women in disguise

An evening at the pleshka

It's seven in the evening, it's already getting dark, and it's harder for me to make out the figures of other people in the park. The park, or rather a long alley near one of the train stations in the center of Dushanbe is still very lively, a lot of people are going about their business, or stroll around in small groups or alone, or sit on the benches. Two men in their forties are laying right on the grass near a massive heroic sculpture that has stood at the beginning of the alley since the Soviet times. A woman – all dressed in black, with a black shawl covering her head, stands nearby and shouts something at them. Two other women dressed in Tajik national clothes are sitting nearby on the curbside and pack their large cheap shopping bags. A group of young men in cheap training suits stop beside me; they are absorbed in an animated discussion. Everybody talks a bit more loudly than you would expect in a public place in Dushanbe but otherwise everything looks completely normal.

A young preoccupied guy is walking back and forth, juggling his cheap cell phone from one hand to another. A man on the other side of the alley in the white sports jacket and jeans is nibbling the sunflower seeds and gazing at me. A large chestnut tree is blooming with beautiful white flowers; birds are singing; the warm tender spring Dushanbe evening is intoxicating. Like most public spaces in

Dushanbe, this park is very neat, the colorful flowerbeds and lawns are well groomed and despite the constant presence of so many people, there is not much litter around. The guy in the white sports jacket tries to draw my attention by making unusual noises, and I pretend not to notice him. As a trolleybus passes by on the road that separates the alley from a wall of apartment houses and lively cheap shops, another guy in the blue gym suit walks by and looks at me meaningfully while clicking sunflower seeds. The man in white approaches me; after realizing that I don't speak Tajik he asks for my phone number, but I explain that I'm not interested and walk away. I start to feel a little uncomfortable, as I understand that it's not common for someone to be just hanging around in the park without a purpose.

But like other people around me, I also have a purpose - I'm waiting for my friend Nosir – the one who brought me here for the first time around a month ago and explained how things work. This park is one of many so-called *pleshkas* in Dushanbe. Pleshka is a place, usually a park or an alley, where people come looking for sex: men, women, sex workers, male and female, for free or for a price. They may make acquaintances for the future encounters or have sex right away, for example in the house entrances or on the roof of the surrounding buildings. The Russian word pleshka is used throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union. It probably derives its name from the square near the chapel to the heroes of Plevna in Moscow, which became famous as one of the first and once the most popular gay cruising areas, but nobody can tell for sure. The pleshka near the train station is especially lively at this time of the year, but if on my first visit I came here without Nosir, I would not be able to understand what was going on. I remember how surprised I was when Nosir explained that the middle-aged mothers in Tajik national clothes sitting on the bench with their children were in fact sex workers who "pretend" to be

ordinary mothers. As a stranger, I would not be able to tell; one just has to know what's going on behind the façade of an ordinary life. On our first visit, Nosir introduced me to a group of 5 young men – all of them dressed in ordinary male clothes – inexpensive gym suits or jeans, well-worn t-shirts and baseballs. He introduced me as a researcher from the Netherlands, and as someone *v teme* (in the theme), a term that I already knew to mean an insider, either a gay person herself, or someone friendly, who understands the slang. They immediately became very open, made a lot of jokes, started to address each other with female pronouns, just like the men who came to my focus group half year before that. Nosir later explained that four of them were *laks* and one guy was a *degh*. I'm remembering this first time in the park, and realize that just like then, until I knew them personally, I would not be able to tell, if the two guys in the tight jeans and dark t-shirts who walk the alley back in forth are there to hook up with women or men, if they are laks or deghs, if they consider themselves to be men or women. To be able to read this from the first sight I should have lived in Dushanbe much longer. It strikes me again how difficult it is to tell anything about one's gender and sexual preferences from their appearances, how average everyone looks. But by now I know what a depth of complexities of gender and sexual reflections and experiences can be hidden behind those average looks.

When on this warm evening in the park Nosir finally arrives, he walks me through the alley one last time; he waves hello to the people he knows and stops to introduce me to a man in a tidy brown office suit, who sits on the bench with an inexpensive brief case, wearing an undistinguishable clerk look. We chat briefly and, after we say goodbye to the man, Nosir explains that the man comes to the park for sex work, but also educates his clients, as well as his fellow laks on the issues of HIV prevention, as he also works as an outreach worker in an NGO. This NGO is one among 14 others

that provide HIV prevention services to people who are officially called "men who have sex with men" (MSM) – both on the governmental papers and in communication with the main donor that funds Tajikistan HIV response – the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.

But among themselves, most of the NGO's clients call each other laks or in a friendly manner - *lachki* (plural of *lachka* – a Russian grammar for diminutive, affectionate and feminine form applied to a Tajik word lak). While the etymology of this term is not clear, it stands to signify a receptive male partner in sexual relations. Another word that can be used interchangeably with lak is *passiv* – a Russian word referring to "passive" (receptive) sexual role. Most of the lachki I talked to during the first month of my fieldwork also identified as women in their sexual relations, so I initially, I came to a conclusion that people use this term to indicate their different gender position. But later into the study, I came across several laks who did not identify as women, so I dismissed my initial hypothesis that the word "lak" included both sexual and gender connotations. However, due to my original research interest, I was primarily interested in those laks who also identified as women. There is no particular local term to distinguish them from the cisgender laks. In some interviews, people mentioned a term *narmoda* that combines the Tajik words *nar-* (male) and *-moda* (female). This construction is similar to *shemale*, or Indonesian *waria* (combined *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man)) but since it has a derogatory connotation it is not widely used at the moment, definitely not as a self-identification.

Since there is no local term specific for the particular group of laks who identify as women, I will call them (transfeminine) bigender laks/lachki in the further writing. I use this category only for the purpose of convenience of writing, and

emphasize that it does not exist in "real life." None of the people I talked to used the words "transgender" or "bigender" and there is no separate category for laks who identify as women as opposed to those who identify as men. With these important reservations, I use the term bigender, as in my opinion it reflects the subject position that I will describe in more details below. While not departing from the binary gender system altogether, or not making a permanent biological or social transition to another gender, these people learn to shift between the two "opposite" gender identities depending on the context and the audience to whom they are communicating their gender. While female identity is often a preferred and cherished one, they can express it only in limited designated social spaces. Besides the pleshkas, such places include online virtual spaces, the company of other laks and friends, domestic relations with their men lovers, certain events where they can dress up, make up and dance as women, the friendly NGOs that provide HIV services to "MSM". The main venue to express their gender identity is, however, sexual relations with men.

Unlike many similar groups described in the literature such as, among others, Indonesian *warias* (Boellstorff 2007), Brazilian *travesti* (e.g. Kulick 1998) or Omani *khanith* (Wikan 1977) and unlike bachas of Central Asia, bigender lachki are not recognized by the society, or even known to exist. The public awareness of such "non-normative" category of people has been completely eliminated during the Soviet years. The regime of state-sponsored compulsory heterosexuality as well as rock-solid gender binary advocated for since the Russian conquest of Central Asia, and cemented during the 1930's, is still in power today, a quarter century after Tajikistan declared its formal Independence. Therefore in common public places bigender people maintain their performance as men and take all the consequent

responsibilities. They marry women, have children, provide for and take care of their extended families, wear men clothes and perfume, talk with male voices, use male names, and when talking in Russian, describe themselves in the masculine gender. Most importantly, they have to hide their female or homosexual identity from their families and fellow citizens. They learn to shift between the two genders and manifest them depending on the context and social expectations.

There are particular albeit limited spaces where lachki can openly express their femininity. These spaces include circles of other laks and friends, certain parties where they can dress up and makeup as women and dance, pleshkas where they solicit partners to provide or accept sexual services or favors, saunas, online social spaces and friendly NGOs. In those spaces, gender expression can be conveyed by several means. When they talk with someone 'in the theme' about themselves in Russian they use the female grammar including pronouns and word endings[4]. They call each other in female gender, often with their female names, and they call their lachki friends *podruzhki* (girlfriends). When they are in friendly circles they may display very feminine manners and behavior: soft emphasized feminine gestures, higher voices and more melodic speech with softer consonants and lingering vowels.

They value rare opportunities to dress up as women, dance as women. They can sometimes organize photo sessions in their female manifestations. Lachki are always happy to pull out photos of themselves in their female persona on their phones, or show videos of them dancing or singing in female attire. Some lachki also perform at concerts or cafes dressed as women. Boellstorff (2007) describes that public

[4] In Tajik, the pronouns and endings are not distinct by gender

performances of *warias* are viewed in Indonesia as a separate genre since warias are an accepted 'third gender' group in the country. Unlike warias, bigender lachki are not a socially accepted group and therefore their performances are not distinguished in a separate genre. While sometimes they can perform publically dressed as women, it is perceived as a parody or a female impersonation and as such is still permitted at some events. These parodies were especially popular in the early Independence times, when men were impersonating famous female singers and actors. Such performances became popular in various TV shows or public concerts. This genre of parody was not perceived as having sexual or non-normative gender connotations; the words drag, travesti and similar notions were not known, perhaps due to the Soviet and early post-Soviet naïveté based on the firm believe that there were no homosexuals in the Soviet Union. Today, these parodies are not that popular in Tajikistan anymore, but still permissible at some public concerts and show and not viewed as something indecent.

Who are deghs and are they gay? A battle of discourses

Bigender lachki typically have sex with men, whom they call *deghi* (plural of *degh*) – a Tajik word sometimes used interchangeably with the Russian *aktiv* (an 'active', 'top' penetrating partner). The term degh implies the penetrative position in sex, and that a person is a man; but says nothing about one's sexual preferences for men or women. However, the word is sometimes used interchangeably with the word *natural* (натурал) – a Russian slang for a 'straight' person. In most cases, men who are called deghi would consider themselves (and would be considered) 'straight' in the sense that they are usually attracted to females but can also have occasional sex with laks. A

typical characterization of a degh would be: "He would occasionally bang boys, but he's not gay" [Field notes: 38]. With a rare exception, deghi are not aware that they are called that, only lachki use the term. In their own perception, deghs sexuality is not marked in any particular way, and they would typically self-identify and be identified by others just as "men." A quote from a group discussion exemplifies that:

> *Anya:* I wanted to ask about those deghs, they don't consider themselves homosexuals?
>
> *Three voices:* no!
>
> *Said's podruzhka:* no, never!
>
> *Anya:* Do they consider themselves as *naturaly*?
>
> *Said's podruzhka:* They just… fuck [us], and… that's it… They just consider themselves to be… just active… people
>
> *Nosir:* they just need to, how to say, to come [ejaculate].
>
> *Said's podruzhka:* How to say, just to fuck, and that's it. To come. That's most important.

This descriptions of deghs pragmatic functional sexuality which doesn't seem to take into consideration the partners gender or biological sex, was quite typical but also confusing for me. I was trying to understand what was going on and place their sexuality to one of the familiar categories. Were these men gay? Or were they gays who denied their sexuality? Maybe bisexuals? To exacerbate my confusion, laks would also use identity terminology very freely, while talking about their own sexuality. They would talk about themselves as women, who have sex with men, but the next minute they would say they were gay men, or *gomoseksuali* (homosexuals) or

would call themselves *passiv*, lak or MSM.

I kept asking questions but the more I asked, the more I realized that my questions were totally off, and I just could not get a grasp of what was going on. Its only by the time that I completed my historical readings that I started to understand that this confusion stemmed from the attempts to fit deghs and laks into my own view of homosexuality rooted in my epistemological background – the Western European/North American paradigm where understanding of sexuality is organized along the homosexual-heterosexual divide. In this paradigm, sexual orientation appears as a central and often fixed characteristic, one that provides ground for a strong sexual and political identity. This system is sometimes referred to as the "gay model" (Najlis 2012). The Eurocentric "gay model" came to dominate the contemporary understanding of sexuality, but it conceptual apparatus does not fit to describe the types of sexualities that I encountered during my fieldwork.

It turned out to be much easier to understand and describe those types when keeping in mind the historical insights into the pre-colonial Middle Eastern and Central Asian male sexualities. It seems that back then, sexual preference for men or women did not appear as such a significant trait. Men were not understood through their preference for other men or women, hence this divide was not lexicalized, and for many people in Tajikistan it is still the case. Murray describes this organization of understanding of sexuality in his review of the history of Islamic homosexualities (Murray 1997). Najilis further outlines the difference between the two models in his analysis of the rich body of anthropological literature on gender and sexuality in Latin America (2012). He describes the three primary models for understanding gender and sexual non-conformity: the gender-sexuality conflation model, the gay

model, and the transsexual model. In addition to Murray's description, he highlights that the hierarchical arrangement in the relationships within the gender-sexuality conflation model "echoes the gendered organization of society at large, where femininity is devaluated and assigned to a position of inferiority and submission, in respect to masculinity" (ibid: 8). In this model the subject identification or not as a female does not matter, what matters is the receptive role in sex. Stigma is distributed unevenly and is attached more to the receptive partner, while the inserter is not stigmatized since he does not 'downgrade' in the gender hierarchy and maintains the masculine role.

Unlike the gender-sexuality conflation model, the gay model interprets gender and sexuality as two separate domains of experience. The model is organized along the homosexual-heterosexual divide, and the notion of sexual orientation becomes more important than the perceived masculinity and femininity. According to this model, all the participants in same-sex practices are seen as sexually dissident, and considered to be equally gay or homosexual. Because of this, they are all equally stigmatized regardless of their gender presentation or whether they prefer the insertive or the receptive role. According to Najilis' review, some scholars call this model 'egalitarian' given its departure from the patriarchal, hierarchical gender relations. He points to the literature that depicts the gender-sexuality conflation model as embedded in the unequal gendered organization of the society, whereas the gay model relates to the social transformations toward more egalitarian social relationships, including feminist movement in certain regions.

In this sense, the gay model is often featured in the academic literature and activist discourse as more "modern" "progressive" and "emancipated" compare to the

"traditional", "backward" and "oppressive" gender-sexuality conflation model. Najilis problematizes the placement of the two models within the narratives of progress as a typical Eurocentric hierarchization. The view that the "progressive" gay model, a cultural product of the North American/Western European cultural systems is superior to the "backwards" gender-sexuality conflation model which is more typical for marginalized and racialized lower-classes in Latin America (and as we see from the Murray's review, to some Islamic societies), reproduces the colonial matrix of power, "that has placed Europe, and later the US, at the social, economic, political and epistemic center of the world system, and as the exclusive owners of modernity and progress" (ibid: 48). Najilis suggests taking a decolonial approach to analyzing the models as an alternative route for alleviating the existing inequalities and stigma attached both to the subjects within the gender-sexuality conflation model and to the model itself.

The presence, co-existence and competition of two different models were observable in Tajikistan. Acknowledging the co-existence of these models helps to deal with the conceptual and linguistic confusion that stems from the discussions in the field. Najilis emphasizes that in the living experiences the cultural models can not be seen as clearly bounded or having a complete internal consistency, however, his own interviews and literature analysis suggest that in Latin America the two models are much more delineated and recognized and subjects can consciously place themselves and the others within one or another model. The situation is different in Tajikistan as due to lack of public debates and anthropological studies the description and conceptualization of the local systems of sexuality in their relations with the Western concepts has not been undertaken and therefore the models are less distinct. People try to find their ways to connect the two discourses: the one that accentuates

the sexual roles, and the western 'gay' discourse focused on identity labels.

Tajik people who are more used to place and understand themselves along the gender-role axis are trying to make sense of the new international gay lingo, and to understand themselves and the others through this unfamiliar identity optics. They try to squeeze their sexualities into the new categories. This new Western identity vocabulary often appears as "objective" and the only right one. For example, a bio-behavioral study was carried out in Tajikistan within the GFATM-funded program last year. This study used a questionnaire, where "MSM" respondents were asked to identify their "sexual orientation and gender identity" (Kasyanchuk et al, 2016: 12). The identity slots provided by the questionnaire were just copied from a Western source and completely disregarded the local terms; people were asked to choose between the following categories: "MSM", "gay", "bisexual", "transgender", or "don't know". In a personal communication, one of the consultants on the project mentioned that he thought that people, especially in small cities did not even understand what they were asked, and have just randomly choose the categories or were prompted by the interviewers.

During my fieldwork, the Western identity labels 'gay' or 'homosexual' were frequently used interchangeably with the role labels such as *passiv* or lak. However, as mentioned by one respondent: "not many people call themselves gay. They would rather call themselves lachki". Since the identity terms are quite new and still very amorphous, their meaning greatly depends on the context. As does Boellstorff (2007) in his book on Indonesia, I italicize the word *gay* and other similar identity terms that sound similar to English words, but have acquired a different local meaning. I provide several examples of how the meaning varies depending on the setting.

People use the term *gay* as a matter of convenience, for example, when talking to the outsiders, and trying to avoid the hassle of explanations of the local specifics. The outsiders would usually be donors, researchers, and colleagues from other NGOs. Since the term is easily recognizable and normally does not require further explanation, it can be preferred in these contexts. In such situations, the word *gay* may also be used interchangeably with MSM. But once people see that a person understands the meaning of lak they would rather use this term.

For the same reason of recognizability, the word gay is completely tabooed in other settings. I quickly learned never to say "that word" after my friend harshly reproached me for saying it out loud in a cafe. In such settings, using of less recognizable terms is preferred. And here the international AIDS lingo comes handy as it can be used as what Boellstorff refers to as "cryptolect" (2007: 129) - an insider's language. Of course, this terminology is used only by a handful of people – those who work for NGOs and their friends. In public places they would use terms like *emesem* (MSM) or *elgebetshka* (LGBT), or specify the letter, for example, they would say, "she is an *el*" (a lesbian); or even *chlen soobshestva* (community member), as in pointing to someone on the street "hey look at this guy, he is definitely a community member" (Field Notes: 38).

In some contexts using 'gay' rather than lak/degh or *emesem* had an ideological meaning. In my discussions, especially with people who work in NGOs and are more exposed to the Western discourse, "*gay*" was sometimes used as a prescribed identity for men who describe themselves as *naturaly* or *emesem* (if they know the term). In the view of my respondents, many of these men should be considering themselves to be gay. In several cases the fact that someone identified as an *emesem* or a *natural* caused

irritation of my interlocutors: "Many [men] who are *gays*, do not consider themselves as *gays*. They say I am an *emesem*. But he is *gay*!.. I mean he is lying to himself. So he can be a total gay and say, uff, I'm an *aktiv*. And lie to himself that he is an *aktiv*, an *emesem*" (Shams).

While even in the Western understanding, the words gay, *aktiv* (the top) or MSM are not mutually exclusive, they appear as such in the quote above. In my understanding, since the discursive processes in Tajikistan (at least in the NGO field) are characterized by the competition between the two models of understanding of sexuality and the relevant vocabularies, the use of the "gay discourse" has a strong ideological meaning for this NGO worker. This echoes Najilis's observation over the literature on Latin America, that people who operate within the gender and sexuality conflation model are stigmatized not only due to their subject position within this model, but for belonging to the model per se, and not engaging in the discourse on emancipation and gay rights, finding an 'easy way' (2012: 43) in submitting and therefore, contributing to homophobia and oppression. In this context, the newly introduced term MSM provides this 'easy way' for many people who want to avoid the political implications of their identity if they are put in the position where they *have to* choose such an identity at all (for example, in their contacts with NGOs):

> *Shams:* There are people who are little informed, and they cannot tell an *emesem* from gay. Or sometimes, someone comes to me and says, I have an *emesem* friend. And I ask: "*emesem*? In which way is he an *emesem*?" And he explains, and I respond: but he is gay!" – "No, he is not gay, he is an *aktiv*, a *natural*".

For people who advocate the gay model, the gay identity is often viewed as more

progressive. When discussing lack of any distinct identity among deghs, one person noted: “There are only a couple of advanced deghs who consider themselves gay, but not the rest” (Field notes: 38). Some people told me about their attempts to convert others into the gay model. Nosir, who also works for an NGO, believes that deghs are *gomoseksualy*, because they have sex within their ‘homogenous’ biological group and he tries to explain that to some deghs but most often he faces rejection. He complained that their 'straight' identity is too strong, which often annoys him very much.

But there are some people who are less resistant to the new paradigm, and as a story below shows, people may transit from the "traditional" to the “gay” model. During one of my visits to a pleshka, I met a degh, and later Nosir told me his story. Nosir said that this degh considered himself as a *natural* but Nosir believed that the guy may soon become gay. Nosir explained, that this guy's behavior started to become untypical for a straight man. While he had regular sexual relations with a lak (which is not at all untypical for a straight man!), instead of socializing with other men, he started to spend too much time out at pleshkas. He made a lot of lak friends and preferred their company to the company of men. Nosir hypothesized that this man is “probably a *gomoseksual*”, and in a couple of years he may even become a lak himself. This story illustrates one possible scenario of a transition from the “traditional” model where the role in sex is central to understanding one’s sexuality and is fixed, to a “gay” model, where it is not uncommon that people fluctuate between “passive” and “active” positions in sex.

Finally, I would like to share a couple of observations on the relevance of the term “MSM”. It was introduced back in 2003 when the GFATM started to fund HIV work

in Tajikistan. The term is used in the official communications, such as the government and the UN papers, communications with donors, at the professional meetings etc. The term is understood and used by NGO workers and their friends, including some clients. In theory, the word is supposed to reconcile the gay and the gender-sexuality conflation discourses as it was coined as a "neutral" term that would not refer to one's sexual identity, while marking a specific behavior (Boellstorff 2011). It was meant to be inclusive of men like the Tajik deghs who do not identify as gay. But the problem with deghs is that not only they don't identify as gay, but they also don't want their sexual behavior to be marked in any way. I had a chance to chat with these men, although I never spent as much time with them as I did with laks. From the several brief conversations, I understood that not only they didn't consider themselves gay, but also some of them did not consider their intercourses with other men as sex. As I understood from our discussions and my readings, while many Tajik men are involved in same-sex as "active" partners[5], most prefer not to verbalize this experience or discuss it with anyone. As mentioned in several interviews of NGO workers who try to engage these men in prevention activities "they never consider themselves to be part of the *emesem* group" (Zoya).

"MSM" is even less accurate in relations to laks. Since many bigender lachki do not consider themselves to be men when they have sex, technically, they also fall outside of the MSM spectrum. Boellstorff points out to this core conceptual paradoxes of the

[5] Apparently, the prevalence of same sex relations is very high, for example, a 2001 assessment of MSM in Tajikistan suggested that 30 to 50% of men who identify as *naturaly* practice sex with male partners occasionally, from time to time or often (Oostvogels 2001).

notion "MSM", which supposes that identity is a social construction, but "reifies "men" and "sex" as pre-discursive, conflating sex with penetration and maleness with biology" (ibid: 294). Despite the fact that MSM does not adequately describe becomes handy when used as a convenience or as a "cryptolect" term so many laks can accept and use it as such, not minding the misgendering.

I discussed the issues of vocabulary in such detail as I believe that without this terminological detour it would be difficult for the reader to make sense of further description of the bigender laks life experiences, especially when described in their own words. But now, after I shared my own understanding of the discursive dynamics in Tajikistan, I would like to return to those life experiences.

500% woman

In addition to several social spaces described earlier, the main venue where laks establish their femininity is sexual relations with men. Since deghs are mostly "straight" men, lachki expect appropriate behavior from them. They realize that deghs may prefer and desire biological women and that there are significant limitations to extending the sexual relations into the romantic or domestic ones. Usually, a lak would not expect that a degh would fall in love with her or manifest his affection. Similar to Kulick's (1998) travesti, many laks would freak out if a degh started to caress her or touch her penis. They would consider such act to undermine degh's masculinity and implicate his homosexuality, which in turn, undermines laks femininity. However, with the shifting dispositions within same-sex relations and emerging gay model that is not a 100% rule. The situation I observed in Tajikistan seemed to be more complex than the one described by Kulick in relation to Brazilian travesti in the 1990's. At least with certain men, lachki also want to seduce, be desired

and longed for, and not only used for a quick fuck; by being able to elicit desire and affection, they also affirm their femininity. While deghs usually do not kiss, sometimes their desire and affection would be expressed in kissing and "making love" as opposed to just reaching an orgasm. For example, one person told me that she didn't mind if a man was tender and sweet, if he kissed and caressed her, and even touched her penis. She said that while younger lachki freak out if a man touches their penises, such behavior could be excused: "men are like kids, they are curious, so they want to touch everything. When I was younger I would also freak out if a degh touched me, but now I've changed, and I enjoy it" (Field notes: 105).

The sexual relations with these straight men provide ground for laks to establish their femininity: "If a man wants me, that means he wants me as a woman, at least in my imagination… But when I'm with a man, I completely… I become a 500% woman" (Nosir). Because these relations are heterosexual in nature and because the sexual roles are fixed, laks almost never hook up with each other sexually. If this happens, it's quite unusual. Once I've heard a gossip about two lachki who tried to hook up with each other – they were mocked as "lesbians". Another friend lachka told me an anecdote how she hooked up with a man on the internet and when they were already in an apartment, her date went to another room and came out in female lingerie – she turned out to be a lak too, so my friend had to assume a man's role and fuck her.

These situations show that having sex only with "straight" men is not a 100% rule. While bigender laks would normally not have sex with each other, they may have sex with people who identify as gay. With the emerging gay model and the blurring lines between the gay and lak identities, this boundary becomes less defined.

Romantic relations and domestic partnerships

Laks usually don't expect that deghs would fall in love with them, and many people told me that they did not believe in love between deghs and laks. However, some deghs engage in long-term relations with laks, including domestic partnerships, and it is not unusual for them to feel attachment, gratitude, friendship and respect towards their partners. On the contrary, laks can easily fall in love with *naturaly*, and there are too many stories of unrequited love waiting to be told. The stories of laks' first love are typically those, where the beloved is a close friend or a neighbor. In those stories the beloved man would typically experience warm feelings toward laks, but not love:

> "We love, but they don't. I used to have a guy; we studied at the medical institute. I fell in love with him, we got used to each other… Then one day I asked: "dear, I love you so much, so so much! At least answer me, do you love me? And he said: "I love you, but not like a man loves his wife, I love you as a person, as a friend..." I became hysterical. And then it just got stuck in my head that men can never be in love with each other" (Kamol).

It is not uncommon that laks have long-term relationships with men and live together with their lovers. The stories I've heard were often of men who were somewhat needy and laks were able to take care of them. These relations were usually described in romantic terms, although those men were often dependent on laks financial support. For example, Nosir told me a story about her love to a man, whom she 'saved' from drug addiction by providing him a place to stay and taking

care of him while the man suffered through a withdrawal. Nosir let the man stay at her place, and later fell in love with him. The man let Nosir take care of him and they lived together for 10 years. At the same time, Nosir was also married to a woman, so he lived in two families. Nosir's lover was a *natural*, and he sometimes cheated on Nosir with women. Their relationships lasted until the man got married (also with Nosir's financial support) and moved out of Dushanbe.

Living with one's lover provides ample opportunities to express and enjoy one's femininity through fulfilling a gendered domestic role. The societal requirements to women in Tajikistan are still very strictly codified and focus a lot around domestic performances. To be a "proper woman" in Tajikistan means to be able to serve and take care of your man, to keep the house perfectly clean, to prepare food, to iron his clothes and to maintain a positive emotional climate in the family. Living with a male lover, provides bigender laks with ample opportunities to affirm their femininity through fulfilling the domestic gender scripts.

Dance

While the social category of "dancing boys" and the relevant homosocial venues were liquidated during the Soviet times, dance remains at the core of gender and sexual expression. Quite a few people I talked to work or have worked as dancers – some of them were trained professionally, and others dance for a hobby, for example, perform at weddings or parties. At certain public performances, it is possible to dress and dance as women, at others they are dressed as men. One person showed me a record of her recent public performance of a female belly dance. At this performance,

she wore very sexual women attire, a wig, and bright makeup. In another video of a public performance, she impersonated a famous female singer: she danced and lip sang to a recording of a famous pop song.

Lachki record and enjoy showing videos of them dancing in their female appearances. But they dance not only for performance – it is also quite a common pastime in the everyday life. Hardly a night went by when I didn't observe lachki dancing. They could start dancing anywhere – in an office, in a café, at home – they would just turn on a Tajik song and start dancing. A couple of times when friends wanted to dance we went to a small friendly bar. At first, it was overwhelming for me: I never saw people enjoy and crave for traditional dancing so much. But I soon realized that for lachki dance is another major site for gender expression. They dance very beautifully; with their soft and flowing female movements and gestures, very mellow but confident and expressive at the same time. They dance not only with their hands and feet but also with their eyes, lips, and facial expression. Beautiful dancing is a signifier for laks: "If you say that you are a dancer then it's already… clear. A normal man doesn't dance" (Said). "A normal man doesn't dance… Dancing its feminine. To dance, and through plastics, through some movements to give a person something… only gays can do that" (Nosir).

Suppression of ambiguous gender expression reflected in the dance tradition did not stop with the elimination of bachas in the 1930s. In his article on the history of dance, Shay tells that in the 1940s-1950s in Egypt and the Soviet Union, especially Uzbekistan and the 70s in Iran modern choreographers that directed national state folk ensembles made an effort to eradicate all the traces of homoeroticism from the choreographic tradition. They created 'new' styles of masculinized dance, "suitable to

the urban, Westernized male and their sensitive elite audiences" (2006: 139). In constructing these ersatz folk dances the choreographers claimed to draw movements from sports, masculine work movements and marital arts but in Shay's opinion the newly invented "tradition" heavily drew from Western classical ballet. He believes that this invented tradition was part of a wider "impulse among postcolonial choreographers throughout the Middle East and Central Asia to distance male dancers styles from what became increasingly regarded as exclusively or "naturally" feminine dance styles" (Fisher and Shay 2009: 297). Despite the elimination of the tradition of dancing boys and further censoring of the official version of the folk dancing in the Soviet Union, my ethnographic findings show that the dance tradition has somehow survived and re-emerged as an important site for gender expression.

Men by the duty

Becoming men

Many bigender laks said that they felt as females or attracted to other boys since early childhood. "I'm 30 years old. Since I was a child, I always have… felt... I always thought I was a woman. A girl. But I was a man, a boy. It was tough for me, and also for my family. I would wear my sister's dress, makeup, her shoes" (Ricardo). Either through the reaction of their parents or peer bullying people would soon start to learn that this feeling and relevant behavior was not "normal." Due to the public taboo, adolescents do not have any information about homosexuality or non-normative gender. My respondents often remembered their existential frustration and fear that they were the only ones in the world with such a "problem." Since all the historical

reference to the homoerotic tradition is carefully obliterated from the books and oral history, teenagers cannot relate to the local tradition of homoeroticism. There are no support resources and teenagers have to deal with the complexities of their non-normative gender and sexual manifestations all by themselves. Consequently, they may experience severe depression, especially related to the first love/denial. At this point, teens are also likely to experience violence from their schoolmates who teach them to conform to the societal norms:

> *Ricardo*: It [dressing up like a girl] lasted until the 8th grade. And after that, I started to sacrifice myself. Because this is impossible – I live in an Islamic country and here its… either they will kill, or will beat you up.
>
> *Anya:* so in the 8th grade you realized it was dangerous?
>
> *Ricardo:* Yes I've been beaten many years. I have scars: here, here. Here, here.

If kids can express some gender non-conformity and their parents would write that off, after a certain age people have to learn how to conceal it. Usually during the school years, people learn to mask their gender and sexual identity and conform to the strict gender requirements. They learn to wear their "man's mask" and to lift it only in exceptional settings.

According to Boellstorff, in Indonesia, before the eighties, warias rarely expressed themselves in daily life. Older warias recalled isolation, staying in the house during the daytime, trying to appear 'normal' during the day and going out in their feminine appearance only at night (2007: 86). This description is similar to the present situation in Tajikistan, except laks can rarely just hide in the houses and escape their masculine duties of which their families constantly remind them. These duties have to be

fulfilled through performing certain behaviors and taking up certain responsibilities.

Nosir told me that compare to Indonesia, the societal attitude in Tajikistan developed in the opposite direction. Paradoxically, in the 1980s, when homosexuality was still criminal under the Soviet law, people felt freer in expressing their gender non-conformity. In his student years in the late 80's Nosir would come to his University wearing flamboyant clothes, long hair, long polished nails, and even makeup and he was not confronted because of that. Nosir hypothesizes that the reason for such acceptance in the Soviet Tajikistan was that people did not attribute the unconventional appearance to homosexuality. Since most people believed that homosexuals exist only in the decaying capitalist West, the level of public suspicion was much lower.

He says that nowadays the situation is completely different: in the years following the Independence, more information started to circulate, people became aware that *gomoseksualy* exist even in Tajikistan, and public homophobia and suspicion consequently grew. Today he advises young people to dress up modestly, to cut their hair short, to "act like men" and learn to lead a "double life". Nosir, who has a strong female identity, has a very masculine presence: short neat hair, an elegant suit and trousers, a calm and composed talk. Like other Tajik men, he is married, has four children and leads a respectful family life. The term "double life" used by Nosir was one of the most common tropes in my interview with the laks. It means that a person should be smart to express her femaleness in designated intimate spaces, while being able to conceal it under the "men's mask" in his public life. That includes wearing men's clothes, talking with masculine manners and lower voice, describing themselves as men, but most importantly, fulfilling the men's duties.

In her writing on Tajikistan, Harris (2004) undertakes to refine Butler's position that gender performances cannot be assumed at will and can differ from the internalized ideal only by the way of minute variations (Butler 1993). Harris says that a lot of gender performances in Tajikistan have to be consciously and intentionally played out to satisfy the family and societal audience. The gender performance becomes a "theater" where actors are fully conscious of their roles and play them by the scenarios, while sometimes improvising. By playing out the submission to the tradition people also subvert it, undermine its genuine validity and establish their subjectivity as one who is playing the role. To describe this phenomenon Harris uses the term "gender mask". A lot of my interlocutors used the same metaphor to describe their male (or sometimes both) gender performances.

Marriage and parenthood

Harris (2004) analyses how the "traditional" gender norms are enforced in the 2000's Tajikistan. She calls the mechanism through which the norms are regulated "the honor-and-shame system" (2004: 20). This system establishes the explicit control of the extended family, neighbors and other relevant communities over the individual's behavior. The most important masculine gender characteristics in this system are those related to male honor – control over women and younger family members and virility, expressed chiefly through impregnation (ibid: 20). Murray also notes that being married to a woman is a universal requirement for a Muslim man, notwithstanding his sexual preferences, since "an unmarried man is of little consequence in an Islamic society" (Murray 1997: 31). In many traditional Muslim societies described by Murray, marriage did not have many consequences for men's sexual life. For example, in Pakistani society, a married man could still be considered

a launde-baz - an adult man who fancies boys (ibid: 31) similar to bachabozs who also were older married men who preferred the company of boys (Baldauf 1990). In those Islamic societies, marriage is understood as a social arrangement, rather than as a venue to fulfill one's romantic and sexual inclinations. Likewise in Tajikistan, marriage is still understood primarily as a family enterprise rather than an individual project.

Tajik men have to get married between the age 23 and 30, and until they do, their parents and neighbors would be restlessly nagging them. For the vast majority of gay and bigender male in Tajikistan, the question is not to marry a woman or not, but rather how long can they postpone the marriage. Arranged marriage is still very common, but some people may be allowed to choose their partners themselves. Several laks told me that they or their friends tried to marry 'simple' women from remote *kishlaks* (villages), who would not suspect anything about their husband's sexual preferences. But even if she does suspect something, other factors can be more important when the marriage decisions are made. These factors may include the family, the social and economic status of the fiancé and so on. People would usually expect and be expected to end sexual relations with other men (or women) after marriage, and quite a few laks I talked to actually wanted to get married, as they believed that marriage would "cure" them of homosexuality and they will stop their relations with men. But that often proves to be only an expectation, and in reality sexual relations with other men continue.

What does it mean to be a husband? The tradition and religion codify masculine performance, which among other things includes: to work and provide for the family, to have sex with wife and procreate and of course dress and behave according to the

gender prescription. Most people I talked to didn't experience problems related to sex with their wives. They viewed conjugal sex not as the gratification of their sexual desires, but as a certain social obligation. Getting a woman impregnated is the primary task required of men and fulfilling this obligation allows laks to accomplish their sexual citizenship. It is common for laks to describe themselves as *biseksualy*. For example, 59% of 206 MSM respondents in Dushanbe self-identified as *biseksualy* in a recent bio-behavior surveillance study (Kasyanchuk et al. 2016: 12). Similarly to other sexual identity loanwords, meaning of the word *biseksual* in the context of my interviews appeared to be different from my previous understanding of the English term. I understood it as referring to someone who is sexually attracted to both men and women. But some of my respondents explained that for them *biseksual* meant that they were physically able to have sex with women, even if they were attracted only to men. Nosir explained: "despite their orientation they are forced to marry women, so they live with women and see other men, and that's why they are considered as bi". If laks have difficulties in conjugal sex, they employ different strategies: from living apart from their spouses (that is often possible because of the high level of labor migration), to watching gay porn shortly before sex in order to get aroused. The spousal sex narratives are usually devoid of pleasure connotations and are very technical: "I could fuck her every day, I just didn't come, that's it. I was just performing my duties as a man" (Bakhodur). The sexual desire is still directed at men: "*gays* will always desire men, whatever love you have for your wife" (Nosir).

Taking care of one's children is another important responsibility and people talk about it a lot. A generation of 50+ years old would have on average 5-6 children while younger generation would normally have 2-3. The medical care and higher education are not covered by the state anymore; the financial burden on the parents is very

heavy. Laks feel very strongly about their parental duties: "for me the most important thing is to raise my children, I set up an aim for myself, no matter what, I will raise them. I will definitely put them into the University they gotta get proper education… I have dedicated myself to my children, for me, it's the most important thing" (Bakhodur).

Laks have to attune their domestic performance on the household stage. When living with a man she would do all the domestic chores herself, but when living with a woman, it would not be normal for him to start cleaning an apartment, lay the table or do the dishes. When Said who always bragged about being a great cook, told me she wanted to get married soon, I asked who would be cooking in their family? She was surprised by my question and exclaimed with a joking indignation:

Said: Sheee, shee will be cooking!!

Shahrom: She will be cooking. When you are with a woman you become a man!

Said: Yeah, I will just lie around the house and curse!

Considerations of transition

Almost every lak has complained about the toughness of her "double life" and having to switch between genders, "wear a man's mask", while having only limited spaces to perform their cherished feminine selves. One especially tormented person who was passing through an existential transformation after having been diagnosed with HIV, described this "double life" in very harsh terms – he complained it was like schizophrenia - being two persons at the same time. After receiving his HIV diagnosis, he cut his hair short and stopped wearing flashy clothes as he wanted to

"kill this hungry for sex, horny woman" that tormented him from inside. He understood his HIV diagnoses as a punishment for his 'sinful' sexual life and decided to stick to his masculine side. He even came out to his wife, with whom he has ten children and a grandchild. However, he still often 'slips' and has sex with men. As this story shows, the psychological burden of leading the "double life" may be very hard and while most people learn to adapt, some may decide to change their appearance more permanently.

Laks who chose to permanently move towards more feminine appearance, are called *transsexualki* (transsexuals), even if they opt of the genital surgery. Naim's story illustrates the tensions that can arise during this gender journey. For about three years Nargis (Naim's female name) lived in Moscow where she provided sex services. She shared her flat with several *transsexualki* from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. She inserted silicone breast implants and did laser epilation of the body and facial hair, but unlike her roommates, she never took hormones, didn't make a nose job or a voice operation. She was just naturally very womanly. She showed me her photos, some of them were made by a professional photographer, and I was awed to see an exemplary woman from the pages of men's magazine: a graceful poise, gorgeous long hair, artful makeup, polished nails, soft tender skin and a melancholy look so typical for models. The photo struck me by its contrast with a man I saw before me – a simple young urban fellow with abrupt mannish gestures, calm composed speech, a bit rough facial features. He wore a plain jacket and a short modest hairdo. It was hard to believe that these two personas were in fact one person; even their fingers looked different – soft manicured fingers of a young woman and coarse male fingers that held the phone with that woman's photographs.

After several years, Naim's mother became more insistent that he returned home and he decided to go back. But in order to return to Tajikistan she had to make another surgery – take out the breast implants and return to his male image. He showed me huge scars under his breasts that remained after a badly done surgery. Upon return home, he found a "simple woman" that he liked and her family accepted his proposal. He lives with his wife and they have a daughter. He has no problems maintaining sexual relations with his wife, and therefore describes himself as a *biseksual*. When off his family duties, Naim spends most of the time at one of the pleshkas, where he hangs out with other lachki and hooks up with deghs.

There are a few other *transsexualki* who live in Dushanbe, and some of them have permanent female appearance, but the 2 NGOs don't have access to them. It is impossible to have vaginoplastica or other surgery in Tajikistan so people who want a surgery have to leave the country. They go to Russia, Thailand, Iran or the Arab Emirates, even Uzbekistan where the surgery is available. One trans woman from Tajikistan who now lives in the USA became a celebrity after a Russian talk show "*Pust Govoryat*" (also very popular in Tajikistan) released a program about her. Samira (her male name Arthur) and her family immigrated to the US during the war in Tajikistan. Arthur is a very

Arthur - Samira

talented dancer and he performed with a dance group in Moscow and New York. He always wanted to become a woman, but feared that his family would not accept her. After several attempts to commit suicide, Arthur decided to make the transition. His mother couldn't accept the decision until she understood that she might lose her child. The acceptance was very hard, especially for Samira's dad. The family also faced a lot of pressure from the Tajik community in New York where they lived. But eventually, they got to accept their daughter and even agreed to talk about that on TV. Interestingly, when we discussed this story in Tajikistan, a typical explanation of the family's acceptance was that they were Jewish and not really Tajik. The Tajiks would rather have their children die than allow them to make a sex change.

In my discussions with laks, I sometimes asked them to hypothesize if they would make the permanent transition if the societal pressure was less unbearable and if the gender affirming services were available. I was trying to understand if the only reason for their bigender position was the societal pressure, as laks often claimed. We discussed this at a focus group, and the participants' opinions differed. Several people over 40 said that they were already used to their "double lives" and have too much of a social body (families, children, grandchildren). Even if the services suddenly became available, they would not make the transition. But as one person said, "if all those services were available 20-30 years ago, I would make the surgery." During the focus group one participant generalized on behalf of everyone that if they could disregard all the social and political factors in Tajikistan, or if they lived in an "ideal world" such as the Netherlands, they would all go for the full transition. But many disagreed. As one person said: "I don't choose [between the genders] I feel fine in this body, I'm satisfied with who I am, I don't want to change myself, don't want to change my sex".

Other laks chose to make a physical change but not towards the gender they preferred, but the one the others would accept. Ricardo believed she was a girl since the early childhood. As a child, she was very feminine and behaved like a girl: played with dolls, wore girl's clothes and hung out with other girls. As an adolescent, she still had a very high-pitched voice, small girlish body, narrow shoulders, small hands, thin legs and waist. She is now 30 years old and still strongly identifies as woman. However, she decided to bury this woman deep under the layers of muscles, the bodily hair, thick beard, and low voice. Several years ago Ricardo went to Moscow to work at a gay strip club. Someone advised him to take hormones to become more masculine, fitter for the club. When he was purchasing the hormones, the dealer looked at him and said – maybe you should take the female hormones instead, and work in another club, where customers preferred the female types. He vividly remembers this moment, when he could choose to move towards his masculine or feminine side, and when he decided to buy the male hormones.

He started to work out intensively, shaved his head and grew a beard, and after only a year his look was completely transformed: even the way he walked have radically changed to reflect his newly acquired masculinity. When he went back home, everyone was surprised by the radical change. He still looks very masculine but unlike his looks, his women identity has not been transformed. He has a wife and a kid, that he is very fond of, but also a male lover, whom he adores for treating him with respect and for taking care in the way men take care of their women. Ricardo's story reflects the desire of many bigender laks to fit in and meet the societal requirements. It also indicates a tendency towards masculinization in the gay world where Ricardo lived in Moscow – something that has also started to happen in Tajikistan with the emergence of the "gay model".

The several cases described in this chapter provide rare examples when laks decided to move towards one or another pole of their gender spectrum on a permanent basis. Some of these attempts are more successful than the others, such as Naim's, who had to return to her male appearance in order to be able to live in Tajikistan. But more commonly, laks do not attempt such radical transformations and learn to live their "double lives" shifting between gender performances appropriate to relevant spaces.

Conclusion

Ingeborg Baldauf, who did her ethnographic work in Uzbekistan in the late 70's and became interested in bacabozlik, observes that the generation who were then thirty did not know anything about the tradition (1990: 12). She was only able to collect information and the folklore tradition on the other side of the Uzbek border, among Uzbek population in Afghanistan. Based on her review of the Central Asian print media between 1920's-1930's she came to the conclusion that after "the decades-long bitter fight" the Soviet campaign against bacabozlik has succeeded and after 1930's the tradition was fully eliminated. It ceased to exist in any form, including in folklore or the form of academic research.

The homoerotic history of the Persian/ Tajik culture also seems to be fully erased from the minds of the people. Before I came to Tajikistan, I suspected that the suppressed cultural memory was preserved in some form of 'historical gossip' or anecdotes, for example about the homosexuality of this or that historical persona. But I didn't trace any such gossip. During a walk in a pleshka with two of my LGBT friends, I saw several large stands with the portraits and verses of Hayyamm, Rudaki,

and Rumi. I laughed and made a joke about the irony that the portraits of the great Persian poets who wrote homoerotic poetry were mounted in the middle of a pleshka. But my lak friend seemed offended, he said: shut up, you silly, why do you say such things about our great poets? Ironically, one of the most popular pleshkas in town is situated in the Rudaki Park with an enormous, glorious statue of Rudaki in the middle of it. While Rudaki is massively promoted in Tajikistan as one of the founders of Persian/Tajik literature, nobody knows about homoeroticism in his poetry. Only once, by the end of my study have I talked to a person who was aware of the homoerotic aspect of Rudaki's and Rumi's poetry.

When I asked about bachabozi, laks usually responded that it was some horrible Afghan custom. Although some were aware that this was also a tradition on the territory of Tajikistan, they do not relate at all to this pre-colonial history, it appears as too distant. At the same time, despite being erased from the people's oral historical memory, some traits of this tradition have found their ways to survive and reexist. For example, I was struck by the extent to which the category 'dancing boy' would probably still be relevant in many ways and a different understanding of gender has preserved itself in the dance and could still be communicated by the means of dance. The understanding of sexuality along the gender and sex roles also seems to have been preserved since the pre-colonial times, before the concept of "homosexuality" and the attached shame has been introduced during the Russian colonization and reinforced by the Bolsheviks. Today this concept and the relevant "gay model" of organization of sexuality are reinforced with the new strength through the work of the international organizations in Tajikistan. The new identity vocabularies and identity politics promoted by these organizations appear as a certain new wave of epistemological colonialism. Najilis (2012) warns us of these global processes when

the Western "gay model" is positioned as superior to the local "traditional" organization of sexualities and calls to decolonize our thinking in order to better understand the local systems of organization of sexuality and to alleviate the stigma, attached to the systems and to the people who operate within them.

In this context, the HIV prevention services emerge as an important territory of acceptance – a territory so needed in the stressful lives of people who constantly have to mask their gender and sexuality. The HIV services are usually run by peers or at least people who are accepting and non-judgmental, and therefore allow freer gender and sexual expression which makes them very appealing not only because of the condoms and health information they provide but mostly because of the accepting environment. That of course significantly improves the effectiveness of HIV work in the country. At the same time, HIV services act as catalysts and agents for new understandings of sexuality, the understandings that come from the Western Europe and North America. Consciously or unconsciously, the local and international NGOs working in the HIV and human rights fields promote this western understanding and the relevant identity categories and vocabularly, which may not be consistent with the local subjectivities.

This new vocabulary helps people to gain a belonging they yearn for - in this case to the international LGBT community. However, since this new vocabulary is grounded in the western universalist understanding of gender and (homo)sexuality, rather than the local gender epistemologies, it fails to capture and reflect certain nuances and specificities. Hence, when used locally, the international language is often confusing. The identity slots it provides are not capable of accommodating the specific local experiences and of reconciling the conflicting sexual and national

identities. While my ethnographic and historical research was very limited in time, I felt that there is a great need to continue similar research through the lenses of the local gender epistemologies that could help people yearning for belonging to fit not only into the international LGBT movement but also reinstate their place in the history and tradition of their own culture.

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